

Socrates and Reader:
The Socratic Persona and Iser's Reader-Response

How does a two-thousand-year-old text shape the minds and lives of readers today? In an attempt to answer this question, Jill Gordon's book *Turning Toward Philosophy* has demonstrated how Plato uses certain literary devices to elicit a reader's response. Her analysis, however, overlooks Plato's use of the Socratic persona—an essential component to the Platonic dialogues' ability to affect readers. Yet this leads to an even more perplexing question: how does a fictional character shape the minds and lives of readers? To begin to answer this question, I consider the form and function of Plato's Socrates. I argue that the form of Plato's Socratic persona *shadows* both the historical Socrates and the "true teacher of virtue."¹ Its function is to cultivate an imitative response in the reader. Plato has therefore created a doubly-mimetic Socratic persona. In order to clarify these enigmatic claims, I first analyze the shadow motif in Plato's Divided Line and apply it to the structure of the Socratic persona. I then demonstrate how the Socratic persona elicits a mimetic response from the reader.

The metaphor of the Divided Line, which concludes *Republic* Book VI, explains the relationship between the Visible and the Intelligible realms (see [H1](#)). Within the Visible realm, subsection AB consists of "shadows" and "reflections,"² BC "the originals of these images."³ Within the Intelligible, subsection CD contains images of Forms dependent on the physical objects of BC. In contrast, the "Forms themselves"⁴ comprise subsection DE. Socrates employs the shadow as his primary motif to describe the relationship between the subsections of both

¹ Plato, *Meno* 100a3-6.

² *Rep.* ln. 509e1

³ *Ibid.* ln. 510a3

⁴ *Ibid.* ln. 510b9

realms. Subsections AB and CD are both related to their counterparts as a shadow is related to its object.

I define the shadows within the Divided Line as *authentic yet opaque* representations of their objects. The physical shadows of AB suggest the true form of their objects, though they are 2-dimensional representations of 3-dimensional objects. The intellectual shadows of CD likewise denote the Forms, though they are physical symbols of non-material entities. Both sets of shadows are therefore authentic because they conform to their respective objects so as to reproduce certain features accurately. Both, however, are nonetheless lacking in their representation. The physical shadows lack ontological mass, and the intellectual shadows lack philosophic purity. The shadows are thus also opaque in that they obscure the essential features of their respective objects.

Shadows within the Divided Line are analogous to an aspect of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory. Iser's version of reader-response holds that the reading experience has two necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for its fulfillment: the participation of the reader and the plasticity⁵ of the text. While reading, the reader necessarily interprets the text so as to have the clearest and most consistent meaning.⁶ Yet in this process the reader must appropriate each new piece of information from the text into his or her interpretation of that text; this often requires the reader to form a new interpretation. This is how, for Iser, a text is malleable; like a night sky, it has definite points, though these points may be connected in an infinite number of ways. The adaptability of the text thus constantly dissolves the reader's interpretation.

⁵ This is my translation of the German term "unbestimmtheitsstellen," which Iser appropriates from Ingarden.

⁶ Iser, *The Reading Process*, pp. 290. Though I translate his term from the Act of Reading "vorstellung."

One particular form of textual plasticity is negation. I argue that negations are analogous to the shadow motif of the Divided Line. Iser defines negations as places where “what at first seemed to be an affirmation of our assumptions leads to our own rejection of them.”⁷ Negations force the reader to become “entangled in the text” because they create a process of forming and re-forming a consistent interpretation of that text. Iser suggests that at this process’s apex, one “becomes the subject that does the thinking.”⁸ By this he means that the two conditions of the reading experience, reader participation and textual adaptability, are no longer in tension. The reader is consciously and properly construing the textual data, and in so doing animates the text. For Iser this is the climax of the reading experience.

Negation is an appropriate analogue to the shadows of the Divided Line because negations are authentic yet opaque representations of the author’s intended meaning. Because a wholly-confused reader is unlikely to continue reading, negations must point to an accurate construal of the author’s meaning. An entirely explicit text, however, leaves no room for the reader to participate with that text in the reading experience. Such a text would be overly didactic and, in Iser’s view lacking in aesthetic value. Negations must therefore be opaque, in the sense of hard to understand, in order to allow for such participation. The result is that negations, like the shadows of the Divided Line, must be both veridical and obscure in order to function properly.

Now two questions remain: How does the Socratic persona correspond to the shadows of the Divided Line, and how do these “Socratic shadows” elicit an imitative response from the reader?

⁷ Ibid., 290

⁸ Ibid., 297

Plato's Socrates is a literary creation, albeit one with significant historical and cultural resonance. Though Plato gives weight to his Socrates through his talents as a writer and careful attention to creating historically plausible characters, his Socratic persona is nonetheless a literary construct. It is impossible to determine the extent to which Plato's Socrates is an authentic representation of the historical Socrates. The first Socratic shadow is therefore an authentic-seeming, yet opaque representation of the historical Socrates.

In order to understand the second Socratic shadow, one must return to the Divided Line passage of the *Republic*, where Socrates describes the first subsection of the Intelligible realm using a geometric analogy: (see H2)

“Although [geometers] use visible figures and make claims about them, their thoughts [are not] directed to them but to those other things that they are like. ... These figures that they make and draw, of which shadows and reflections in water are images, they now in turn use as images, in seeking to see those others themselves that one cannot see except by means of thought.”⁹

Put simply, by drawing a square the geometer seeks to gain insight into squareness itself.

Using this as a hermeneutic, one could interpret Plato as a literary “geometer” who uses the “visible figure” of the historical Socrates to make claims about him, though his thoughts are not directed to the historical Socrates but to that which he is like. Plato seeks to exploit the historical and cultural resonances of the Socratic persona so that his readers might “see [that which] one cannot see except by means of thought.”

⁹ Plato, *Republic*. 6.510d

I argue that this is the “true teacher of virtue” discussed at the conclusion of the *Meno*. As Socrates and Meno bring their conversation to a close, having concluded that no true teachers of virtue exist, Socrates notes that if such a teacher did exist, (see H3)

“He could be said to be among the living as Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, namely, that ‘he alone retained his wits while the others flitted about like shadows.’ In the same manner such a man [i.e. the true teacher of virtue] would, as far as virtue is concerned, here also be the only true reality compared, as it were, with shadows.”¹⁰

The shadow language of this passage clearly echoes the shadow motif of the Divided Line passage. Under this interpretation, though Plato’s Socratic persona imitates the historical Socrates, Plato is ultimately attempting to represent this true teacher of virtue in his corpus (see H4). I now turn to the function of Plato’s Socratic persona.

In order to demonstrate how the Socratic persona of the dialogues elicits a mimetic response from the reader, I return to Iser’s negations. Just as Iser’s negations create a means for the reader to participate with the text through the rejection and creation of the reader’s interpretation of the text, the Socratic persona creates a means for participation through the duality of its apparent historical authenticity and otherworldly qualities.

The first, literary shadow draws the reader into the text through its realistic portrayal. Even in Plato’s time, Socrates was beginning to become a sort of folk-hero. Plato uses this folk-hero persona of Socrates for his own literary ends. The historicity of his name and the strength of his personality allow Plato to create a character that a reader wants to identify with. As Iser points out, identification with a character in a text requires the “establishment of affinities

¹⁰ Plato, *Meno* 100a3-6

between oneself and someone outside oneself.”¹¹ These affinities, rooted in the historical plausibility of Plato’s Socrates, are however negated by the second Socratic shadow.

Throughout the dialogues, Plato hints at Socrates’ almost ethereal nature. This otherworldly quality about the Socratic persona stems from its shadowing of the “true teacher of virtue.” One clear example is found in the *Protagoras*. As Socrates and his young companion Hippocrates enter a den of sophists, Socrates explicitly adopts the language of Homer, casting himself as Odysseus visiting the underworld and the three sophists as famous wraiths therewithin.¹² In other words, Socrates is the only living man among shades. This passage is an instance where Plato negates our assumption that his Socratic persona is merely a representation of the historical Socrates—he is in some way otherworldly. In an attempt to ensure a consistent interpretation of the text, the reader naturally enters into the text to discern the extent to which Socrates is the ethereal philosopher and the extent to which he is the realistic personality. The enigmatic nature of the Socratic persona therefore draws the reader to become “the subject that does the thinking.”

How then does such participation cultivate functional imitation and turn the reader toward philosophy? The realism of the Socratic persona allows the reader to identify with Socrates as a character, but his otherworldliness then forces that identification to grow into a fuller form of participation with the text. For Iser, such engagement with a text results in self-examination.¹³ As the reader struggles to form a cohesive and consistent interpretation, his or her

¹¹ Reading Process, pp. 296

¹² Plato, *Protagoras* 315a-316b. Socrates compares Protagoras to Orpheus, Hippias of Elis to the shade of Heracles, and Prodicus of Ceos to Tantalus. The latter two are references to *Odyssey* xi.601 and 582 respectively.

¹³ Iser’s direct quote is, “text and reader no longer confront each other as object and subject, but instead the ‘division’ takes place within the reader himself” (Reading Process, 298).

own consciousness to some extent comes to be seen as the analyzed object, rather than the text. In Iser's vernacular, the reader's personality is split between an "alien me," which identifies with the Socratic persona, and the "real me," which recognizes itself as the reader of a text. Throughout the dialogues, the Socratic persona is primarily engaged in *elenchus*, which is the method of question and answer that Gregory Vlastos suggests is at the heart of Socrates' philosophical way of life. By identifying with the Socratic persona and participating in the *elenchus* of the text, the reader in some way becomes both Socrates, the alien me, and one of his interlocutors, the real me. When the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking, therefore, he or she practices philosophy along with Socrates.

In conclusion, I turn to the *Apology*, where Plato has Socrates explain the difficulty of his defense. Plato writes (18d), "one must simply fight with shadows ... and cross-examine when no one answers." Though admittedly not the meaning in the text, I find Socrates' words provide us with a metaphorical account of the reading process. We fight with the plasticity of the text, attempting to construe a consistent interpretation. We likewise "cross-examine when no one answers." As Plato says in the *Phaedrus* (275d), written texts "preserve a solemn silence" they cannot reply to our questions. Yet by applying both conceptual models that Plato himself creates and contemporary phenomenological criticism, I believe we have successfully cross-examined the text, gaining clarity on how the literary device of the Socratic persona conditions our reading experience. The structural mimesis of the Socratic persona draws the reader to identify with it. The reader then begins to imitate the Socratic persona as he or she actively participates in the method of *elenchus*. If and when a reader truly participates with a Platonic dialogue in this way, Socrates may yet turn another interlocutor toward philosophy.

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