PLATO AND THE GREEK NOVEL

An authoritative model to inverse

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The parasite Gnatho, a secondary character in Longus' *Poimenikà*, has fallen in love with Daphnis. As he tries to convince his master to take him as slave, he praises his beauty proving himself to be familiar with the symposia and the whole panoply of erotic symposiastic rhetoric. At the end of Gnatho's ridiculous declaration of love, Astylus ironically states that "Eros makes great σοφισταί" (μεγάλους δ Έρως ποιεῖ σοφιστάς, 4,18,1). Eros himself had been labeled a sophist some centuries before in Plato's Symposium. In the portrait of the god depicted by Diotima, he is "a terrible enchanter, sorcerer, and sophist" (203d). We may recognize in Astylus' utterance a more or less overt allusion to the Platonic dialogue: in both texts, the term *sophist* creates an association between the one in love, ever-ready to exploit every deceitful and verbal means to reach the beloved, and the rhetorician, who employs sophisticated and charming words to sway the opinion of his listeners, be it just or not so. Like the Platonic Eros, Gnatho is in need of something and tries to obtain it through the display of a consummate symposiastic rhetoric (a little before he had, less poetically, harassed the object of his desire). In the following, I shall examine why Plato is one of the major intertexts of a parodic scene in which a pederast begs his master to buy a teenager for his own pleasure, and go on to analyze why a parallel is drawn between the figure of a parasite and the Platonic god of love.

Nietzsche was the first to highlight that "Plato really gave to all posterity the model for a new art-form, the *novel*". All Platonic dialogues are structured and conceived as narratives. K.A. Morgan notes that the merging of mimetic and narrative forms and the narrative experimentation at work in Theocritus and in the novel as well find a significant precedent in Plato. The novelists of the Imperial Age inherited from the philosopher, amongst other things, the use of narrative frames to create "a vertiginous effect of multiple nested narratives", the use of prose as a narrative form instead of poetry, and the psychology "for the representation of internal struggle and decision-making". Compared to the linearity of the Aesopian fable, the other model of fiction, Plato's prose

¹ Nietzsche (2000), recently, Hunter (2015).

² K. A. Morgan (2004) 358f.

³ Ibidem, 364.

⁴ Hunter (2015) 223.

was much more sophisticated and suited to the expression of the complexity of human feelings. With regard to the question at hand, we can mention several studies. However, there is another point in connection with the relationship between Plato and the Greek Novel that is challenging and often neglected by scholars, upon which I will seek to shed light.

Plato was considered by the novelists not only a prose stylist, but also one of the main authorities in matters of love. During the Imperial Age, the Symposium and the Phaedrus were his best-known dialogues and Plato was, in the opinion of the majority of the literate public, not a philosopher stricto sensu but a theorist of eros. By assuming that Plato's theory of eros was so influential and widely-known in that age, we are able to explain - sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly - why the ancient Greek novels contain abundant references and quotations from famous passages of the Symposium and the *Phaedrus*. Since the erotic experience bore a central role in the novel, the novelists sought to evoke the authority of this Plato Eroticus to confer prestige to the newlyborn literary genre they practiced. However, the cultural leap between the fundamentally intellectual and homoerotic dimension of Platonic eros and love as it is represented in the novel was significant and often problematic. Let us explore how the novelists dealt with the theory of Platonic *eros* through an analysis of several intertextual references. In particular, I will consider three novels: Leucippe and Clitophon by Achilles Tatius, Daphnis and Chloe by Longus, and Theagenes and Chariclea by Heliodorus of Emesa, but I will especially focus on Achilles' book.

A valid general consideration for these novels (with the partial exception of *Theagenes and Chariclea*, which will be read as a counterexample to Longus' and Achilles' books) is that they tend to trivialize and superficially employ Platonic philosophical concepts. This lack of depth in reusing Plato is not to be ascribed to a lack of culture (although it is difficult to reconstruct an educational profile for these authors because of many biographical uncertainties), but to the subordination of philosophy to rhetoric in the curricular *paideia* of young men in the Imperial Age.

"La culture philosophique ne s'adresse qu'à une minorité, à une élite d'esprits qui, pour la préférer, consentent à faire l'effort nécessaire. Elle suppose en effet une rupture avec la culture commune",

writes Marrou.⁵ In their youth, Achilles, Longus, and Heliodorus, traditionally designated as the sophistic triad,⁶ would probably have approached Plato through fragmented texts cobbled together in anthologies; they learned to imitate his style and to embellish their own rhetoric μελέται with his quotations. In their novels, they originally re-elaborated these intertextual references, but refrained, however, from delving into the matter more

⁵ Marrou (1948) 283.

⁶ See e. g. Hägg (1987) 199–202.

thoroughly at a conceptual and philosophical level. An example of this process of reworking may be found in the opening sequence of *Leucippe and Clitophon*.

This novel has been interpreted by Ni-Mheallaigh as "a Phaedran text". Anderson states that Achilles aims to compete with Plato and to become a sort of "Plato eroticus" himself.⁸ In fact, the setting of the framework and the opening sequence clearly recall the incipit of the Phaedrus. The latter begins in Sidon (Phoenicia), in the temple of Astart (the goddess of love), where an anonymous narrator contemplates a painting of Europa and the Bull, and praises the power of *Eros*, who is leading the Bull and represented "in the guise of a tiny boy, with his wings stretched out" (1,1,3). A young man (Clitophon) standing next to him remarks: "I may call myself a living example of it. I am one who has suffered many buffets from the hand of Love" (1,2,1). The other man replies: "I can see by your looks that you are not far from being one of the god's initiates". Clitophon responds: "You are stirring a whole swarm of stories. My adventures are really like fiction" (Σμῆνος άνεγείρεις, εἴπε, λόγων τὰ γὰρ ἐμὰ μύθοις ἔοικε). At this point, the narrator warmly invites the young protagonist to tell his tale. Listening will prove to be a great pleasure for him. Then, he leads Clitophon to "a grove" (ἄλσος) at no great distance, where many thick plane-trees were growing, and a stream of water flowing through, cool and translucent, as if it came from freshly melted snow". Here, sitting on a low bench, Clitophon starts his tale. The cross-references between the *incipit* of this novel and the *Phaedrus* are as follows:

- both *Phaedrus* and Clitophon pronounce a speech on *Eros* before an expert audience: both the anonymous narrator and Socrates declare their passion for hearing speeches. The first is, more specifically, an "ἐρωτικός" (1,2,1), while the second describes himself as "a man who is sick with the love of discourse" (228b);
- the locus amoenus described by Achilles explicitly recalls the place on the Ilissos where Socrates and Phaedrus are seated at the beginning of the eponymous dialogue, a delightful spot away from the busy life of port-cities (cf. Ach. Tat. 1,2,3 and Phaedr. 230b-c). Even if many details of the landscape are omitted, the elements left are characteristic of the Platonic reference: worth mentioning, for example, are the "πλάτανοι", a multiplication of the one plane-tree which, in the Phaedrus, evokes the silent presence of Plato, whose name was phonetically connected to that of the πλάτανος;
- the initial recusatio of Phaedrus and Clitophon are parallel (cf. Phaedr. 228b–c). There is a clear reference to the Platonic distinction between muthos and logos, when Clitophon protests that his logoi seem muthoi, and hence they are hardly believable.

⁷ Ni-Mheallaigh (2007) 232. See also Repath (2007).

⁸ Anderson (1982) 25.

⁹ I quote the translation made by Gaselee (Loeb, 2014).

That is to say that his real experience has taken the shape of fiction. It is self-evident that the essential philosophical value of the opposition between *muthos* and *logos* in Plato is here lost and reinterpreted in the new light of the metaliterary opposition between the *mimesis* of the fiction and the reality of experience, a thematic which was destined to have great fortune in the literature of the following centuries;

- an allusion to a mythical maiden kidnapped can be found in both texts (cf. the description of the painting in Achilles and the passage of the *Phaedrus* at 229b–d);
- the competition between orality and literacy, which is explicit in the *Phaedrus*, is implicitly recalled in Achilles;¹⁰
- finally, the lack of a reconnection with the main frame at the end of the text is typical of some Platonic dialogues such as the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, and the *Theaetetus*.

Another noteworthy parallel between the novel of Achilles Tatius and Plato is the use of the Platonic analogy of sex as initiation, which is stated in Symp. 210a and 210e. This image recurrs with extraordinary frequency in the novel: as we have seen in the incipit, Clitophon looks like someone "not far from being one of Eros' initiates" (1,2,2); his cousin Clinias has been initiated recently (ἔρωτι τετελεσμένος, 1,7,1) and represents an experienced guide in the eyes of Clitophon, thanks to his initiate status (συνηθέστερος ἤδη τῆ τελετῆ τοῦ θεοῦ, 1,9,7); Clitophon, in turn, tells Leucippe: "if but once Aphrodite initiates us into her mysteries, no other god will ever prove stronger than her" (2,19,1). In Book V the analogy is extremely frequent (cf. 5.15.6, 5.16.3, 5.16.8, 5.25.6, 5.26.3, 5.26.10, 5.27.4). The resolute approach of the widow Melite, who yearns for the handsome Clitophon, culminates in the 'initiation' of the young protagonist, who declares that Eros can make any place (a ship, in this case) a proper spot for the celebration of his mysteries (πάντα τόπον αὐτῷ τιθέμενος μυστήριον, 5,27,4). Froma Zeitlin considers the widespread use of the analogy of sex as initiation an innovative usage of the age of the Second Sophistic. ¹¹ Burkert emphasizes that

"to speak of the mysteries became routine mainly under the impact of Plato's Symposium [...]. In later romances and related literature many a lover is prone to proposing to his partner initiation into the mysteries of this special god [scil. Eros]". 12

Tim Whitmarsh remarks that the deepest meaning of this analogy is to be found in the interior change that people experience after marriage, which was considered the proper

¹⁰ For further explanations see Ni-Mheallaigh (2007) 232 and M. Marinčič (2007) 168–200.

¹¹ Zeitlin (2008) 102.

¹² Burkert (1987) 107.

moment of sexual initiation, at least for women.¹³

A number of conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the aforementioned passages. Once again Achilles is approaching the Platonic theory of *eros* according to the *forma mentis* of his time, without any evidence of further development. When the anonymous narrator sees in Clitophon a man "not far from being one of Eros' initiates", Achilles has in mind not only the *Symposium* but also the distinction made in the *Phaedrus*, between the ones who are "not newly initiated or who have become corrupted" (250e) and "he whose initiation is recent, and who has been the spectator of many glories in the other world" (251a). However, if in Plato the contact between the lovers has above all a spiritual value (they recognize in each other's face the pure Form of Beauty), Achilles exalts the materiality of the body and, in the sequence of the sexual initiation of Clitophon at the hands of Melite, he plays with the contrast between a religious metaphor and a playful sex scene. Moreover, the initiation is accomplished after the sexual intercourse rather than after the contemplation of the Hyperuranium.

Longus draws on the Platonic figure of the ἐρωτοδιδάσκαλος, immortalized in the character of Diotima in the *Symposium*, and offers us three different typologies of teachers of love: the old and wise herdsman Philetas (Book II), ¹⁴ the sexually voracious Lycaenion (Book III), and, finally, the pederast Gnatho (Book IV). They all substantially give a lesson that is the opposite of the one offered to Socrates by Diotima: if the priestess of Mantinea teaches to the young philosopher a gradual but, in the end, total detachment from corporeal and material love, Philetas declares before the puzzled Daphnis and Chloe that "there is no remedy for Love, that can be eaten or drunk, or uttered in song, save kissing and embracing, and lying naked side by side" (2,7,4). Lycaenion goes further than this, since she materially shows to Daphnis what the "third remedy" for the ἐρωτικός νόσος (lovesickness) is and how to perform it with Chloe. Eventually, Gnatho teaches Daphnis what a "real" man of the Imperial Age should not be: a homosexual, a pederast, a parasite, an assiduous symposium-goer. What is significant, however, is that the young and inexperienced protagonists of our novel never totally put into action the lessons of their ἐρωτοδιδάσχαλοι: they will have sex just after reaching marital union and not immediately, as implied in the words of Philetas; even though Daphnis is 'initiated' by Lycaenion, he does not follow her suggestion to secretly possess Chloe in the deep of the wood before marriage (remember that female virginity was an obsession in the Imperial Age, as Goldhill brilliantly points out); and, more importantly, the homoerotic model proposed by Plato has now been inverted into the caricature of a ridiculous parasite and pederast, who tries to disguise himself as a pale imitation of the symposiastic philosopher

¹³ Whitmarsh (2008) 101f.). Different sexual morality and standards were applied and requested on the basis of gender. Cf. M. Jones (2012) 216: "Visits to prostitutes were a common part of a young man's education, [...] an experience remarkably akin to what Martial recommends for the young man in the epigram [Mart. 11,78]".

¹⁴ See Whitmarsh (2005) 145–148.

in love, as already noted by Hunter.¹⁵ Is it legitimate to state that Longus aims to subvert the selfsame model he implicitly evokes? It is prudent not to jump to any hasty conclusions about the writer's intention, but rather to understand the cultural background of a novel such as *Daphnis and Chloe*.

As accurately explained by Meriel Jones in *Playing the Man*, in the time when these Greek novelists wrote, there had been a substantial change in the perception of the value of andreia: a man should be not only a pepaideuménos (a well-educated man), but also a virile husband, a father, someone able to make his own fortune. Even though Greek novels often portray their male protagonists as améchanoi anti-heroes, 16 in the happy ending their ambiguous figures reappear rehabilitated: at a crucial moment and in some unexpected way, Daphnis acquires a great deal of money, so that he may finally marry Chloe (3, 27f.); if at the beginning of the book he has no idea of what the 'third remedy' is, in the last chapter he walks well-prepared to the wedding thalamus (the bride-chamber); he becomes the father of two children, discovering the existence of his natural father in turn, and becomes the owner of the land where he once served. If we compare the pragmatic ideal of a quiet and ante litteram bourgeois life promoted by the novel to the ideal of a life devoted to philosophy (cf. Ep. VII, 340b-341a), fundamental to Plato and influential also with regard to his theory of eros, we can understand why ancient Greek novels never integrally incorporated the conceptual construct of the Platonic eros. In the Imperial Age, a new erotic model, based on heterosexual love, family and procreation, and celebrated in the novel, opposed the erotic views expressed mainly in the Symposium: eros as a male-male relationship between a younger and an older cultured man (a parody of this unbalanced relationship can be read in Longus), circumscribed within a limited period of one's life, endowed with a deeper religious significance; one that flourishes in the context of the hetairia and the drinking party, and which aims at the transmission of certain skills and at seeking to attain immortality through "reproduction and birth in Beauty" (Symp. 206e).

With these considerations in mind, what is to be made of the authoritative Platonic model? In my opinion, since the novel was a genre addressed to a wide public,¹⁷ often constituted by women, the novelists attempted to shed light only on the 'noble' Plato, for the prestige he could confer to their works and the undeniable beauty of his prose. Yet simultaneously they sought to censor or cleanse or even parody – when they simply did not understand – some Platonic concepts, including those that implied the superiority of

¹⁵ "The character of the pederastic parasite Gnathon may also be seen as a satirical exposure of Platonic (and neo-Platonic) pretentiousness. Certainly, his plea to Astylos that beauty is a universal which may be manifested in a goatherd as in a plant or a river (4,17,4) can be read as a debased reflection of Platonic 'form' theory, which is particularly amusing in [amusing coming from] the mouth of a character who would appear to lack any higher, Platonic aim", Hunter (1996) 327.

¹⁶ See Konstan (1987) 9–27.

 $^{^{17}}$ "The ancient novel – in all its manifestations – first arose in a period of increased levels of use of literacy and an ever-widening availability of books", Hunter (2008) 261.

homoerotic eros over heterosexual eros. Longus swiftly and superficially quotes the famous passage from the Phaedrus (249e–252c) that explains in detail how Eros gives wings to the human soul; however, I believe there is enough evidence to suggest that through Gnatho's character, the writer, according to his own distorted perspective, wished to stigmatize the figure of the symposiastic pseudo-intellectual, common in his age but culturally rooted in the philosophical environments of the 5th and 4th century. Finally, let us not forget that the novel is by nature a mimetic and fictional genre, less easily adaptable to the inclusion or even criticism of philosophical content. In other words, there is no space for a critical and philosophical approach to Plato's theory of eros in the novel.

However, a noteworthy exception might be mentioned. Heliodorus, the last of the Second Sophistic novelists (III–IV century A.D.), seems to propose an alternative model to the Platonic opposition between celestial and earthly love. In the sequence at 3, 5 of his novel, Calasiris, a shifty Egyptian priest, endowed of Neo-Platonic philosophy, describes the first encounter of Theagenes and Chariclea during a religious procession in Delphi as the first meeting of two souls predestined for eternal love. The *topos* is that of love at first sight, but here it has been reworked in an original way, endowed with a religious and philosophical meaning. The intertextual material in question is *Phaedrus* 251a–b. ¹⁸ If we read both texts, we can find surprising parallels: for both Plato and Heliodorus the process of falling in love at first sight is nothing but the explication of the process of anámnesis (ἀνάμνησις) recurring in *Phaedr*. 247c–e, *Phaed*. 72e–77b and *Men*. 81c–86c. In Heliodorus, that possibility of love that Plato collocates in a hyperuranic dimension, is available on earth, yet undergoes a process of recollection of the Pure Form of Beauty contemplated in the Hyperuranium.

I would like to add a few final remarks to conclude this paper. I have tried to highlight the process of cleansing, trivialization, censorship or parody that Plato underwent at the hands of the novelists, with the single exception of Heliodorus. However, I would like to stress that there is also a creative and constructive aspect to the intertextual play between Plato and the Greek novel. The betrayal of Plato's doctrine is, paradoxically, the way in which many Platonic concepts and images—though adulterated and diminished—have reached a wide audience and stood the test of time. The romantic topos of the inseparableness of lovers, for example, derived from the famous speech of Aristophanes

¹⁸ "But he whose initiation is recent, and who has been the spectator of many glories in the other world, is amazed when he sees anyone having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of divine beauty; and at first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god; then while he gazes on him there is a sort of reaction, and the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration; for, as he receives the effluence of beauty through the eyes, the wing moistens and he warms. And as he warms, the parts out of which the wing grew, and which had been hitherto closed and rigid, and had prevented the wing from shooting forth, are melted, and as nourishment streams upon him, the lower end of the wings begins to swell and grow from the root upwards; and the growth extends under the whole soul-for once the whole was winged."

in the Symposium (189c–193d), became a key point in the construction of the Greek novel plot and, through its medium, was inherited by the erotic literature of the following centuries. We should all be grateful to Achilles, Longus, Heliodorus and the others for the fact that poets and writers continued to relate to us the struggle of eternal love over death, such as that of Tristan and Isolde, and Dante and Beatrice. The topos of inseparableness has been explored throughout every literary epoch, from Orlando Furioso (the episode of the palace of the wizard Atlante), to Romanticism. More recently, this concept has been incorporated into contemporary cinematography (emblematic is the movie by David Cronenberg entitled Inseparables), songs and mass culture, confirming itself to be, ironically, inseparable from the imagery of love.

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