

Dialogical Writing in Philosophy and Literature

**A study on Plato's *Crito* and *Gorgias*
and Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey***

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**Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

in

English

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April 17, 2002

Blacksburg, Virginia Tech

Keywords: Plato, philosophy and literature, dialogue, dialectic

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(ABSTRACT)

Both Thomas Love Peacock and Plato use dialogue for their works while they differ in what they envisage and what they achieve, i.e. same form, different objectives. Thus, having Peacock and Plato writing dialogues in different frames—one literary and one philosophical—raises an important question: can literary writers be more provocative of thought in the audience than writers of philosophical dialogues? If so, what then are the features of dialogical writing, whether literary or philosophical, or common features that pertain to both these fields, that cause it to be respectful or nurturing to the minds that encounter it?

This question will underlie the whole paper. It actually comes from the fact that in dialogue, whether deployed in philosophical or literary texts, we do not see the author's opinion clearly expressed. In dialogue, and this is often true for Plato, the author's dogma loses itself under the various dogmas that the characters have; the author hides himself behind his personages. The readers do not encounter only one mind that has claims of revealing a truth—the philosophical approach—or that lays out a story—the literary one. In dialogue, the reader finds an ongoing discussion and becomes part of it. Through the analysis of two of Plato's dialogues, the *Crito* and the *Gorgias*, and Peacock's satirical novel, *Nightmare Abbey*, I intend to show that, used in philosophy or literature, dialogue seems to be the perfect tool to communicate the idea that once expressed becomes its negative: the only thing that we know is that we do not know anything.

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Chapter I

What is this paper about?

If Thomas Love Peacock were to live during Plato's time, he would have probably written *The Clouds* and mocked Socrates. This is, at least, the idea that his dialogical novels give to their audience. Peacock has indeed been many times compared with the Greek writer of comedies Aristophanes. J.B. Priestley observes that Aristophanes "was certainly Peacock's greatest master" (129). Similarly, Lorna Sage mentions that, while Peacock's friend Percy Bysshe Shelley "was to be profoundly persuaded by Plato's use of dialogue as a means of discriminating truth, Peacock cast himself in the role of the comic dramatist Aristophanes, whose parodic dialogue was a means of revealing bigotry and of destroying illusion" (*Peacock—The Satirical Novels* 14).

Although such a comparison puts Peacock in great company, it would make him and Plato uncongenial thinkers, on first glance, if we do not think that Plato offers a sympathetic portrait of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*. Nevertheless, Plato's and Peacock's purposes in writing dialogues are clearly different, and they come to the dialogic craft from different places, quite apart from the fact that one of them lived more than 2000 years ago in Greece, while the other was a nineteenth-century Englishman. Peacock was well educated in classical philosophy, so we can see Plato as influence on him; but of course he did not influence Plato. Also, while in Plato the reader is engaged in judging issues related with how one should live one's life, Peacock's writings touch this idea only tangentially. It is true, however, that both writers show themselves wonderful stylists, with a witty use of irony, but this does not seem to be a sufficient reason to put them together, quite apart from the fact that their uses of irony have different purposes. All those differences might at first make them seem unfit for discussion in light of each other. However, it is exactly their different takes on how to use dialogue that make their comparison interesting. For both Peacock and Plato use the dialogue for their works while they differ in what they envisage and what they achieve, i.e. same form, different objectives. Thus, having Peacock and Plato writing dialogues in different frames—one literary and one philosophical—raises an important question: can

literary writers be more provocative of thought in the audience than writers of philosophical dialogues? If so, what then are the features of dialogical writing, whether literary or philosophical, or common features that pertain to both these fields, that cause it to be respectful or nurturing to the minds that encounter it?

This question will underlie the whole paper. It actually comes from the fact that in dialogue, whether deployed in philosophical or literary texts, we do not see the author's opinion clearly expressed. This problem raises difficulty in understanding especially when the discussion is about a philosophical treatise, where our expectation is at least that the author actually has the intention of communicating a clear message. But in dialogue, and this is often true for Plato, the author's dogma loses itself under the various dogmas that the characters have; the author hides himself behind his personages. The readers do not encounter only one mind that has claims of revealing a truth—the philosophical approach—or that lays out a story—the literary one. In dialogue, the reader finds an ongoing discussion and becomes part of it. What a reader might go in on emerging from such a dialogic conversation will be the object of study of this paper.

Analyzing the dialogue, be it in philosophy or literature, we have to think about the nature of writing itself. Plato approaches this subject in various dialogues, especially in *Phaedros*. For Plato, the issue of writing is strongly related to that of education. A word written says something to another individual, and in this sense it educates. However, for Plato education is surely not the transmission of words from a knowledgeable mind to another mind. In *Phaedros*, he seems to understand this sort of approach as an intellectual rape—X makes Y think the way X thinks, and, in this sense, X takes over Y's ability to choose.¹ Plato understands education—including writing—as a process within the space of philosophy. In modern terms, we could affirm that Plato understands education as a process within the space of freedom. Plato's dialogues seem to take this position

¹ In *Phaedrus*, Plato seems to talk about two different types of education—the philosophical one, in which the student is taken under the fresh and liberating shadow of the mentor's love, and the sophistic one, where young minds are encouraged to “learn” theories and to re-express them successfully. A more

themselves—as the plane tree from the *Phaedrus*,² they do not give you any fruit. Plato’s dialogues do not transmit knowledge. At the same time, they take us, readers, within a space where it is up to us alone what we can do. Plato’s dialogues determine us towards the undetermined—the excellence of education.

Thus one would say that the dialogue, in any of its uses, would include the ideas in a realm of fiction, where there is no dogma that is supposed to be transmitted from a mind to another. Thus, the dialogue opens the realm of freedom—a realm where ideas seem to fight each other without trying to win.

However, this is only the first impression. Writing a dialogue does not have the intrinsic virtue of transforming the whole frame of the discourse into one of freedom, as long as we understand freedom in Sir Isaiah Berlin’s terms from his essay on “Two concepts of freedom.” Entering the space of a dialogue does not equate to entering a realm of an absolute negative freedom, in which there is no restriction coming from outside the reader considered as an agent. For the dialogue becomes whatever we, writers and readers, make of it. This is actually what makes any kind of text fruitful: as an object, it is always situated in the middle ground between author and reader, and it does not gain full meaning without meeting a different mind than the one who created it. In this sense, any text becomes potentially infinite while staying one. This peculiar characteristic emerges from its openness to different readings. For instance, in the specific case of the dialogue,

thorough explanation can be found in the next footnote, where the issue of education is related with one of Aesop’s Fables.

² In an unpublished mss. about the philosophical moral of the Aesopian fables in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Mark Gifford observes that the dramatic setting of the dialogue is structured similarly with Aesop fable “The Travelers and the Plane Tree.” Here is Perry’s translation (175): “Some men were traveling along a road near noon on a summer’s day when they became fatigued by the heat. They spotted a plane tree in the distance, and when they arrived beneath it, they paused to rest, lying down in its shade. Gazing up at the plane tree, they said to one another, ‘What an utterly useless thing this tree is! It provides no fruit for man.’ And the plane tree said by way of reply, ‘You ungrateful men! At the very moment you are enjoying my benefits, you fault me for being useless and without fruit.’” Gifford’s idea is that the first two speeches from Plato’s *Phaedrus* talk about love ignorantly falling to see the true nature and benefits of Eros—“the benefits of a philosophical relationship between mentor and student.” At the same time, it is tempting to say that Plato sees his own dialogue as a plane tree—it seems it does not have any fruit because does not transmit punctual knowledge, but the true benefit of being exposed to it stays in the shadows that dialogues provide where people can rest and understand the truth on their own. Mark Gifford goes on to even say that this brings the long-discussed issue of the unity of *Phaedrus* in a new light. Thus, “the real issue behind

some writers might use it just as a means to get victories—the eristic. Some might enter in dialogue to exercise their wit. Others might just try to work with others towards a common purpose. And those are just a few examples. Viewed in this pluralistic sense, the dialogue as a method of writing, whether literary or philosophical, is no longer something that is easy to grasp.

If we consider Plato and Peacock, there is no way to say with a clean conscience that they can be said to use dialogue in one and only one of the possible ways mentioned above. Although Plato is traditionally considered a dialectician, which means, more or less, that the dialogues that his characters engage in are supposed to achieve a truth, many times Socrates—Plato’s “hero”—seems to play the role of a smart guy who enjoys making fun of people. For Peacock things might be more complicated than that, since we don’t even have the certainty that he is in the pursuit of achieving a truth about how things are—we are already in the space of fiction. J. B. Priestly observes that some critics would seem to think that Peacock’s dialogical novels are best approached as comic dialogues, “and one of them has described the Peacock novel as ‘a Platonic dialogue as Aristophanes might have caricatured it’. This is an excellent description so long as we are allowed to assume that Aristophanes... would have turned his dialogue into what we now call fiction. Otherwise it is misleading” (129). Priestly thinks that Peacock situates himself in a different realm:

Peacock’s critics have been so anxious to point out that he did not write conventional fiction that they have frequently driven him away from the novel altogether. This, however, is a mistake because Peacock is, in his own queer way, a novelist, and his five tales of talk are just as far removed from philosophical dialogues and the like as they are from ordinary realistic fiction. They occupy a position—perhaps a unique position—between the two. It is one of the secrets of their appeal, this curious intermediate character of theirs, which makes them less concrete and

these speeches is the question whether a young Greek seeking higher education and wisdom should go to Plato’s philosophical Academy or to Isocrates’ school of rhetoric.”

documented than novels proper and yet far less abstract than such things as dialogues and allegories (129-30).

Neither Plato nor Peacock is easy to integrate within an already established category. Although tradition remembers them as a philosopher and a literary writer respectively, the fact that both of them write dialogues brings them together in a space where philosophy and literature are no longer determined by certain exclusive features but where all those virtues are in a melange.

Thus, this paper will analyze how dialogue works in Plato and Peacock's writings considering how literary and philosophical writers can be provocative of thought in the audience. Consequently, I shall approach issues such as education and freedom. For any texts take us within themselves and show us how the world is under their categories. There, the text's world tries to become our world. Some of these texts tend to replace our rational capacity of categorizing the world by imposing their own categories. Others seem not to give us anything. At last, there are texts that, as mentors, take us within the space of their freedom and keep us there until we are able to confront and categorize the world with our own minds. Plato's philosophical dialogues and Peacock's dialogical novels seem to have as a common thread this last approach—they both avoid presenting themselves as ideologies that want to become ours, but instead refute any possible claim of false knowledge, allowing the reader to find the ideas on his own. However, each text is different and works in its peculiar ways.

Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* will be my primary text in the study of the English writer's dialogues. Although Peacock's plays have interesting issues to raise, I shall not approach them, taking into consideration that they are already differently constructed texts. The same logic works in Plato's case. First of all, it is hard to talk about Plato's dialogues in general. The tradition usually divided them in three categories: early dialogues, named also Socratic dialogues, middle dialogues, and late dialogues. Plato's voice is clearly different in each of these periods, and the dialogues seem to have different functions.

Whereas the early dialogues abound in dramatic settings and are full of irony, Plato becomes more arid later. Although there still is Plato's wonderful style, we no longer find whole pages about the setting of the discussion or a devastating Socratic irony. This is not to say that the dialogues become technical towards the end of Plato's life, but the dialectic is more concerned with logic. Actually, many late dialogues were integrated in the group named "logical dialogues."

Thus, I shall consider only the early and middle dialogues, as they are more fruitful from a literary perspective. Although the *Crito* and *Gorgias* will be the main source for my analysis, I shall also consider other dialogues such as *Phaedrus*, the *Apology*, or the *Symposium*.

Chapter II

Platonic Philosophical Dialogue and Pavonian Dialogical Novel

2.1. Philosophy and literature

The border between philosophy and literature is not a clearly defined line. Moreover, in recent times, many literary theorists, as Arthur C. Danto affirms in his “Philosophy as/and/of Literature,” turned their attention to the texts of philosophy, treating them as texts in no way different from those that were traditionally the subject of literary critique. Thus, philosophical or literary texts become only texts that can be judged with the same tools.

However, one may see the difference between philosophical and literary texts as consisting in these texts’ purposes. Danto observes that philosophers write their essays having a claim of truth, while literary writers focus on the expression—the style. He says,

Literature is not universal in the sense of being about every possible world insofar as possible, as philosophy on its nonliterary dimension aspires to be, nor about what may happen to be the case in just this particular world, as history, taken in this respect as exemplificatory science, aspires to be, but rather about each reader who experiences it (18).

This clearly is a totally different understanding of literature than the one Peacock’s friend, Percy Bysshe Shelley, expresses in his *Defence of Poetry*, “A Poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth” (128). Nevertheless, the most important concept that Danto introduces here is the plurality of worlds. Literature, he says, does not have as its purpose to cover the whole but is meant to approach particular issues. In literature we have stories, stories of individuals who, although they can represent types of characters, and thus universals, remain nevertheless particular cases. However, this interpretation stands only insofar as we consider literature as aspiring to express something about every possible world. Let us name the universals with the Platonic terms “Forms.” If we go back to Danto’s idea, he takes for granted that a text—a written text—

can give an account of the Being or the Forms. This would mean that a text has the power to include the Forms within itself and thus to transform them into something less important than the text itself. Or, at least, in something less important than what they are supposed to be since their definitions are bigger than they are. If we think about how definitions work from an Aristotelian perspective, the universal term is used only to define the particular. Socrates is a human being (the universal) who said that he knows only that he doesn't know anything (the particular that distinguishes the individual Socrates from the many human beings who participate in the form of "human being"). If the term that we find to define is a universal (or a Form), then the only way in which we can approximate a definition is the tautology—what it is it is. Or we can think about negative definitions in which we distinguish a Form from other Forms. "Chair" is *not* "couch."

In this sense, a philosophical text cannot comprehend the Forms, but it can only play with them, can only put them in relation—the approach that Plato seems to take in his dialogues. But literature does the same thing—it situates itself within a realm where there is not even the temptation of perceiving the Forms. Moreover, in Danto's terms, literature can even be considered the very space of any and all possible worlds, passed, present, or future. Fiction presents itself as the world of all possibilities. There is no limit in creation. Thus literature is not about any possible world because literature *is* any possible world.

There is, of course, a substantial difference between the concept of "literature as being any possible world" and the concept of "any possible world" mentioned by Danto. When Danto talks about the world of possibilities, he obviously has in mind what can have reality. Philosophy, in this sense, is universal because it attempts to treat the being in its entirety. Understood this way, philosophy situates itself apart from Being and becomes an agent that analyzes it. Instead, literature seems to perceive itself as part of the Being. Without wanting to understand that what is, literature takes the approach of creating within the realm of Being. And in this sense, one might say that philosophy is always about literature and becomes a meta-literature.

Fiction writers do not claim that they are able to grasp with their minds the world of possibilities, as philosophers seem to do in Danto's interpretation. Au contraire, we can imagine the artists as being aware of the fact that the world is not an exterior object that their minds analyze or express, but that the world is already produced by the categories that humans impose on it. Being aware that they cannot step outside their own mind, literary writers limit themselves to creation. "Every possible world insofar as possible," as characterized by Danto, is already within a human's mind. In this sense, a writer is closer to what Plato seems to understand by a philosopher—literary writers acknowledge that they know only that they do not know anything; the difference is that they also play with the categories that their minds produce.

From this perspective, the border between literature and philosophy falls under a deeper shadow. This might be the explanation why there are so many various theories on the difference between these two ways of expression, fiction and expository essays, or literature and philosophy. Arthur Danto says that the philosophical text refers to reality—in this way it aims at a truth. Of course, he does not even consider that the world—the reality—could be anything else than an objective, exterior object that we can perceive and understand with our minds. For Danto, philosophy is different than literature because it applies to what is already existent while literature tends to create within a space of imagination. At the same time, he dissociates himself from the view that a literary text refers only to literature, or only to that space of imagination that it creates. Danto's view is that "philosophy wants to be more than universal; it wants necessity as well: truth for all the worlds that are possible" (17). Since he says that his view is close, in a way, to Aristotle's idea that poetry is concerned with a kind of thing that might be—thus, it is concerned with the realm of possibilities—poetry is close to philosophy (18). Nevertheless, poetry and philosophy for Danto are not ideal forms called *poetry* and *philosophy* but what he defines them as being. His approach is rather scientific and owes its view to a scientific understanding of "truth."

Paradoxically, a literary critic such as Matthew Arnold affirms an almost similar point in his "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time". He associates philosophy with

science while giving to literature the chance of bringing new things into the world. Arnold says,

creative literary genius does not principally show itself in *discovering* new ideas; that is rather the business of the philosopher; the grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them; of dealing divinely with these ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations, making beautiful works with them, in short (10-1; emphasis is mine).

It seems that for Arnold ideas must be discovered. But if we do not create ideas, we can through literary means create attractive combinations of them. From Arnold's perspective, philosophy seems to be a dull activity that approaches reality scientifically, while literature brings life to all that with the infinity of orders one can imagine.

In "Philosophical Discourses and Fictional Texts," Peter McCormick gives another account of the specific qualities of fictional and non-fictional texts. He suggests that "we have good reasons for construing at least some of these nonfictional texts we call philosophical as fiction of a peculiar sort" (54). However, this does not mean that they are intrinsically fictional but that they can take features of a fictional text. Hence, he finds a so-called standard account of what makes some texts fictional, starting from the difference he makes between locutionary and illocutionary acts. Thus, "what makes a text fictional is the nature and not the use of certain markers and conditions of a text-type structured in no one way other than such as to ensure that a community of readers in a culture takes those among the many cardinal sentences of the text which are speakers' illocutionary performances in a certain way" (60). McCormick finds that there are at least five objective features that distinguish fictional from nonfictional texts:

- the use of indirect discourse about the mental states of characters;

- the use of narrated monologues, which transforms performances of illocutionary acts into their representations;
- some putative descriptions of particular events in fictional texts are not required to satisfy the same epistemic conditions that govern descriptions in nonfictional texts;
- the presence in fictional texts of nonreferring names or descriptions, that is, sentences containing names or descriptions of what does not exist;
- the aspect of address without access (57).

If we apply McCormick's approach to the case of the dialogue, the difference between fictional and philosophical texts is not so clear. Both of them use similar markers that might tell us that there is no particular difference.

In this sense, we do not really need to put Plato and Peacock in clear categories. I think a richer approach is to consider them as writers of dialogues without having in mind the preconceived idea that we deal with a philosopher and a literary writer, respectively. Hopefully, a better understanding of what kind of dialogues they write will be the result of this analysis. The pages that follow, after a brief distinction among dialogue, dialectic, and eristic, will analyze what dialogue does in each of these two cases. Considering Plato's and Peacock's works pieces of writing, I shall try to see what are the features that we can attribute to them as a consequence of the dialogue. Hopefully, I shall thus arrive at a better understanding of what philosophy and literature, at least in these two writers' cases, can do with the dialogue.

2.2. Terminological distinctions: elenchus, eristic, dialectic, dialogue.

Thinking about Plato, we inevitably have in mind the cross-questioning that Socrates applies to everyone he encounters. This method is called “elenchus.” In a wider sense, Richard Robinson says, elenchus “means examining a person with regard to a statement he has made, by putting to him questions calling for further statements, in the hope that they will determine the meaning and the truth-value of his first statement. Most often the truth-value expected is falsehood; and so ‘elenchus’ in the narrower sense is a form of cross-examination or refutation” (7).

The *elenchus* was a part of the Greek culture “in which many officeholders were subject to an audit (*euthyna*) at the end of their term of office. The difference is that Socrates’ scrutiny of his contemporaries was that of a private individual” (Clay 180). The elenchus might look at a first glance like refutation for the sake of refutation. However, Plato tries to make a clear distinction between elenchus and refutation for its own sake in the *Euthydemus* (see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* 324). The cross-examination that elenchus entails does not imply the idea of winning.³

In contrast, the eristic is played as a game (Kahn 234) in which the practitioner does not care about the truth but about who wins the argument. Plato describes the eristic in the *Republic*: “when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who’ve refuted them by refuting others themselves, and, like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing those around them with their arguments” (539 b). Robinson observes that “the more detailed connotation of ‘eristic’ and ‘antilogic’ tends to be whatever Plato happens to think of as bad method at the moment, just as ‘dialectic’ is to him at every stage of his thought whatever he then considered the best method” (85). The most important idea is that dialectic was regarded as a method of discussion—the noblest and most useful method (cf. Robinson 69). But dialectic is also “the technical aspect of ‘philosophy,’ in one of Plato’s uses of that word.

³ See the section on the *Gorgias*, where the difference between “feast” and “war” can be seen as the distinction between elenchus and eristic (infra p. 37-42).

‘Philosophy’ meant to Plato either the pursuit of moral excellence or the pursuit of intellectual excellence or both” (Robinson 71).

Because the three terms dialectic, elenchus, and eristic seem to be very close, they can confuse if not clearly distinguished. I shall use them in this thesis with the following significations:

- eristic is the sophistic method of contradiction with the sole purpose of proving the other one wrong no matter which is the truth;
- elenchus will be considered the Socratic method of refutation, method that has as purpose the purification of unhealthy souls—souls that think they have knowledge while what they have is only an appearance of knowledge;
- dialectic, distinct from the Socratic elenchus, refers to the Platonic method of cross-examination but also is a way of thinking that aims toward discovering truth.

As for the dialogue, Diskin Clay observes that “*dialogos* is a noun derived from the verb *dialegomai*, which means to become involved in a conversation with another” (79). I shall limit the consideration of dialogue to this idea. Thus, Peacock’s and Plato’s writings will be considered written in a dialogue format because they presuppose that individuals become involved in, and ideas will rise out of, a conversation. Dialogues might embody elenchus, eristic, or dialectic, as will be shown through the appraisal of the specific texts.

2.3. In what way is Plato a philosopher and Peacock a literary writer?

If the analytical philosophers tend not to consider the form of the dialogue in analyzing Plato's thought, those of the continental school of philosophy interpret the Greek philosopher's writings not only from their philosophical worthiness, but also as works of art, works that are important in the history of human culture precisely for their literary value. This latter approach can take different forms. For example, some might say that, although the dialogical form is not essential for the study of Platonic corpus, it still is an interesting object of study in itself. Others might argue that Plato's philosophical theories can be expressed only in dialogues, thus having the dialogical form as a necessary conduit of the Platonic thought. These two extremes frame the different theories that focus on Plato's style. All of them have at their basis the question of why Plato, who often criticizes the writers of drama, appeals to dialogue, a literary rather than philosophical form of expression. One of the most interesting responses is Martha Nussbaum's understanding of the platonic dialogue as "anti-tragic theater." She sees in it

the origin of a distinctive philosophical style, a style that opposes itself to the merely literary and expresses the philosopher's commitment to intellect as a source of truth. By writing philosophy as drama, Plato calls on every reader to engage actively in the search for truth. By writing it as anti-tragic drama, he warns the reader that only certain elements of him are appropriate to this search (134).

Starting from the same idea that Plato's dialogues are a sort of theatre, James Arieti even affirms, exaggerating, I think, that

the dialogues are drama and that, as in plays generally, the philosophical arguments in them are subordinated to the drama. In order to understand the drama, however, it is necessary to follow the arguments, not to be sure, with the logical nitpicking of most commentators, but as theatre-goers, who in any case would not be able to pick up all the details of complicated

arguments any more than our students can follow all the details of very technical lectures (5).

Arieti's views are an example of how Plato's dialogues can be seen as literary rather than philosophical works. This view seems to be an exaggeration. Arieti focuses on the action of the dialogue and how characters are transformed throughout each piece,⁴ but even the early and middle period dialogues do not abound in action and transforming them in drama would be a misinterpretation. It is true that Samuel Beckett's plays, for instance, do not have action either, but Plato's dialogues are written clearly different than the plays of his period. However, if we go back to Arieti's point, it has the benefit of making us think whether considering Plato only a philosopher whose purpose is solely to convey ideas is enough to let us understand precisely his philosophical agenda.⁵

Peacock's writings do not raise the same difficulties on a first view. Although not seen by his contemporaries as a social person and having "nothing resembling a circle until he made the acquaintance of Shelley at the end of 1812" (Butler 15), Peacock is rather associated with the literary artists of the beginning of nineteenth-century than with any philosopher. Of course, early nineteenth-century English poets (especially Coleridge and Shelley) were inclined to philosophize. And Godwin wrote both philosophy and fiction.

⁴ A good example of Arieti's interpretation will be analyzed in the section on the *Gorgias*. See *infra* p. 39-40.

⁵ Arieti has a good summary of the main works treating this issue. I shall just quote his account here, only mentioning that many of these authors will appear further in my paper. "F. Schleiermacher (*Über den Wert des Sokrates als Philosophen* [Berlin 1815]) rebelled against the earlier attempt to abstract dogma from the dialogues to build a system. He insisted on the need to study Plato's artistry. Since his insight that "Form and subject are inseparable, and no proposition is to be rightly understood except in its own place and with the combinations and limitations which Plato has assigned to it" (Reprinted in *Great Thinkers on Plato*, edited by B. Gross [New York 1969], 71), there has been a great deal of attention paid to drama in Plato. See Jaeger's tribute to Schleiermacher in *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 2, translated by G. Highet (Oxford 1943), 78-80. Among many others, Friedländer, Jaeger, L. Strauss (*The City and the Man* [Chicago 1964]), A. Bloom (in the preface to his translation of the *Republic* [New York 1968], 38-50), J. Klein (*A Commentary on Plato's Meno* [Chapel Hill 1965]), and D. Hyland ("Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 [1968]) discuss the importance of the dramatical parts of the dialogue. U Wilamowitz (*Platon*, vol. 1 [Berlin 1919], 123) suggests that the purpose of the early dialogues is poetic and imaginative—not profound and philosophical—in short, that their purpose is dramatic. For a recent discussion of the importance of the drama and for some possibilities for why Plato wrote dramatically, see A. A. Krentz, "Dramatic Form and Philosophical Content in Plato's Dialogues," *Philosophy and Literature* 7 (1983): 32-47; and, for the early dialogues, H. Teloh, *Socratic Education in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Notre Dame 1986), 1-5" (Arieti 12-13, footnote no. 5).

However, Coleridge and Shelley remain basically poets, interested in philosophical ideas, but poets, while Godwin's theoretical work is closer to a social study. Then, although Peacock's characters often use philosophical clichés, they point to poets, like Shelley (Scythrop from *Nightmare Abbey*) or Byron (Cypress from the same novel), and not to the philosophical minds of his time. Peacock's use of literary characters in his novels has an impact on us, readers. We are not tempted to discuss whether Peacock wrote philosophy or literature because we go towards his texts with the already formed opinion that we read fiction. A fiction might embody philosophical preoccupations, but that does not transform it into philosophy. Although Peacock's dialogical novels abound in references to philosophers like Plato or Kant and his characters seem to embody different theories, he was rather seen as a writer of comedies that used philosophy as their material.

However, there is a moment in Peacock's life when he can be associated with one of the figures of the history of philosophy: John Stuart Mill. When he was 34, in 1819, Thomas Peacock started his three and a half decades appointment in the Examiner's Office of the East India Company (Mulvihill 8). Here, Peacock succeeded James Mill in the post of Chief Examiner, while his successor was John Stuart Mill; he also met Bentham during the same appointment with East India Company. The acquaintance with representative figures of utilitarianism did not push him towards this kind of philosophy. Au contraire, Peacock was in his novels, as Mulvihill observes, "the satiric scourge of just such exclusive intellectual systems as utilitarianism" (8-9).

Arguing a point of view very different from utilitarianism, Peacock's satiric attitude makes him a Socrates of his time. He was clearly not the teacher of early nineteenth-century England, as the Ancient philosopher seemed to have been for Athens, but at least one of those who could laugh at its claims of knowledge. In *Memoirs of Shelley*, Peacock is describing a circle Shelley introduced him to at Bracknell, "I was sometimes irreverent enough to laugh at the fervour with which opinions utterly uncondusive to any practical result were battled for as matters of the highest importance to the well-being of mankind" (cf. Butler 16). In this sense, it is not surprising that, in his book about Peacock's life,

James Mulvihill calls him “the laughing philosopher.” Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Peacock might have considered his writings philosophy. In a preface to the novels written in 1837, he calls them “little publications” that were supposed to speak for themselves” (Sage ed. 35). Further, he mentions

the classes of tastes, feelings, and opinion, which were successively the same. Perfectibilians, deteriorationists, statu-quo-ites, phrenologists, transcendentalists, political economists, theorists in all sciences, projectors in all arts, morbid visionaries, romantic enthusiasts, lovers of music, lovers of the picturesque, and lovers of good dinners, march, and will march for ever, *pari passu* with the march of mechanics, which some facetiously call the march of intellect (Sage ed. 35).

Not only does Peacock not consider himself a philosopher, but he appears in this fragment as someone who can judge from a superior position any theory that closes itself within itself. For Peacock seems to use philosophers or any kind of thinkers as exemplars who can become characters in a book—it is the literary approach which does not analyze discourses in detail, but extracts what seems to be the general idea and plays with it.

If Peacock did not see himself as a philosopher, the question of whether Plato considered his own dialogues philosophy or literature can be raised only from a modern perspective. The distinction between these two forms of expression was not so clear in Plato’s times. Martha Nussbaum observes that, for the Greeks, “epic and tragic poets were widely assumed to be the central ethical thinkers and teachers of Greece; nobody thought of their works as less serious, less aimed at truth, than the speculative prose treatises of historians and philosophers” (12). At the same time, Nussbaum argues, Plato tried to change this perception. In his view, she says, “no tragic poem, as his time knew them, could be a good teacher of ethical wisdom” (129). In this sense, if Plato’s dialogues “are a kind of theater, owing a debt to tragic models, they are also a theater constructed to supplant tragedy as the paradigm of ethical thinking” (129). Actually, Nussbaum’s main idea is that “what we find in middle-period dialogues... is theater; but theater purged and

purified of theater's characteristic appeal to powerful emotion, a pure crystalline theater of intellect" (133).

Although we could say that many theorists⁶ perceive philosophy as being different from literature because philosophy's purpose is to express clear ideas that have an aim at universality, things were not so in Plato's time. Furthermore, Plato does not write in the usual fashion of philosophers, who have accustomed us to treatises where they claim a truth and support it with arguments. The structure of the dialogues is centered on a question raised immediately after one of the characters presents a statement. This first idea never proves itself to be Plato's—it actually is hard to affirm what Plato really thinks. Au contraire, the first so-called "thesis" of the dialogue is only an opinion that seems to be common sense at the beginning but is afterwards proved by Socrates not to have any basis. Moreover, Plato does not replace this first idea with anything else; or, better, he is always ready to reject, using Socrates' voice, any new ideas that one of his characters expresses. Socrates himself avoids affirming something. When he makes an assertion, as in the *Symposium*, for example, he puts these words in someone else's mouth. Having to praise Eros, the god of love, Socrates narrates what someone else, Diotima, told him.

Paradoxically, the structure of *Symposium* seems to mock Plato's own critique of literature. In Book 10 of the *Republic* Plato critiques poets as imitators of the copies of the forms. The work of poets is inferior to philosophy because poets do not even bother to think about the eternal forms. Instead, they direct their attention towards the changeable and imperfect copies. Poets' products are thus twice removed from the real forms and cannot be considered as giving any serious account about important questions like, "what is virtue." In this sense, the imitator "knows nothing about that which is but only about its appearance" (*Republic* 601 b). Thus, "an imitator has no worthwhile knowledge of the things he imitates, ... imitation is a kind of game and not something to be taken seriously, and ...all the tragic poets, whether they write in iambics or

⁶ In the first section of this chapter, I try to develop an overview of how different scholars approach this subject. See supra p. 7-11.

hexameters, are as imitative as they could possibly be” (602 b). But the *Symposium*, at least, seems to fall into the same category.

Apollodorus, the narrator of the symposium story—the dinner at Agathon’s house, where many people, including Socrates, made speeches to praise Eros—did not participate in the event. He knows the story from Aristodemus, who participated in the banquet. If we consider the symposium at Agathon’s house, Apollodorus’s version is already twice removed—Apollodorus’s version of Aristodemus’s version of the actuality. Thus Socrates’ reported speech is three times removed from the actual meaning—Socrates narrates what Diotima told him, Aristodemus reports Socrates’ words, and Apollodorus relays Aristodemus’s. Here, Socrates himself appears as an imitator, but Plato is the chief of them all. His *Symposium* is a story twice, three, or even four times “removed” from the real fact—and this quadruple mediation may be one of the ways Plato is having fun with his readers’ minds.

If Plato’s dialogues begin with a dramatic setting—*Phaedrus* and the *Gorgias* are among the most interesting works from this point of view⁷—Peacock dialogues do not differ much in this respect. *Nightmare Abbey* begins on the same note Plato opens the many of his dialogues, with a description of the scene—a lovely and extensive establishment in Lincolnshire, the property of Christopher Glowry, Esquire. The difference between Plato and Peacock begins when the latter starts to describe his characters. Glowry’s wife, married from interest, discovered, “when it was too late, that she had mistaken the means for the end—that riches, rightly used, are instruments of happiness, but are not in themselves happiness... She laid on external things the blame of her mind’s internal disorder, and thus became by degrees an accomplished scold” (2). Not only does Peacock introduce his characters in an ironic fashion, but he also establishes them as representing certain philosophical or temperamental concepts. Glowry’s wife explains her mental state with what happens to her—she blames others for her circumstances, while a good man, as Socrates says in Plato’s *Apology* cannot be harmed. Thus, Glowry’s wife—and Peacock

⁷ See the section on the *Gorgias* where, after I briefly summarize Mark Gifford’s interpretation of the *Phaedrus* opening, I affirm that the *Gorgias*’ opening is the key for understanding Plato’s idea in this dialogue (see *infra* 37-42).

might mean that all philosophers who search for the cause of things where it cannot be found—is nothing but a scold. Through his character, Peacock seems to make a judgment on certain philosophical schools. This does not imply that Mrs. Glowry can be considered “philosophical,” as, for instance, Mr. Flosky, a character pointing to Coleridge, can’t be this way either. Peacock uses his characters only especially to make fun of some philosophical ideas.

If Glowry’s wife were to play a role further in the novel, one would say that Peacock, unlike Plato, tells his readers from the beginning what to think about the ideas that someone brings into dialogue. Glowry’s wife is a clear-cut character—she does not distinguish between means and end, all that as a consequence of her focusing on exterior things rather than the interior self. Of course, the same thing could be said also about Plato, as long as he uses as characters people known by his audience—from Socrates to Crito or Aristophanes, all lived in the Ancient Athens, although they were no longer alive while Plato was writing his works. But Plato never categorizes them within his own dialogues. Or, if he does, he employs other characters, which is not so powerful as using the omniscient voice of the narrator. Nevertheless, Peacock does not stop here. For, as I have suggested at the beginning of the paragraph, Glowry’s wife disappears—she dies and leaves Mr. Glowry “a very consolate widower, with one small child” (3).

However, Mrs. Glowry is not the only character through whom Peacock makes an idea alive. As James Mulvihill observes, “if the personalities of Peacock’s characters seem almost wholly based on the ideas expressed by these characters, the reverse also applies, for ideas in Peacock are conditioned by personality” (1). Thus, Peacock transforms his characters into theories that gather together in his dialogical novels—an approach similar to that of Diderot, the French author in whose dialogues two peculiar theories come as avalanches from two mountains that face each other and meet at their base to talk. But Peacock brings something else—his characters are rather articulators of philosophical ideas and, instead of truly fighting each other, they have a discussion that never seems to have as its purpose finding the answer to a question. This also is one of the main differences between Plato’s and Peacock’s dialogues—if Plato is always looking for an

answer (and it does not matter whether he finds one), Peacock plays with ideas without directing them towards a clear goal.

This difference can raise again the question of why Plato, a philosopher, wrote dialogues. However, it would be wrong to say that Plato is the only philosopher who does not write in expository prose. There are other thinkers who impressed not only with their arguments and ways to interpret the cosmos, but also with the style in which they presented their views. Even before Plato, Parmenides wrote his poem—thus philosophy in verse—, while after the professor of the Academia’s dialogues followed St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Descartes’s *Meditations*, Berkeley and Hume’s dialogues—so again philosophy in a dialogical form—Nietzsche’s diatribes, or Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*. In the introduction to a volume dedicated to Plato and his dialogues (Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy) edited by James C. Klagge and Nicholas Smith, James Klagge even observes that “we may distinguish between those cases from those in which the non-standard style was designed simply to present the philosophical material in which the style was in some sense integral to or inseparable from the material” (2). Thus, he includes Lucretius, Berkeley, and Hume among those “practitioners of a non-standard style as merely a vehicle or container of philosophical content,” while Heraclitus, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche would be among those “practitioners of a non-standard style as (partially) embodying philosophical content” (2).

But not only scholars considered philosophers’ works from the way they were written. Philosophers themselves stepped outside their writing and thought about what should be the best method to express a philosophical thought. Plato, obviously, is one of them. But the issue continued to torment minds to modernity. Wittgenstein himself wrote, “I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*. It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do” (apud. Klagge 2). Also, Normal Malcolm writes that Wittgenstein once said “that philosophical treatise might contain nothing but questions (without answers)” (apud. Klagge, 2).

Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy can give a better account of why Plato used dialogues in expressing his ideas. First, Plato seems to be one of those philosophers who makes from "I only know that I do not know anything" a way of living. Wittgenstein's "treatises" with questions and Plato's dialogues are on the same level—they both say everything affirming nothing. For they both consider philosophy what it was at the beginning—the love of wisdom, and not its possession. Plato might have written in dialogues because he wants to avoid contradicting his own theory. Writing in dialogues, he never affirms anything. Instead, he hides his ideas behind his characters' discourses, making his texts some of the most difficult to understand in the entire history of philosophy. But this very hiding might have only one point—the speech cannot be but removed from the forms. When one tries to teach what virtue is, one only fools one's self—instead of encouraging one's student to begin a journey toward finding the ideas, one only encourages one's student to look down on the earth. Take for example *Gorgias*. Here, Socrates begins one of the few speeches that he makes throughout Plato's dialogues with the words, "but the truth is..." (*Gorgias*, 517b). The last words that he pronounces come in contradiction with the idea that he had just stated a truth, "you've made me deliver a real popular harangue, Calicles, because you aren't willing to answer" (519d). One might question how Socrates can start a discourse with the words "the truth is" and finish it with, "this is a popular harangue." A possible answer would attribute to Plato the belief that any stated "truth" becomes inevitably a popular harangue. A discourse is already removed from the idea that it was supposed to express and thus cannot transmit knowledge. But Plato cannot say that as long as he wants to be true to this very belief because he would fall under the same critique—his statement would only be a popular harangue. Thus, Plato makes Socrates have a speech, on one hand, and say that any speech is only a popular harangue, on the other hand. Plato's true belief is in none of these statements, but in what these statements put together affirm—the Forms embodied in discourse are no longer eternal but fallible. The truth, if it is truth, cannot be embodied; or it can, if we think of Jesus, but even then it has its lost moments, "Eli, Eli, lema Sabachthani"—God, why have you forsaken me?

Peacock's dialectical works are of a different sort. If Plato makes use of a literary form to express what a discourse could never do—what truly is—Peacock approaches already existing theories and plays with them. His own writing never becomes the subject of his novel because there is nothing that can be beyond the novel. Peacock's novel plays the role of Plato's form—in fiction, the nineteenth-century Englishman finds what cannot be passed by anything else; fiction stands for itself and does not need anything to be related to. Even when Peacock uses different philosophical concepts, he does not employ them as exterior objects but subordinates them to the discourse they are in.

In "Plato's Arguments and the Dialogue Form," Michael Frede supports the idea that presumably Plato thinks "that high literature cannot achieve its traditional aims without turning philosophical, or that philosophical writing, or at least the philosophical writing he is engaged in, does not serve its philosophical purpose unless it is eminently literary" (254). More precisely, Frede says, "Plato has certain views about the value and status of philosophical theses and philosophical arguments, as a result of which he thinks that the only responsible way to put forth such views and arguments in writing is in the form of a fictional dialogue, more precisely the kind of dramatic dialogue he writes" (254). Frede's idea is that the dialogical form is strictly related to the arguments that Plato presents in his writings. However, Frede does not say that the dialogue contains in its very form a philosophical idea, but he affirms that this format is appropriate for the presentation of Plato's arguments:

1. In one's determination to do justice to the non-argumentative, 'literary,' elements of the dialogue one should not overlook the plain fact that in sheer bulk the dialogues primarily consists in arguments;
2. As a rule it is an argument which forms the backbone of a dialogue and gives it its structure;
3. The very dialogue form seems in part to be due to the fact that Plato's favourite format for argumentation is the question-and-answer form ...
4. The prominence of arguments in the dialogues presumably reflects the prominence arguments have in Plato's conception of philosophy (254).

The main idea of this thesis proceeds along Frede's lines. Although I would not say that Plato thinks that high literature cannot achieve its traditional aims without turning philosophical—along with Martha Nussbaum, I don't think that the border between philosophy and literature was so a clear line in Plato's time—I want to affirm that Plato's dialogues are intended to be the tree of philosophy, under which we can enjoy the shadow and find the truth that lies within ourselves. The dialogue does not only say something about Plato's philosophy; the dialogue is Plato's philosophy—the philosophy that cannot be found by considering the various theories that his characters, including Socrates, develop within the dialogues.

Peacock's dialogical novels can also be considered a kind of tree, but a different one. It is not evident that Peacock meant them to be this way. Au contraire, he even wrote to Shelley that *Nightmare Abbey* has the object “to bring to a sort of philosophical focus a few of the morbidities of modern literature” (apud. Mills 200). This testimony shows that Peacock intended to convey a clear message to his audience, which comes in contradiction with the view that Plato just desires to make his audience judge and evaluate certain issues in the shady environment that his dialogues provide. But the shadows—and thus the freedom of thought—that Peacock's dialogical novels provide are of a different nature. Peacock's writings transport us into a realm where ideas are satirized and we are able to approach them liberated of their dogmatic power. It is true, we cannot understand Coleridge's views from those expressed by his proxy in *Nightmare Abbey*, the Kantian nostalgic Mr. Flosky, neither do we appreciate Byron reading the words of the caricatured Cypress. For the laugh, the irony, both in Plato and Peacock, has as its effect the liberation of the readers from the power of the written text.

Perhaps a good understanding of what the dialogue does in Plato and Peacock's cases is given by the answer to the question whether we could rewrite their works in the form of a thesis paper. Could we translate Plato's dialogues into different philosophical treatises that enunciate a theory and argue for it? Could we transform Peacock's dialogical novels into expository essays without losing anything from the message his texts are able to

convey to us? And if not, what are the particular differences that the dialogical format brings to Plato and Peacock's ideas?

In what follows, I will argue that the dialogue form is essential for the understanding and the appreciation of both these writers. To this purpose, I will treat separately two of Plato's dialogues, *Crito* and *Gorgias*, and Peacock's *Nightmare's Abbey*.

Chapter III

Analysis of Plato's *Crito* and *Gorgias* and Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*

3.1. The *Crito* and the plane tree

The *Crito*'s opening is not a statement about virtue, as one would expect from a philosophical text on how people should behave. Instead, like many other early and middle period Platonic dialogues, the *Crito* begins with a dramatic setting where we are presented with the place of the discussion—a bed in a cell where Socrates, waiting for his execution, is asleep; Crito, amazed by the old man's calmness, waits for him to wake up. "I have been surprised to see you so peacefully asleep. It was on purpose that I did not wake you, so that you should spend your time most agreeably. Often in the past throughout my life, I have considered the way you live happy, and especially so now that you bear your present misfortune so easily and lightly" (*Crito*, 43 b). There is no "thesis" in the *Crito*—at least not in the introduction, which is dramatic—but just an indication that one person, Crito, considers the situation a misfortune, while the other one, Socrates, seems to accept it with calmness. After this dramatic setting, Plato makes Crito affirm something that generates discussion. "Listen to me even now and be saved" (44 b), says Socrates' old friend, implying that the street-philosopher of Ancient Athens should disobey the law because it wronged him. From here, the dialogue develops into a discussion about whether one should or not disobey the law that ends with a conclusion that some people believe to be the message Plato tries to convey—it is always good to obey laws in any circumstances—and that others interpret it as a partial conclusion that in no way is Plato's true belief but just an argument that can convince Crito, clearly not a well-versed dialectician. One interesting position is James A. Arieti's. He claims that the basic teaching of "this drama," as he names the dialogue, is "the importance of living according to reason, according to the best argument" (139). Thus, Arieti argues further,

This dramatic teaching does not depend on the validity of what the Laws argue; if one cannot refute them, he is bound to live in accordance with them. It is possible that the dramatist Plato deliberately made the arguments philosophically unsatisfactory: a life of reason requires acting

in accordance with the best arguments *actually available*, not arguments that are potentially better... Socrates must live with the best argument *he has* (139).

In this sense, Arieti finds a thesis of the dialogue in what Socrates says, although he believes that the focus of the text is not whether one should obey the laws in any circumstances but the importance of living according to the best argument. Arieti's interpretation still has at its basis the idea that Plato believes we can formulate definitions about Forms in language. For "one must live in accordance with the best argument" is the statement of someone who clearly knows something, and in this sense, it is the statement of an expert. However, I think Plato would reject this interpretation of his works. Since Plato does not let any occasion to mock experts escape, it is improbable that he would accept the idea that he himself can be regarded as one.

The issue of the meaning of the *Crito* is a difficult one indeed; but I believe that the consideration of its dramatic opening can, if not resolve the problem, at least illuminate it. The dramatic opening has here two possible effects. First, the description of the characters' actions could influence the way we read each of their arguments. Thus, we see Crito acting illegally without thinking whether or not he does a good thing—he gives something to the warder to let him visit Socrates—while Socrates is depicted as a man in peace with himself, as I have mentioned earlier. In this sense, Socrates is similar to Crito—he does not even question whether he should or should not disobey the law and accepts the punishment in the same non-problematic way Crito tips the warder.

A second effect is related to a strange statement that Socrates makes with regard to his status, "it would not be fitting at my age to resent the fact that I must die now" (43 b). Socrates' thought comes as an answer to Crito's remark that throughout his life, he considered Socrates' way to live "happy, and especially so now that you bear your present misfortune so easily and lightly" (43 b). In this respect, Socrates' reply sounds at least inconsistent with what Crito thinks about the life of the man about to die. For the resentment that Socrates might have about his upcoming certain death is related in his

words rather to what is appropriate in a particular situation, at a certain age—and here Socrates seems to include the opinion of the many—than to what people must do to achieve a life of happiness. Instead of relying on clear and objective arguments, Socrates describes how things are and arrives at the conclusion how they ought to be. Crito, in his simplicity, amends this logical failure by a simple observation, “other men of your age are caught in such misfortunes, but their age does not prevent them resenting their fate” (43 c). And Socrates accepts this point immediately—“this is so.”

This specific short section of the dialogue can change the whole meaning of it and might add a new line to the dispute regarding whether the *Crito* has a conclusion that we are supposed to endorse. Here, Socrates talks about a specific moment of life, supporting his way of action by describing how things are. Instead, Crito eliminates this option by showing that particular circumstances cannot be criteria for judging how an issue should be. Throughout the dialogue, though, both Crito and Socrates, but especially the former, sustain their points of view making references to different specific circumstances.

This observation about the change of ideas that Socrates, Crito, and the laws have within the dialogue can direct us towards a question. What philosophical idea would remain if we removed Plato’s dramatic embellishment and the dialogical structure? My thesis is that it is impossible to translate Plato’s dialogue into any other discourse, as can plainly be seen in the *Crito*.⁸ A first point is related to the interpretation I am proposing for the opening of the dialogue as an indication that the conclusion reached at the end is a dramatic finale, not a philosophical point Plato wants to affirm. Thus, we cannot find a thesis that could be translated into an expository essay. A second point comes from the idea that dialogue is employed especially to convey a message that cannot be expressed plainly. In the *Crito*, as in many other dialogues, Plato makes his characters dispute over a subject while his purpose is to show that the truth about any of these issues cannot be captured in language. Since he cannot say that without contradicting this very statement—he would claim to state a truth while saying that truth cannot be put in language—Plato uses dialogue where his characters do not arrive at any conclusion. This

⁸ The commentary on *Gorgias*, see infra p. 37-42, shows a similar point.

not grasping a conclusion is Plato's thesis—a thesis that cannot be understood without having dialogue as means of communicating ideas.

Let me begin with the arguments we have in the *Crito*. It is not clear whether the points raised here, either by Socrates or Crito, are to be believed as Plato's views or, at least, as valuable approaches that one might think to adopt as one's view.⁹ It is true, however, that Crito's position is consistent throughout the dialogue, which is not the case for Socrates, who contradicts Crito's opinions in accordance with what he believes could convince his friend. For instance, Crito claims that Socrates should save himself by escaping from prison because:

- a. by dying, Socrates would deprive Crito of a good that he could never find again—Socrates' friendship (44b);
- b. many people would believe that he, Crito, did not want to save Socrates, although he had the means to do it—again, Socrates' action would bring a bad thing, a bad reputation (44c);
- c. Socrates would betray his sons by going away and leaving them, when he could survive to bring them up and educate them (45d);
- d. Once dead, Socrates can no longer teach the youth what is good (45 b-c).

Crito's ideas are consistent in the sense that he judges Socrates' action by its effects. Socrates, on the other hand, does not answer Crito with an argument consistent throughout the dialogue. At the beginning, in answering Crito's claim that Socrates' death would bring shame on Crito's behalf, Socrates affirms that one should not pay attention to what the majority thinks.

The most reasonable people, to whom one should pay more attention, will believe that things were done as they were done... Would that the majority could inflict the greatest evils, for they would then be capable of the

⁹ Actually, there is a whole discussion about how we can be sure whether the arguments that Plato develops in his dialogues are really endorsed by him. There is the simple view that Socrates' ideas are actually those of Plato. More complicated theories say that, while the early, or the Socratic dialogues, are intended to

greatest good, and that would be fine, but now they cannot do either. They cannot make a man either wise or foolish, but they inflict things haphazardly (44 c-d).

Later, though, Socrates, quoting the Laws, uses almost the contrary argument to refute another of Crito's opinions. The Laws say that if he escaped he would "also strengthen the *conviction* of the jury that they passed the right sentence on you, for anyone who destroys the laws could easily *be thought* to corrupt the young and the ignorant" (54 c). Also, they say, "do you not think that Socrates *would appear* to be an unseemly kind of person?" (54 d, emphasis is mine). In both these statements, the laws analyze how Socrates would be judged by the many and make decisions in accordance with how a good opinion about Socrates' conduct would be formed.

One might wonder why Socrates' ways of refuting Crito change. A possible answer is that in the *Crito*, as in many early and middle period dialogues, the text seems not to work towards an answer but to show why some statements do not work. Refuting false theses is a purpose different from achieving a true thesis. The purpose of the dialogue resides within the dialogue itself. Thus, the structure of the dialogue goes as follows:

- i. thesis A;
- ii. thesis A implies B, which implies C, which implies D... which implies N;
- iii. N implies non A.¹⁰

This is the usual structure of Plato's dialogues. Throughout the *Crito*, Crito's different theses are finally refuted in the same style. The end is what is called Plato's *aporia*. This view is supported by Michael Frede, who says that in the case of the aporetic dialogues

it is clear that... the question-and answer format is not just a way of presenting an argument clearly and vividly, or didactically, an argument which could as well be presented in continuous oration. It is rather a

present the philosophy of Plato's mentor, the voice of Socrates-the-character becomes later Plato's voice. But even that is not certain. Sometimes, Socrates himself affirms ideas that contradict each other.

¹⁰ This idea was also observed by Frede (see 262-3).

format which is required by the elenchus, a format which reflects that the respondent significantly contributes to the argument. For, though again the questioner poses the questions and thus shapes the course of the argument, it is crucial for our evaluation of the argument not only that the premises reflect the respondent's beliefs, but that for the purposes of the elenchus it does not matter in the least what the questioner himself knows or believes to be the truth about the subject in question. The questioner has to show that the respondent, given his own beliefs, is committed to the contradictory of his original claim. And for this purpose it does not matter at all whether the questioner believes the premises or, for the matter, the conclusion to be true (262-3).¹¹

The idea that Plato does not attempt to arrive at the end of a conversation at a certain truth is supported by his making Socrates use the laws in his argument with Crito. Socrates almost never says anything about what he believes. He is rather open to different interpretations, and, in the absence of a peer for Crito, he brings the laws into discussion.¹²

Tania Gergel observes that many readers tend to view “the rhetorical form of the Laws’ speech in the dialogue as unphilosophical and as an impediment to solving the speech’s inherent difficulties” (289). Although it is not important for the purposes of this paper whether this statement is true or not, if we accept the idea of the “unphilosophical” rhetorical form¹³ of the Laws’ speech, this could make an interesting point about the dialogue. One could say, for instance, that Plato uses rhetoric in the Laws’ speech to

¹¹ Frede continues his argument saying, “It follows from this that, given the elenctic character of the aporetic dialogues, their argument is not the argument of the questioner, an argument which the questioner is portrayed as endorsing. Hence, it follows that, however much and however clearly Plato may identify himself with Socrates, the questioner in these dialogues, he does not thereby commit himself in any way to the argument of these dialogues” (263).

¹² This idea could be related with the one mentioned in the previous chapter about *Symposium*. As in *Symposium*, where instead of making a speech about Love, he narrates what Diotima told him, Socrates does not make a speech either in *Crito* about what one should do in his situation but brings the laws into discussion to contradict his friend’s arguments.

¹³ It is rather odd to talk about an “unphilosophical” rhetoric, especially having Plato in mind, because it implies that we could talk about a *philosophical* rhetoric, which seems to be a contradiction in terms.

dismiss them, to make the readers think about what they say and not to accept their statements because they come from Socrates' mouth. It is actually interesting that Socrates does not argue with Crito from his point of view, but rather challenges Crito's opinion about what should be done with another opinion—that of the experts: the laws. However, there are many places in Plato's dialogues, and especially in the *Apology* or *Phaedrus*, where Socrates is making fun of the experts. In the *Apology*, Socrates "tries" to see whether the Delphic oracle was right in saying that Socrates is the wisest man by talking with the "specialists" of different fields—and it is they who show themselves as being non-knowledgeable (20-22e). Also, in *Phaedrus*, at the end of the dialogue, when Socrates narrates the myth of Theuth, the inventor of writing, the king of Egypt addresses Theuth with the words, "oh, most expert Theuth" (274e), in a clearly ironic attitude. That could raise the question whether Plato is introducing the Laws=experts into discussion for really expressing a point about what should be done, or rather, let us say, to express just another perspective on the issue. The Laws claim to know how things are, and it is improbable that Socrates, who questions everything, would accept their statement without challenging it. Thus, one might say that in the *Crito* we find various theses, but not Plato's true opinion on whether individuals must obey a law in any circumstances, including when it wronged them.

In this case, we could think about whether Plato is implying that there is another answer to the question of whether or not one should obey the law in any circumstances, an answer that neither Crito, nor Socrates, nor the Laws express within the dialogue. In fact, one might even say that Plato does not give us any answers, which is not surprising for us, being already accustomed to Plato's *aporia*.

In the *Crito*, one important argument for this view can be found at the end of the Laws' speech. The last thing they say is, "Do not let Crito *persuade* you, rather than us, *to do what he says*" (54 d, emphasis is mine). Plato seems to imply that both Crito and the Laws try to persuade Socrates, which is a sophistic method, one in which the discussion starts from previously known facts, rather than a Platonic, philosophical one, where the dialogue goes towards the truth from no previous knowledge. Of course, this

interpretation would not stand as long as we took the Laws to be the interior voice of Socrates, but there is no evidence in the dialogue that would encourage us to think that way.

Socrates makes it clear from the beginning that the Laws of Athens speak to him. It is not his point of view, but what he knows as being the attitude of the Laws. Actually, it is odd that in a discussion about whether one should respect the laws of the city in any circumstances, the *Laws* themselves, instead of an independent source, argue for the positive answer. Even though Socrates says at the end of the dialogue that “these are the words I seem to hear, as the Corybants seem to hear the music of their flutes, and the echo of these words resounds in me, and makes it impossible for me to hear anything else” (54 d), it is not his voice that he says he hears. It is the voice of the laws that seem to have persuaded him—or, at least, he wants us to think have persuaded him—but he shows himself being open to any other beliefs that could make him change his opinion: “As far as my present beliefs go, if you speak in opposition to them, you will speak in vain. However, if you think you can accomplish anything, speak” (54 d).

If the *Crito* started from the question of whether one should obey the laws of one’s city in any circumstances, Plato’s dialogue does not bring any answer. Plato only presents Crito’s statement—pro breaking the law in this particular circumstance—and the laws’ statement—of course, pro observing the laws in all circumstances—and makes them enter into dialogue to each other. But the Laws’ argument is constructed to refute Crito’s reasons to break the law rather than to show what one should necessarily do in Socrates’ situation. Thus, as Socrates seems to imply, the laws’ argument is better than Crito’s, but not the ultimate answer to the question that started the discussion. In this sense Plato does not give any account of what one should do being confronted with the moral dilemma of following the law or not when it seems that breaking it would be ethical behavior. The whole dialogue seems to be constructed either to refute Crito’s opinions or to show how some arguments can be stronger than others without being necessarily true. Does this observation rise out of the dialogue format? Or could another mode of presenting

philosophy result in the same way? I think we need to go back to the problem of whether Plato tells us something through this dialogue in order to answer these questions.

Since Plato simply exposes different opinions about whether one should obey the law in any circumstances, one might say that he does not communicate anything to us. As long as it is agreed that the end of the *Crito* does not really make a final point about the issue that Socrates and his friend discuss, it seems that the dialogue travels in a circle, without actually getting anywhere. But this is the response of someone who is waiting for answers—someone who needs another mind to tell him what to do. Perhaps, however, instead of filling the minds with objects that inevitably corrupt them so that we become faithful to our beliefs instead of searching the truth, Plato is trying to “purify” the souls of humans who approach his texts, an objective he avows in the *Sophist*. In the *Crito*, Plato does not offer an answer, a theory. To do so would be an affront to the members of his audience, in the sense that it would limit them to thinking as another told them to, and doing that would be an affront to his own “status” as philosopher.

The lines above do not mean to affirm that Plato is a subjectivist or a relativist. In no way do I want to say that Plato wants his readers to follow whatever conclusions they reach regardless of the quality of these final beliefs. Instead, I affirm that Plato teaches us that the answer itself is not important and that we might not even be able to reach it. Thus, the question about Plato’s own beliefs and theories about justice and the obeisance of the laws seems to be inappropriate for what I think Plato’s purposes are—to show us that, no matter the subject of the discussion, the most important thing is to realize from the beginning that its fruits cannot be some definitive answers about how things really are, but instead the understanding that we actually only know that we do not know anything.

This Socratic saying, used so many times, became a sort of common knowledge about Socrates’ or, in some respect, Plato’s philosophical theories. In this sense, people tend to take it as something clear and usually point towards the *Apology* when they want to say where it can be found. At the same time, “I only know that I do not know anything” is put apart and left in shadow as something rather Socratic than Platonic. However, “I only

know that I do not know anything” is the main idea behind any word written by Plato. And, while the Socratic “I only know that I do not know anything” is expressed as such within Plato’s dialogues, the Platonic one is never overtly expressed. Stated, “I only know that I do not know anything” becomes “I know something”—it still is a claim of knowledge. The claimer of this knowledge is Socrates, Plato’s character, not Plato. Although Plato might have the same belief as the one expressed by his mentor, he recognizes that, paradoxically, *to state it would be to repudiate it*. Otherwise, we could easily imagine a treatise with the title, “I only know that I do not know anything,” in which Plato would explain why we, as people, are bound to a limited knowledge. In this sense, as I mentioned before, the Socratic saying we mainly find in the *Apology* has nothing direct to do with what I affirm Plato wants to say. For while Socrates affirms something and thus is in no way formally different than any other claimer of truth, Plato uses a fictional method of writing precisely to escape the ideology that, to a certain extent, Socrates saying presupposes. With the dialogue, Plato is able to reverse each possible answer to any questions. Thus the form itself expresses what Plato is bound not to do as long as he wants not to contradict his own theory—I only know that I do not know anything.

The Greek philosopher’s dialogues, and especially those of the early period, are actually variations on this same theme. They have different subjects on a first view, but the Platonic corpus revolves around the circle of knowing to know nothing. Plato cannot say that outside the frame of the dialogue. Within this frame, he creates a work that says nothing and everything at the same time.

As part of Plato’s philosophy, *Crito* expresses the same idea that we encounter in the allusion to the plane tree from *Phaedrus*.¹⁴ The plane does not have the fruits that the many expect from it. Comparably, the *Crito*’s fruits are not in what Socrates, Crito, or the laws affirm, but in what its own structure says. Just as the tree itself is valuable for the shadow that can bestow upon tired travelers, the dialogue offers a place where people can cease the madness of seeking clear truths and ask whether there is something that can be

¹⁴ See supra p. 3.

known. The *Crito* does not have an answer to the question, “what is virtue?”, but one can find on one’s own the answer under its shadow. With the *Crito* (maybe with any dialogue) Plato takes us within the realm of philosophy and encourages us to love it. He might have the answer to the question of whether breaking the law is acceptable as long as it is done in accordance with the moral values. Or maybe not.

In any case, it does not matter whether Plato has or doesn’t have an opinion on this subject. For him, what seems important is only what his readers think, how they approach a certain issue, and how they can make themselves achieve the real truth, if such a thing can be ever reached while being on earth, among the imperfect copies of the Forms. The first step for that is to wonder about and question everything. The dialogical form helps Plato to arrive at this effect. Under the different views and personalities of his characters, Plato can hide his own opinion and thus avoid conditioning or determining his readers by the power of his thought. His dialogues enact the Greek master-disciple relationship: the master—Plato, in this case—brings the disciple into the space of the master’s freedom and teaches him how to be free, how to let his mind travel towards and within the space of wisdom. In the *Crito*, Plato takes us with him into the space of his, not Socrates’, “I know only that I do not know anything” and leaves us there. It is we who have to answer our questions.

3.2. The *Gorgias*

Considered a dialogue that centers on rhetoric but also touches Socrates' favorite questions ("what is the happy man?"; "how a man should live?"), the *Gorgias* is often associated with the *Phaedrus*. If in the latter Plato employs Socrates and Lysis to deploy good and bad examples of speeches, in *Gorgias* we have one of the most interesting dialogues of the early period, rich in characters and full of irony. The purpose of this analysis is actually twofold and starts from the observation above. On one hand, I shall focus on the opening of the dialogue that offers, in my opinion, the key to the whole work; on the other hand, I shall explore the various methods of irony Plato uses in *Gorgias*, having in mind the goal of understanding what irony does for this specific philosophical text.

3.2.1. "First at feast, last at a fray"

The beginning of the *Gorgias* is under a sign of a Greek saying, unknown to us, but that seems to be the equivalent of the English phrase, "first at a feast, last at a fray."¹⁵ Callicles, who presents himself as Gorgias' friend, ironizes Socrates as the latter arrives accompanied by Chaerephon at what seems to be a public building where Gorgias, the famous orator of Athens, has just delivered an "admirable, varied presentation." Callicles' words—"this, they say, is how you're supposed to do your part in a war or battle, Socrates"—can be interpreted as a clear irony on his part towards Socrates who, although he praises himself as a lover of wisdom, might not be brave enough to participate in a true war, a true display of wisdom just put on scene by Gorgias. In other words, Callicles implies that Socrates would be able not to lose a confrontation of ideas with Gorgias only by arriving after the battle is finished. Socrates seems to buy into Callicles' categories and answers him, "Oh? Did we arrive when the feast was over, as the saying goes? Are we late?" (447 a).

¹⁵ This is the beginning of the *Gorgias* in Greek,

Καὶ ἰ. Πολιμου καὶ μ<χης φασὶ χρ<ναι, ἱ Σᾶκratew, οἱ τω μεταλ αγ<nein.

Σω. Αἱ ἰf · τὸ λεγῆμενον κατῆριν φ<rt<ς ἴkomen [καὶ ἔsteroḗmen];

The phrase gets different translations into English. In Donald J. Zeyl's translation, the one that I am using for this study, it says,

"Callicles: This, they say, is how you're supposed to do your part in a war or a battle, Socrates.

By his reply, Socrates changes the whole meaning of Callicles' words by replacing "fray" with "feast," a rather strange approach for Socrates who, instead of challenging his opponent's definition, accepts its structure changing only the subject—we arrived when the *feast* was over, not the *war*, as Callicles implies. This interpretation could be sustained with an interesting tone brought by W. R. M. Lamb's translation, where Socrates replies, "Do you mean, according to the proverb, we have come too late for a feast?" This "do you mean" indicates that Socrates is about to interpret Callicles' words in his own way—a rhetorical method that does not take into account what a word means but how it can be used. Are we supposed to see here a key for the reading of the *Gorgias*? Can we say that this dramatic setting plays the role that a thesis should have in an expository essay? In a paper to which I was referring in a previous chapter,¹⁶ Mark Gifford thinks that Plato uses this approach in *Phaedrus*. There, Gifford says, the dramatic opening of the dialogue gives us the key for discerning the true purpose of Plato in writing *Phaedrus*—to show that a philosophical education (maybe his Academy) would be better than a sophistic one (Isocrates' school of rhetoric). Could a similar state of affairs also be the case in the *Gorgias*?

The answer can be positive. I think there are two levels that need to be analyzed here. First, there is this strange welcome of Callicles, which suggests the subject of the dialogue—a war, a dispute. A dispute of ideas, of course, but still a dispute. Second, there is this different characterization of the same fact by different people—in Callicles' phrase, Socrates came as if late for a war; for Socrates, the war seems to be a feast; then Callicles himself describes the event as a feast, "and a very urbane one," but with a different meaning (a admirable presentation, or a discourse) than what Socrates understands by "feast," a wonderful dialectic, close, it may seem to Callicles' eyes, to war, or eristic. On both these levels, I think, Plato plays with the words of war and feast and makes them interchangeable, thus avoiding the expression of any possible theory.

Socrates: Oh? Did we 'arrive when the feast was over,' as the saying goes? Are we late?" (447 a).

¹⁶ See supra p. 3.

The peculiar opening of the *Gorgias* has roused the attention of other Platonic scholars. Paul Friedländer observes that Socrates' reply to Callicles' greeting is a "peculiar, dramatic irony: what happened before was really play, the serious struggle is about to come" (245). Friedländer's view comes in relation with his understanding of the dialogue as the scene of a battle between philosophy and sophism, dialectic and rhetoric. Although this argument has its own arguable points, I agree with James A. Arieti that it does not do justice to the dialogue (see p. 79). This does not mean, however, that I support what Arieti makes of this opening when he affirms that *Gorgias* is "a drama that starts out brightly and gaily" (79). Considering the *Gorgias* as drama, Arieti focuses on what we see happening in the text, and mainly Callicles' transformation from a man eager to share his guest, Gorgias, with Socrates, to "an angry, sullen, belligerent man" (79). Thus, Arieti argues, we do not see the improvement of any citizens, what the task that Socrates assumes for himself would usually be, but exactly the opposite. "We see Callicles actually transformed through his encounter with Socrates into a *less virtuous person!* Nor indeed do we see Socrates' arguments as entirely sensible or practical for this world; nor, finally, do we see Socrates always arguing fairly" (80).

If we accept that Callicles' transformation is the effect of Socrates' meanness, Arieti interpretation seems plausible. In one of the most interesting paragraphs written on the *Gorgias*, Arieti says,

Are we, the audience, to be filled with admiration for Socrates in the *Gorgias*? I think not: he comes across as bull-headed, tricky, abusive, and wholly indifferent to reality. Despite his claim to be the only true politician, if we accept his definition that the true politician improves the citizens, we see that Socrates is no more successful than Pericles or Themistocles. Indeed, his most prominent historical failure is Alcibiades, who, in case we might have forgotten him, is mentioned twice and in key contexts. And in the dialogue before us, we see him fail utterly to persuade Callicles. Indeed, Gorgias boasted that he could make a man *deinos legein*—clever at speaking. In a sense, hasn't Socrates proven that he can

do the same thing, if we understand by *deinos* not ‘clever’ but ‘terrible’? Socrates, spurning every opportunity for reconciliation and agreement with Callicles, has transformed the patriotic, well-meaning man into a tyrant-loving, anti-philosophical man. Surely Plato means for us to see in this dialogue a failure in the extreme Socratic way of life. Surely he wishes us to see also the ethically empty life of public speaking and politics, a life that has never done any real good to the citizenry (90).

The importance of this long paragraph resides in considering the meaning of Plato’s *Gorgias* only from a literary perspective. Here, Arieti focuses on *Gorgias* with the idea that he has in front of his eyes a work written with literary purposes. But Arieti’s interpretation cannot stand as long as we consider the whole Platonic corpus where, although Socrates might now and then appear in a bad light, it never seems that Plato intends to show the failure of his master’s philosophy. Moreover, Plato’s dialogues abound in places where Plato challenges what many scholars believe to be his own opinions, and, in a related sense, it does not seem awkward for him to challenge his master’s teaching.

But I think this contradiction between what Socrates claims and the effects that he has on Callicles can be explained as long as we consider the same conclusion we arrived at studying the *Crito*: Plato cannot affirm anything as long as he wants to avoid becoming an expert—the category of people laughed at the most in his dialogues. This interpretation can be supported with two interconnected arguments. The first one comes from the observation about the dramatic setting of the dialogue. The second one is related to Arieti’s comment that in the *Gorgias* Socrates’ effects on people seem to be in contradiction with what he preaches.

The fact that Socrates does not have a good effect on Callicles while saying that he is the only true politician and that a good politician improves the citizens is not the only place in *Gorgias* where we catch Plato’s mentor in inconsistencies. There is another fragment, at 517 b–519 d, where Socrates gives one of his few speeches throughout Plato’s

dialogues.¹⁷ Here, we have at the beginning of his speech the phrase, “the truth is.” Not only does Socrates make a speech, but this discourse seems to be in no way different than those of the orators of his time—he claims to have a truth, most surprising for Socrates. But at the end he transforms his whole speech into a joke—“You’ve made me deliver a real popular *harangue*, Callicles, because you aren’t willing to answer” (519 d, emphasis is mine). Socrates makes a speech and then subverts it by calling it a “popular *harangue*.”

Observing that some critics have been puzzled by the way that Socrates, after questioning the value of *makrologia*, or long speech (see 334 c – 335 a), employs it himself later in the dialogue, R. B. Rutherford gives the following explanation:

This is... a common feature of the dialogues, in that Socrates adapts his approach and even his form of discourse to the interlocutor (as in the *Symposium* with the encomium); his dialectic is *ad hominem*. This is not a straightforward process, however. It is important that Socrates does offer his long speeches for questioning and investigation, rather than expecting them to be swallowed whole; that is, his speeches are Socratic in spirit, whether or not the historical Socrates ever did play the role of an orator. But although Socrates adapts rhetorical techniques to a moral end, he is also, arguably, ‘infected’ by Callicles’ oratory and responds with his own, which must still be vulnerable to some of the general criticisms of long speeches as a form of argument (146-7).

Although this interpretation has its valuable points, I think that in order to understand the nuances of the issue we need to consider the context in which it is situated. The uncharacteristic speech comes immediately after Callicles makes another reference to war, as in the opening of the dialogue. Socrates is cornering him with, “Do you shrink back from answering—if there even *is* anything you produced while still in private practice before attempting a public career?” (515 b). In the face of his opponent’s insistence, Callicles says, “you love to win, Socrates,” and we, the readers, tend to

¹⁷ I have already mentioned this paragraph on page 22.

approve the sophist. But Socrates exchanges “war” for “feast” as he did at the beginning of the dialogue, “But it’s not for love of winning that I’m asking you. It’s rather because I really do want to know the way, whatever it is, in which you suppose the city’s business ought to be conducted among us” (515 b-c). Again, Socrates’ answer is the right one—an individual should not pretend to know; instead, he should follow the path of finding wisdom, trying to reach the truth through genuine questioning. In this short reply, Socrates implies that a genuine dialogue cannot not take place between individuals who claim already to possess knowledge, but between two people who look together to find the best answer.

Why does Plato need a dialogue to make that point when, as we see, it can be easily articulated in a couple of sentences? I think the answer is that he wants to avoid stating any of his beliefs in order not to transform them into dogma, or into false knowledge. Plato is conscious that, as long as he affirms something, he is in no way different from the sophists—Socrates’ antagonists in the *Gorgias* and in many other dialogues of the early and middle period. Stating a certain theory, Plato would admit that he knows something. When he makes Socrates claim that a discourse is not good, Socrates is formally in the same position with a sophist who pretends that the chief knowledge is how to talk properly in public. In this sense, although Plato affirms something through Socrates mouth,¹⁸ he needs to negate it immediately. A first negation occurs in the actual dialogue. Callicles, Socrates’ opponent, tries to keep up with the overwhelming arguments. Although he is more powerful than many other characters from the Socratic dialogues, he is not strong enough. But we also have another dialogical level—Socrates in dialogue with himself. Using this technique, Plato is able to affirm everything while saying nothing. Socrates makes a long speech while accusing oratory; Socrates says he is the only true politician, but under his influence Callicles becomes a less virtuous individual; Socrates says that he is not questioning for love of winning but immediately attacks Callicles as in a war: “Haven’t we agreed many times already that this is what a man active in politics should be doing? Have we or haven’t we? Please answer me. Yes

¹⁸ I do not want to say that Socrates’ words are the expression of Plato’s theories. However, it seems that his main beliefs are already expressed through the mouth of his preferred character.

we have. (I'll answer for you)" (515 c). Despite including these contradictions, Plato does not intend to show us a clear failure of the Socratic approach. Actually, I don't think he wants us to believe that or anything. Instead, his point is that we should believe nothing. But he can't say that. In making a totalizing claim, he would become a sophist, as I said—so the form of his writing, the dialogue, helps him to demonstrate, rather than asserting, the point he has in mind.

This idea becomes more evident when we think back to the opening of the *Gorgias*. Callicles says Socrates arrived after the battle. Instead, Socrates changes Callicles' word and names what took place before his arrival—Gorgias' admirable presentation—a feast. A feast is also nourishing in the sense that it feeds people's minds; a mental feast can strengthen minds. But considering a speech a feast is a very strange thing to be said by Socrates, always portrayed as a character who thought and talked against the sophistic teaching. At the same time, what follows this introduction seems to be a true war, one in which people try to win, as Callicles accuses Socrates of doing. But the dialogue turns out to be a feast for Plato—the only way through which the youth of Athens can become true citizens or politicians. The metaphors *war* and *feast* enter into dialogue from the beginning and seem to interchange their places. Plato doesn't make the final point about whether Socrates and Callicles, or the readers, participated to a war or a feast—his opinion does not matter or, at least, if once stated it would become nothing else than a speech. So he writes dialogues. And the dialogue as a frame is the means to understand Plato's philosophy: as long as we put any truth into words, we ourselves claim only its image and thus a dogma. Through dialogue, Plato is able to express his beliefs without transforming them into ideology.

3.2.2. "By Hera, Gorgias, I do like your answers. They couldn't be shorter!"

As Ann N. Michelini observes in an article published in *Classical Philology*, "Plato's vivid mimesis of apparently trivial verbal interactions is often ignored in scholarly accounts" (50). Nevertheless, when irony is the subject of the Platonic inquiry the dialogue that comes easily to mind is the *Gorgias*. Here, Socrates is confronted with Polus, Callicles, and, to some extent, Gorgias, three characters who are treated severely

by the Socratic verb. Michelini thinks that in this dialogue “an examination of Socrates’ manners, good or bad, and the way... irony functions in his confrontation with two different but equally refractory opponents will demonstrate the link between Socrates’ convictions and his dialectical technique” (50). More precisely, Michelini believes that “what may appear to be discourtesy in Socrates’ approach, his persistence in refutation and his stubborn refusal to let Callicles escape from his dialogical torment, can be interpreted as an expression of genuine good will that corrects the false benevolence of Callicles as it corrects his false ideas” (58).

Michelini’s interpretation brings up an interesting point: irony, another literary feature of Plato’s dialogues, does not play a marginal role but crucially helps the expression of Plato’s thought. However, I do not want to go so far as to say that Socrates’ approach is the manifestation of genuine good will, as Michelini believes—in certain places, especially when Socrates examines Gorgias’ way of speech,¹⁹ the irony approaches pure cruelty.

Again, as in the case of the dialogue format, one could wonder what irony does for a philosophical idea. In a thorough analysis of the term “irony” and of how it works in the Socratic dialogues, Gregory Vlastos argues that the word *eironeia* in Greek has metamorphosed into the modern sense of irony, “speech used to express to express a meaning that runs contrary to what is said—the perfect medium for mockery innocent of deceit” (28).²⁰ Vlastos characterizes Socrates’ contribution to the evolution of “irony” as follows:

He changes the word not by theorizing about it but by creating something new for it to mean: a new form of life realized in himself which was the very incarnation of *eironeia* in that second of its contemporary uses, as innocent of intentional deceit as is a child’s feigning that the play chips are money, as free from shamming as are honest games, though, unlike

¹⁹ See 449 d, paragraph analyzed later in this section.

²⁰ See a history of the term in Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, p. 21-9.

games, serious in its mockery (*cum gravitate salsum*), dead earnest in its playfulness (*severe ludens*), a previously unknown, unimagined type of personality, so arresting to his contemporaries and so memorable for ever after, that the time would come, centuries after his death, when educated people would hardly be able to think of *ironia* without its bringing Socrates to mind (29).

One of the question that Vlastos raises is whether or nor the Socratic dialogues' "protagonist allows himself deceit as a debating tactic" (42).²¹ Thus, analyzing *Hippias Minor*, Paul Friedländer sees Socrates as "the living witness to the fact that he who knows the truth can deceive better than he who does not, and he who deceives as Socrates does 'voluntarily' is better than he does so involuntarily." In this sense, Friedländer says, we can find

the purest portrait of the Socratic mode of existence depicted so often (along with the most diverse problems) not only in the early dialogues, but even in the maturest works of Plato: the portrait of Socrates as the sovereign master of all the sophistic techniques with the view toward the good, or as the deceptive educator with his mind fixed upon the right goal (Friedländer 145).

Friedländer's assessment of Socrates from *Hippias Minor* holds equally true in the *Gorgias*. Here, as Charles Kahn also observes in his study, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*" the "three elenchi..., the refutations of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, constitute Plato's fullest portrayal of the way in which the dialectical encounter with Socrates turns into a critical examination of the interlocutor's own life" (75). Kahn acknowledges that this is most obvious in the case of Callicles, "whose challenge to Socrates is explicitly cast as a choice between two ways of life" (75). But this is precisely the problem. If we take into consideration Arieti's remark that Plato's protagonist's irony

²¹ Vlastos also mentions here Kierkegaard for whom "Socrates is the anti-sophist who by ironies of sophistry tricks sophist into truth" (Vlastos 45).

here has as effect Callicles' movement from friendliness to rudeness,²² the Socratic irony seems to fail. As a result of his meeting with Socrates, Callicles arrives at the bad way of life. Socrates' good purpose and right goal that Friedländer mentions are not achieved. Au contraire, the effects are precisely the opposites of Socrates' supposed goals.

A possible explanation would go along with the argument we found in the previous section—if Plato clearly values something and overtly presents it as good or right to his audience he would fall into the category of sophistry. Thus, he cannot make the Socratic didactic method succeed without indirectly presenting it as the way to be followed. But there also is another possible interpretation: even while failing in his purpose, Socrates remains the superior partner of the discussion. As Friedländer says, Socrates can deceive because he is the one who knows—his “I only know that I do not know anything,” although it becomes dogma once stated and hence as wrong as any other sophistic statement, still is a superior one. This is more evident in the short exchange Socrates has with Gorgias:

Socrates: That's what we need, Gorgias! Do give me a presentation of this very thing, the short style of speech, and leave the long style for some other time.

Gorgias: Very well, I'll do that. You'll say you've never heard anyone make shorter speeches.

Socrates: Come then. You claim to be knowledgeable in the craft of oratory and to be able to make someone else an orator, too. With which of the things there are is oratory concerned? Weaving, for example, is concerned with the production of clothes, isn't it?

Gorgias: Yes.

Socrates: And so, too, music is concerned with the composition of tunes?

Gorgias: Yes.

²² See Arieti's analysis in the quote on pages 39-40 of the present study.

Socrates: By Hera, Gorgias, I do like your answers. They couldn't be shorter!

Gorgias: Yes, Socrates, I daresay I'm doing it quite nicely (449 c-d).

This final irony regarding the shortness of the answers of one of the most prominent sophists of the time (a sophist having to give short answers is a ironical situation in itself), irony completely missed by Gorgias, establishes which of the two, the philosopher or the sophist, is the true master of speeches and hence the better sophist. Because he is bound not to affirm something clear in an expository essay as long as he desires not to transform his beliefs in ideology, Plato needs different ways to express his ideas; two of them are precisely literary. The dialogue format was analyzed above. Here, we can see that irony, besides provoking laughter in the dialogues' audience, can also be considered having a meaning for Plato's philosophical agenda. Without openly endorsing Socrates' approach, the professor of the Academia shows by irony that Socrates' way of life is at least superior to any other one.

3.3. *Nightmare Abbey* or a *Gorgias* with literary purposes

“The object of *Nightmare Abbey*,” Peacock wrote to his friend Pierce Bysshe Shelley, “is to bring to a sort of philosophical focus a few of the morbidities of modern literature, and to let in a little daylight on its atrabilarious complexion” (Halliford, VIII, 204). From this point of view, it seems that Peacock conceived his dialogical novel rather as a philosophical work than a fiction. Whether or not *Nightmare Abbey* is, while being a literary text, also a philosophical piece because of its dialogical format will be a question that this section addresses. Before doing so, let me observe that, instead of applying his “philosophical focus” to general ideas, Peacock’s purpose is at the beginning to address specific objects—the literary works of his time. Thus, if we consider Arthur Danto’s distinction between philosophy and literature²³—that literature focuses on this particular world while philosophy aspires to every world possible—*Nightmare Abbey* enters into the category of fictional texts, or, at least, non-philosophical texts.

Whatever Peacock’s professed objectives, the novel seems to have taken over its own destiny and ended up being something different than only a critique of Peacock’s contemporary writers. Although, as Ian Jack points out, “the views of Mr. Flosky the Kantian satirize those of Coleridge: the views of Mr. Toobad, the manichaeian Millenarian, satirize those of J. F. Newton: while those of Mr. Cypress satirize Byron... Scythrop’s opinions caricature those of Shelley at a certain point in his life” (*English Literature 1815-32*, apud. Mills 136), these characters are not mere caricatures of Regency writers. For a reader unaccustomed to the subtleties of the relationships within Peacock’s real-life circle, *Nightmare Abbey* still makes sense. One reason is, as some critics say, that “the characters are abstractions and it is their opinions which form ‘the main matter of the work.’ Unlike Jane Austen, Peacock is more interested in ideas than in people.”²⁴ Thus, transcendent philosophical concerns mingle with the literary contingencies of Peacock’s characters and their dialogues.

²³ See infra p. 8 and following.

²⁴ Ian Jack’s *English literature 1815-32*. Oxford, 1963, p. 213, apud. Mills 136.

However, the same dialogical novel provoked different interpretations. Howard Mills affirms that “*Nightmare Abbey* is the shakiest of grounds on which to base a generalization that Peacock is ‘more interested in ideas than in people’” (137). Mills supports his idea taking as an example Scythrop’s reply to Mr. Toobad’s claim that everything is a proof of “the temporary supremacy of the devil” (Peacock 25). In a long paragraph, Scythrop enumerates evil, mischief, confusion, vanity, vexation of spirit, death, war, diseases, and all possible evils that one could think about only to say that Mr. Toobad is right in his views. “There is nothing here worth considering as an idea,” says Mills without hesitation. The only thing that matters in Mills’ opinion is that “the whole breathless paragraph conveys to us Scythrop’s temperament and nervous system, with his overflowing pity and self-pity, that are inseparable from his emotional fluctuations and violence in the preceding scene with Marionetta, and his physical volatility in the headlong chase” (138).

It is clear that there is a lot of space for discussion between Ian Jack’s and Howard Mills’ theories, two extreme positions on *Nightmare Abbey*. Both of them look for ideas in the actual words of the characters. But wouldn’t it be possible, as we saw in Plato, to find ideas not merely in what the characters say but also in how they interact? Can we say that Peacock expresses his ideas using the format of his dialogical novel? And what place does irony occupy in this picture? The ensuing analysis of *Nightmare Abbey*’s will center on these two possible issues—the dialogical format and the irony.

Let us see first what is the idea of the story. Peacock’s novel can be summarized as follows: a young man, Scythrop Glowry, after finishing his education, comes back to his father’s house, Nightmare Abbey in Lincolnshire. He falls in love with the wrong girl, Marionetta, who, although she is the orphan niece of Mr. And Mrs Hilary, friends of Mr. Glowry, the master of the house, does not appeal to Glowry’s hopes for his son. Scythrop refuses to marry Celinda Toobad, a union Mr. Glowry has arranged for him with her father, another guest at the Abbey. Nevertheless, Scythrop also accidentally falls in love with his father’s choice without knowing it. Celinda Toobad runs away from home to avoid the marriage her father wants for her and falls into the arms of a young writer,

Scythrop. The interest Celinda shows for his intellectual work takes Scythrop from the arms of Marionetta but only leaves him in the middle. Caught in a love triangle, Scythrop cannot make up his mind and ends up left by both women. The whole story is a friendly irony directed towards Shelley who at the time was caught between two women. *Nightmare Abbey*'s two unmarried ladies are "in some ways reminiscent of Shelley's Harriet and Mary—Shelley himself at times lives a parody of sentimental romances" (Dawson 213).

The story of the novel does not offer anything new—the classic love triangle resulting in the loss of a proper relationship with either of the two possibilities. Thus, it is not arguable that Peacock does not use dialogue just to narrate a story that can be said simply in any other narrative style. Of course, the dialogue might provide him some resources to explore the depth of his characters' feeling, but one might say that it is easier to do that as long as the writing style adopts the position of the omniscient author or when the main character seems to be the narrator of the story.

In this sense, Peacock's choice of the dialogue format does not have anything to do with the actual story. Actually, the novel begins conventionally, with an introduction in which an omniscient narrator describes the characters and sets the scene. One specific difference from Plato's dialogues, then, is that in Peacock's we have an introduction that starts like a normal novel. In *Nightmare Abbey*, the exposition, "a prelude of a rather insistent kind, [is] setting the emotional tone of the book and indicating the problems which will form its subject-matter" (Burns 82). Here, Peacock presents the main subject of his story—the area of love, as Burns observes. Furthermore, "a proper affection between man and woman is presented as the aim of good life" (Burns 84).

There are at least two kinds of dialogues within *Nightmare Abbey*. The first type is concerned with Scythrop's romantic relationships. These dialogues usually occur between him and Marionetta, him and Celinda, or him and his father. The second type involves almost all the guests of the Abbey and usually addresses wider moral issues, often treated ironically.

If we think about the first kind of dialogue, the most interesting seem to be those between Scythrop and his father. After finding out that his father “pledged [his] honour to the contract” (29) that engages Scythrop to a “lovely, serious creature” with a “great fortune,” the son is revolted, “Indeed, sir, I cannot say. I claim, on this occasion, that liberty of action which is the co-natal prerogative of every rational being” (29). And here we have an exchange about a particular subject that has more to do with philosophy than literature—liberty and necessity:

“Liberty of action, sir? There is no such thing as liberty of action. We are all slaves and puppets of a blind and unpathetic necessity.”

“Very true, sir; but liberty of action, between individuals, consists in their being differently influenced, or modified, by the same universal necessity; so that the results are unconsentaneous, and their respective necessitated volitions clash and fly off in a tangent.”

“Your logic is good, sir: but you are aware, too, that one individual may be a medium of adhibiting to another a mode or form of necessity, which may have more or less influence in the production of consentaneity; and, therefore, sir, if you do not comply with my wishes in this instance (you have had your own way in every thing else), I shall be under the necessity of disinheriting you, though I shall do it with tears in my eyes.” Having said these words, he vanished suddenly, in the dread of Scythrop’s logic (29-30).

On a first glance, the exchange between Mr. Glowry and his son seems to be the expression of a philosophical fight between two different schools of thought, determinism and free will. On a more careful look, both Scythrop and Mr. Glowry are inconsistent in their philosophies. Scythrop starts by claiming that liberty of action is the “*co-natal* prerogative of every rational being.” But then the confused young man explains his understanding of liberty using exactly the determinist theory—the freedom humans have is the result of a universal necessity, so liberty of action is not assumed by the

individuals. “Your logic is good,” replies Glowry, and we can interpret his conclusion in two ways. It might mean, “your way of thinking is correct,” in which case the father is no better than the son. Or it might mean, “your logic is good for me—you just proved my point.” These two readings can be registered at the same time, and that brings an interesting point about how irony functions in Peacock’s text. For here, the reader has the option to laugh with Glowry at Scythrop’s naiveté or with Peacock at the poor understanding of the father, or to enjoy both sorts of laughter.

But there also is another possible reading—that Peacock himself upholds one of the views and is serious in conceiving this discussion, so that laughter should be directed towards the writer when we discover inconsistencies and ambiguities in the characters’ utterances. However, although we can conceive such a possibility, we have to reject it from the beginning. This rejection is related to the fact that Peacock writes a *literary* dialogue, not a philosophical one. In this discussion between Mr. Glowry and Scythrop there is no evidence that Peacock has a serious preoccupation in settling whether determinism or freewill (if Scythrop’s theory in any way resembles free will) is a better belief to base your life upon. Instead, Peacock uses philosophical ideas for literary ends. In this short dialogue between father and son, the reader is meant to enjoy the contradictions that each of the character expresses. The continuation of Glowry’s speech after his appraisal of his son’s logic shows that he is not able to understand Scythrop’s logical failures, for his own statement has its own problems. Telling his son that he will be disinherited, Mr. Glowry sees that as a consequence of necessity while admitting that it is his free choice to do it.

To a certain extent, having a character supporting a theoretical issue while using its contrary reminds us of the *Gorgias*, where Socrates makes long speeches while stating that it is wrong to do so. However, there is a clear difference between what Plato does with this technique and how Peacock uses it. If for Plato this was the only way to escape the danger of ideology,²⁵ Peacock’s purpose is rather directed towards laughter. A

²⁵ See the section on the *Gorgias*.

discerning reader takes both Scythrop and Mr. Glowry as comic—characters who have a claim of knowledge that proves to be only a pseudo-knowledge.

The commentary above does not mean that the only Pavonian purpose is to write a satirical book that occasions laughter for its readers. Actually, there are certain scholars who see in Peacock's text a serious examination of the state of literature. Marilyn Butler affirms that

Nightmare Abbey has two faces, negative and positive. Its negative, or satiric, face is the anatomy of a current intellectual scene swept by a craze for the Germanic. Seen from this angle, Peacock's satire re-examines the question of what German literature stands for, using Coleridge's own statements as the prime piece of evidence. *Nightmare Abbey* is indeed largely cast as a reply to Coleridge's opposition to the French tradition in his *Lay Sermons*, and his praise of the Germans in the *Biographia Literaria* (113-4).

Butler supports her claims having a look at the interventions of Flosky, a character representing Coleridge and his philosophical positions largely borrowed from the German philosopher Kant. And with that we can pass together to the second type of dialogue I mentioned above, the one in which almost every character living at the Abbey is involved in.

After Marionetta, Scythrop's love, flirts with Mr. Listless, Scythrop's former comrade and present rival, to make the young Glowry jealous, Mr. Flosky joins in a sterile discussion after hearing Listless' remark that "Dante is becoming fashionable" (47). Listless, a superficial young man, ventures into discussion "with a consciousness of my own nothingness, in the presence of so great a man as Mr. Flosky." It is interesting to see why Peacock named his personage Flosky. He comically explains in a footnote that Flosky is "a corruption of Filosky, quasi Filoskiōs a lover, or sectator, of shadows" (9). Of course Filoskiōs sounds close to Fōl n̄sofōs, which can make us think that Peacock

shows us from the beginning that Flosky is a lover only of shadows, although he *sounds* like a philosopher. Indeed, after Listless' remark, Flosky shows his *thorough* knowledge, "tea, late dinners, and the French Revolution, have played the devil, Mr. Listless, and brought the devil into play" (48). After Mr. Listless recognizes with honesty that he "cannot see exactly the connection of ideas," Flosky launches himself in a long speech,

I should be sorry if you could; I pity the man who can see the connection of his own ideas. Still more do I pity him, the connection of whose ideas any other person can see. Sir, the great evil is, that there is too much commonplace light in our moral and political literature; and light is a great enemy to mystery, and mystery is a great friend to enthusiasm (48).

After this long speech, from which I quoted only the beginning, where he attempts to explain his incomprehensible theory, Flosky ends it with, "and for these reasons I have christened my eldest son Emanuel Kant Flosky" (50).

Considering this long but indeed "beautifully executed passage, located in the actual text of the *Lay Sermons*," Butler finds that "Peacock allows Mr. Flosky intellectual distinction, while noting his enmity to the scientific spirit of free enquiry which is characteristic of the Enlightenment" (115). But Butler's serious remark about a serious discourse comes after she has omitted from her quotation the very beginning of Flosky's speech ("I should be sorry if you could; I pity the man who can see the connection of his own ideas. Still more do I pity him, the connection of whose ideas any other person can see"). This beginning bestows a totally different interpretation upon the whole passage—Flosky acknowledges that he cannot see the connections of his own ideas thus provoking in us the expectation to laugh at his words instead of paying attention. Also, the critic extracts Flosky's words from the dialogical context, without considering the discussion they come after and the ideas they generate.

Actually, put in context, Flosky's speech reminds a reader of Socrates' "popular harangue" from the *Gorgias*. It comes in a middle of a passage where we have short

answers, and there are signals that we, as readers, are supposed to laugh at Flosky's pretension of knowledge. For instance, the beginning of the speech is purposely comic and does not make any sense as long as Flosky values reason above all, while the ending where he mentions giving the name of Emmanuel Kant to his son, as Coleridge named his first two sons Hartley and Berkeley, only adds to the general comic note.

However, there are two important differences between Flosky and Socrates. First, Flosky takes himself seriously, whereas Socrates himself calls his speech a popular harangue. Paradoxically, Socrates' own critique does not direct our focus to something else than his theories. Au contraire, his speech is diligently analyzed. In Flosky's case things change—he takes himself seriously, but it seems there is no point in analyzing “the connection of his ideas” because earlier signals have conditioned us to expect them to serve Peacock's purpose of ironizing the seriousness of a philosopher whose ideas are too important for him to try to question their validity.

The second important difference resides in the purposes of these long speeches within the frame of a dialogue. In the previous section on the *Gorgias*, we arrived at the conclusion that Plato's purpose is actually to avoid falling into the danger of ideology. Peacock does not have the same problem. If he puts different characters in dialogue, he does it because in this way he can ironize the ideas they express. Peacock does not work towards an answer to a question but only employs the dialogue format to make fun of any possible theory that the literary world of his time deployed or exaggerated. In this sense, I believe it would be unreasonable to search for cogent philosophical ideas within the various shorter or longer speeches that we encounter in *Nightmare Abbey*. Peacock has no purpose of expressing an ideology there. Instead, he uses philosophical ideas as targets for his powerful and skilful irony.

At the same time, the whole fragment built around Mr. Flosky's speech is reminiscent of Platonic dialogue. As in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates does not succeed in convincing his opponents of his truth, Flosky does not impose his point of view either. Although the Reverend Mr. Larynx seems to be bewildered—“Nothing can be more luminous”—Mr.

Listless, the one whose remark about Dante started everything, makes us laugh at Flosky's speech, though unintentionally, it is true: "And what has all that to do with Dante, and the blue devils?" The final irony comes from Mr. Hilary, the character who mainly expresses the sane, classical views of Peacock himself, "Not much, I should think, with Dante, but a great deal with the blue devils" (50).

What follows are two other Flosky speeches, full of the same pretentious nonsense as the first one. But the nonsense emerges when we consider Flosky's speeches in isolation. Like Marionetta who does not "precisely enter into your meaning" (52), we cannot grasp Flosky's argument. The words of this shadows' lover are shadows. But this approach considers the obvious meaning of Flosky's discourses. If we look deeper—and we need to do that to consider the dialogue format—we see Peacock laughing at a theory at two levels. On the first one, he makes it obviously illogical. The theory considered in itself is actually no longer a theory but a juxtaposition of ideas without logic. On the second one, he gives the theory logic within the big picture of the discussion—Flosky's speech is the object of voluntary or involuntary irony.

Flosky's shadowy and opaque arguments do not have any success in provoking a philosophical quest for truth. The participants to the discussion respond to them only in accordance with their own theories. Mr. Toobad responds with his eternal, "the devil is come among us"; Mr. Hilary has always a distant and ironic observation—"which [the mental power] is about as well employed as the power of a hot-house would be in forcing up a nettle to the size of an elm"; Listless remains the same superficial but honest individual. The dialogue ends without any conclusion. But Plato's *aporia* is replaced here by Marionetta's music.

I began this section with two opposite views on Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*. On one hand, Ian Jack affirmed that Peacock was rather interested in ideas. On the other hand, Howard Mills claimed that there is nothing in this dialogical novel worthy being considered an idea. It seems now, after traveling through the two types of dialogue we encounter in Peacock's novel, that both Jack and Mills are wrong because they are

looking for ideas in the wrong place. Or, better said, although there might be some ideas that can, at least, provoke us to prove them fallible, the most interesting ideas rise out of the structure of the novel. For Peacock, the dialogue seems to have two main uses:

1. it equips the writer with the power of making fun of the statements of his characters through the other characters' voices;
2. it gives the chance for a meta-level of discussion—Flosky's speech is no longer important in what it says, but in how it is situated among the critiques of the surrounding characters, equally absurd theories.

In this sense, Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* is clearly a work of literature. The philosophical ideas that it employs are not to be analyzed as important concepts that Peacock wants to convey. Instead, the intellectual reward we can gain is revealed through how they interact with each other. Like a latter-day Socrates, Peacock laughs at each pretentious claim of knowledge. The difference consists in that Socrates, unless we assume that Plato portrayed a historically accurate Socrates, is only a character within Plato's dialogue, while Peacock, working from outside the dialogue, realizes his purposes using each and every one of his fictive personages.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

Analyzing what the dialogue format does in some of Plato and Peacock's writings inevitably raises the problem of the border between philosophy and literature. Thus, in some respect, this paper touches the issues of what makes a text philosophical or fictional. Nevertheless, this very question about the border between philosophy and literature might be misleading, especially in the cases of the two writers analyzed. For one of them uses literary forms to better express a theory that would negate itself if overtly stated, while the other employs philosophical concepts and theories as pieces to obtain with their combination a literary effect, mainly irony. In both cases, dialogue enables Plato and Peacock to have generalized dialogical texts. The characters interact with each other. There are dialogues within the discourses of the same character (Socrates rejecting his own statements and Flosky involuntarily auto-ironizing). The writers themselves seem to participate to the conversation—we understand the unintentional ironies as signs of the author's intervention; finally, literature and philosophy go back and forth, retreating or advancing, in a dance of mutual courtship.

Although it might sound strange to put together two characters like Socrates and Flosky—the philosopher and one who believes he is a philosopher while loving only shadows—their comparison is worthwhile as long as we consider how irony works in Plato's and Peacock's dialogues. I already mentioned in the section on *Nightmare Abbey* that Flosky's speech reminds us in some respect of Socrates' discourse from the *Gorgias*. To recollect, let me say that in the *Gorgias* Socrates was delivering a speech arguing that long discourses are not good and cannot bring knowledge, after asking Gorgias at the beginning of the dialogue to have short sentences. If Socrates had towards the beginning the words, "the truth is," at the end he says, "You've made me deliver a real popular *harangue*, Callicles, because you aren't willing to answer." In *Nightmare Abbey*, the beginning of Flosky's speech is also peculiar. With the words, "I pity the man who can see the connection of his own ideas," Flosky involuntarily ironizes his own discourse, as Socrates ironizes his. Socrates' irony is, though, different than Flosky's because although

we find a fine irony within each of Flosky's speeches, we view that irony from the vantage point of the author. Flosky is the object of irony, not its agent. Nevertheless, the irony bestowed on him is a Socratic one. Peacock uses this irony in a different way than Plato does. While the Greek philosopher employs only Socrates and we see this irony as a characteristic of the character, in *Nightmare Abbey* Flosky never ironizes. His character is comic because Flosky is the object of the irony that came from his own speeches or from the sincere remarks of his interlocutors, like Mr. Listless. Irony, even Socratic irony, connects Plato and Peacock over the centuries.

It is true, however, that, while Peacock's writing dialogues does not obviously raise a problem since we consider him a literary writer who uses a literary format, the philosopher Plato's using dialogue raises questions. Why does Plato write dialogues? The answer can take different forms, none of them being able to embody certainty, as R. B. Rutherford observes in *The Art of Plato: Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation*. Rutherford proposes three such answers. The first "obvious advantage" of dialogue, he says, "is the vividness and sense of immediacy that the form allows: it enables [Plato] to recapture the atmosphere and intellectual pleasure of Socrates' company, and also to preserve the memory of the kind of man Socrates was: eccentric, amusing, ingenious, playful, maddening, physically grotesque—an extraordinary individual" (8). A second reason, related to this one, is that "the dialogue form makes the discussion more entertaining, more amusing, and lures the reader on." Third, "the dialogue form enables Plato to avoid appearance of dogmatism and to encourage independent thinking" (8-9).

The first two effects that Rutherford sees in Plato's use of the dialogue form do not have any influence on Plato's philosophy. Actually, one might say that they, especially the second one, contradict what Plato seems to preach throughout his dialogues—he rejects entertainment and amusement in the teaching of philosophy. However, Rutherford's third observation also implies a philosophical agenda—Plato does not want to be seen (Rutherford mentions "appearance") as a dogmatic writer and wants to encourage independent thinking.

My thesis concerning Plato and dialogue is close to Rutherford's last reason. However, it would claim more for the form than Rutherford does. For I believe that Plato uses the dialogue format not only to avoid dogma, but to say that there is nothing that can be said without its taking the slippery characteristic of subjective things. Once stated, a theory, a concept, or a truth is no longer itself but something else and thus removed from the original. The dialogue format helps Plato to affirm, without dogmatizing, that he only knows that he doesn't know anything without actually affirming it. In this sense, I believe that for Plato's philosophy the dialogue is a necessary ingredient. Without it, Plato would no longer be Plato.

As I mentioned above, Peacock's use of dialogue is not so surprising. Nevertheless, if we focus on what the dialogue does in his novel, we can discover things that could not be found in simply studying his novelistic style and his opinions on the literary world of his time. Moreover, studying the dialogue bestows a new light precisely on these traditional loci of Pavonian scholarship. We can see that the use of dialogue takes the focus away from what the characters actually say in the novel and moves it to how each shorter or longer discourse situates itself at the table among all the theories encountered. This effect is also strengthened by Peacock's use of unidimensional characters who remain identical throughout the novel. The Pavonian novel can be imagined like a pointillist painting where the colors perpetually switch their places as they interact but do not change their essence. We understand them better in contrast, but we understand only their appearance, how they appear to each other, instead of grasping their substance.

Yet, there is a peculiar change of nuances in *Nightmare Abbey* understood as a painting: each color—each theory—becomes less scintillating. After imposing themselves as truths—probably all the characters from *Nightmare Abbey* have a claim of knowledge—they pale towards the end of the dialogue as a consequence of their confrontation with each other. Finally, what remains valuable is the painting itself—the dialogue, the only place where, as in Plato, people with formulated opinions or apparent expertise find that to pretend to have knowledge and expertise is actually the worse ignorance.

In this sense we can raise again the question about the difference between philosophy and literature. Studying Plato's and Peacock's dialogues offers a possible interpretation that does not separate these two ways of approaching ideas. On one hand, it seems that genuine philosophy can be expressed only through fiction. Wittgenstein affirms that idea—"philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*." Plato applies this dictum without mentioning it. The surprising thing is that the Pavonian dialogue has the same genuine philosophical conclusion—the knowledge that one believes one has is actually only appearance. Without writing philosophy, Peacock's use of the dialogue becomes philosophy. Not in the actual assertions, where, as previously affirmed during *Nightmare Abbey*'s analysis, some might say that there are no worthwhile ideas, but in the big picture. Thus, used in philosophy or literature, dialogue seems to be the perfect tool to communicate the idea that once expressed becomes its negative: the only thing that we know is that we do not know anything.

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Education

M.A. English (December 2002) Virginia Tech

Four years of undergraduate studies in Philosophy (September 1996—June 2000)
University of Bucharest, Romania

M.A. Communication Studies (June 1997) University of Bucharest, Romania

B.A. Journalism and Communication Studies (June 1996) University of Bucharest,
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Conferences, Translations, Publications

Translated from French to Romanian Jean Servier's *Histoire de l'utopie*. Bucharest:
Meridiane Publishing House, 2000.

"Nintendo with Plato and Derrida, or This Is Not Just a Game, or $p \rightarrow q$ " *International E-
Journal for Philosophy*. January March 2002, <http://www.hybris.ro/>

"The *Gorgias*, or 'First at a Feast, Last at Fray.'" Illinois Philosophical Association. 2002
Meeting. November 1-2, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"Dialogical Writing in Philosophy and Literature. A study on Plato's *Gorgias* and
Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*." Building Bridges. Philosophy Graduate Student
Conference at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, November 15-17, 2002.

Teaching Experience

Teacher, French and Journalism, Roanoke Catholic School (August 15, 2002)

Graduate Teaching Assistant, English, Virginia Tech (August 2000—May 2002)

Assistant Professor. Journalism for Printed Media. Hyperion University, Bucharest,
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Other Work Experience

Journalist, *Dilema*—a Romanian cultural magazine published in Bucharest (April 1998—
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Assistant. The French Cultural Institute in Bucharest (June 1996—May 1998).
Organizing courses for the Romanian Government about the European Integration.

Journalist. *Bucarest Matin*, a French newspaper published in Bucharest (May—August
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Languages

Romanian, English, French (Diplôme Approfondi en Langue Française), Italian, some
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