

NIETZSCHE'S PLATO, BETWEEN SYMBOL AND CARICATURE

El Platón de Nietzsche, entre símbolo y caricature.

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RESUMEN: Nietzsche trata repetidamente con la personalidad múltiple y ambigua de Platón, sus escritos, la historia del impacto de su pensamiento. Desde las conferencias de Basilea, Platón el símbolo se utiliza según un registro triple: monumental, anticuario, crítico. La controversia con el platonismo es constante; sin embargo, la imagen cuestionada del moralista Platón se define como una «caricatura» que es similar a las lecturas de Agustín y Schopenhauer, definidas como denigrantes y redundantes en algunos pasajes. Las interpretaciones no influenciadas por el dualismo metafísico-moral se consideran, con la aparición, más allá de la lucha ininterrumpida «con» Platón, de una lucha más esporádica pero intrigante «sobre» Platón.

Palabras Claves: Platón – moralismo – metafísica – símbolo

ABSTRACT: Nietzsche deals repeatedly with Plato's multiple and ambiguous personality, his writings, the history of the impact of his thought. Since the Basel lectures, Plato the symbol is used according to a threefold register: monumental, antiquarian, critical. The controversy with Platonism is constant; however, the questioned image of the moralist Plato is defined as a «caricature» which is similar to the readings of Augustine and Schopenhauer, defined as denigrating and redundant in some passages. Interpretations not influenced by metaphysical-moral dualism are considered, with the emergence, beyond the uninterrupted struggle «with» Plato, of a more sporadic but intriguing struggle «about» Plato.

Keywords: Plato – moralism - metaphysics - symbol.

Biographically, Nietzsche's relationship with Plato can be framed in three moments. An initial moment of personal reception-education refers to the Plato of his studies at Pforta, under the guidance of Karl Steinhart¹, and to the first readings from the *Dialogues*², meaningfully recorded in a short school essay on the *Symposium*³. Then, when in Bonn, he attends Carl Schaarschmidt's⁴ and Otto Jahn's lectures on Plato with his friend Deussen⁵. In these years, Nietzsche approaches Schopenhauer's and Lange's Plato⁶. One second moment is mainly characterized by a professional approach. Specifically, it concerns the intense preparatory work of the academic lectures in Basel, with the resulting wide philological tackling of *Platonische Frage* and the Platonic literature of the times⁷. The several guided readings of Platonic texts carried out at the *Pedagogium*, which, as Nietzsche wrote to Ritschl, were held to «infect my pupils with philosophy»⁸, are particularly meaningful. Finally, the third moment, rooted in the first two and resulting from them⁹, includes the whole course of philosophical thought of Nietzsche, who recognizes in

1 Teacher of Greek and Latin, valuable Plato scholar.

2 In the school year of 1863/64 Nietzsche tackles *Phaedo*. At the time, he might have already followed up on his intention, noted in July 1863, to read *The Apology, Crito* and *Euthyphro* (KGW I 3, p. 146). He then reads *the Symposium*, his favourite piece (KGW I 3, p. 419).

3 'The Relation of Alcibiades's Speech to the other Speeches of Plato's Symposium' (KGW I 3, pp. 384-388).

4 Steinhart had addressed him to Schaarschmidt and had introduced Nietzsche to him as «a deep and sensitive nature, enthusiastic about Philosophy, in particular the Platonic one, in which he is already quite initiated» (KGB I 4, p. 338). Some translations of Nietzsche's letters are taken from Middleton 1969 (ed. and transl. by), *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Indianapolis – Cambridge: Hackett; in all the other cases they are translated by me.

5 Precisely while writing to Deussen about his friend's Platonic researches, Nietzsche sketches a significant framework of the scholarship of the times: «At present, the Platonic question represents an extremely large field, a complicated plot of infinite branches, an organism. Such problems require large-scale treatments: what is the point of focusing on one of the exterior aspects, even on the bark of the problem! What is the point of accusing Schaarschmidt of levity and exaggerations! Researchers have by now reached the highest level: they involve psychological knowledge, they deal with recreating the development of Plato's soul and spirit, and not in Schleiermacher's or old Steinhart's confused way» (KGB I 2 letter 568, of late April-early May 1868, p. 270).

6 Cf. Author 1999: 53-71.

7 Nietzsche emphatically describes himself as «surrounded by hundreds of Platonic works that are useful to introduce my hearers to the study of Plato» (KGB II 1, letter 169 to R. Wagner of 18 November 1871, p. 245f.). To trace the sources of the lectures on Plato cf. Arenas Dolz 2011: 25-44; besides, cf. Merker 2019: 19-69, 213-234, 237-244.

8 KGB II 1, letter 3 to Ritschl of 10 May 1869, p. 7.

9 Indeed, it is not my intention to separate again Nietzsche's philological work from the development of his philosophical thought, but to give due credit to the didactic-academic context of the lectures.

Plato both a blood relative¹⁰ and an antagonist¹¹, electing him as a prominent interlocutor of his own interior development.

In the course of this development, the references to Plato are not limited to the field of strict philology or «scientific» historiography, but they extend to a more intimate and intense level. Both as an object of controversy and as an interlocutor, Plato is perceived by Nietzsche as almost a contemporary, for his «eternal liveliness». Plato is among the interlocutors he is proud of, in his 'descent into Hades' (echo of Plato's *Apology* 40e–41c): «Whatever I say, resolve, cogitate for myself and others: upon these eight I fix my eyes and see theirs fixed upon me»¹².

The reference to Plato constantly maintains irreducible complexity and ambivalence. It can't be said that there is a univocal evolution of Nietzschean thought concerning Plato, initially more favorable and then gradually more negative¹³. A persistent plurality of perspectives can be detected in different periods of Nietzschean thought and even in single writings. Nonetheless, for example, *The Dawn*¹⁴, *Beyond Good and Evil*¹⁵, and partially also *Twilight of the Idols*¹⁶, works where anti-Platonic controversy appears more evident and

10 'When I speak about Plato, Pascal, Spinoza and Goethe, I know that their blood flows in mine – I am proud when I tell the truth about them' (NL 1881 12 [52]: KGW V 2, p. 483; cf. also NL 1881 15 [17], NL 1882, 4 [2]), NL 1884, 26 [42]. Nietzsche's texts in English are taken from the works published in Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, with indication of the translator's name. In all the other cases they have been translated by me.

11 It's no coincidence that to many scholars the fight with Plato has seemed to innervate Nietzsche's whole thought, from the early period when Nietzsche presents his philosophy as «*umgedrehter Platonismus*» (NL 1870 7 [156]: KGW III 3) up to the controversial peaks of *Twilight of the Idols*. Still in 1887, while writing back to his friend and Platonic studies companion Deussen, who had sent him a bay leaf and a fig leaf picked up on October 15 where the Academy used to stand, he asks himself, somewhat rhetorically, «perhaps this old Plato is my true, great opponent? But how proud I am to have such an opponent!» KGB III 5 letter 954 to Deussen of 16 November 1887, p. 200.

12 AOM 408: KGW VI 3, p. 169f., Hollingdale, p. 299. Out of the eight names «Epicure and Montaigne, Goethe and Spinoza, Plato and Rousseau, Pascal and Schopenhauer», Plato's name is, with Schopenhauer, the most present, including the other thinkers' view of him: «from them will I accept judgement, to them will I listen when in doing so they judge one another». In Nietzsche there is Schopenhauer's Plato, but we can also find Montaigne's Plato, the Plato ridiculed and envied by Epicurus, the Plato associated to Goethe and Spinoza, or the one opposed to Rousseau.

13 Cf. already Bremer 1979: 88 and Dixsaut 1997: 295f.: «Nietzsche's statements concerning Plato are not verdicts or truths, they are images, they are put together and take their shape, but they do not entertain any logical relationship of contradiction, negation or confutation». Dixsaut suggests that they are read in connection with the metamorphosis of Nietzsche's thought, as traces of a soul's involuntary biography, more than a logically outlined evolutionary line. It is curious that Nietzsche had said something very similar concerning Plato's treatment of Socrates, completely averse to any kind of historical accuracy: «Plato has no intention of setting Socrates' image; he reproduces it in ever changing ways as a double of his own personal evolution» (PPP 11, KGW II 4, p. 292).

14 Cf. Author 2005: 61-87.

15 Cf. Author 2011: 173-236 and Lampert 2004: 205-219.

16 Cf. Denat 2014: 101-126.

articulate, more or less explicitly host references and appreciation of motifs, images, questions ascribable to Plato.

The name «Plato» constantly represents a symbol that holds a wide range of meanings and uses for Nietzsche. On one side, it concerns the issue of Plato the man (and the philosopher) and his personality; on the other, the issue of the contents of his writings and the field of thought they constitute, to some extent exceeding «Platonism» as a «system»; in the third place, the issue of the history of the impact of this thought. On one hand, each of these three levels can be considered as quite independent; at the same time, they refer to and interact with one another.

In order to deal with the significant and fragmentary bulk of references, both explicit and implicit, to Plato and his writings that can be found in Nietzsche's texts, it might be helpful to recall some categories of the second Untimely Meditation on history.

After all, Nietzsche is scarcely interested in the dating or atthetesis of one dialogue or another (he deals with these issues with growing indifference even professionally) or in the logical coherence of this or that Platonic doctrine. What counts for him is to challenge himself repeatedly on what could have been or still be the uses or the disadvantages of «Plato» on life. Almost all of the several traits by which Nietzsche in turn evokes a nature so much polymorphous as antinomian in Plato have been able to generate opposing evaluations in him, according to whether they are organized from a point of view of negation or affirmation of life.

Though with varying balance among them, Nietzsche repeatedly referred to the three modes of a historical use of Plato as the monumental, antiquarian and critical types, already clearly present in the *Introduction* to the first Basel course on Plato¹⁷.

Plato the symbol reveals a monumental use, particularly referring to the man and the thinker, whose greatness and nobility generate respect and emulation. In the *Introduction*, Plato the man is said to be: «still more remarkable than his books»¹⁸ and introduced as «the true philosophical guide of youth», able to determine with his «bulging philosophic nature [...] the push towards philosophy».

In Nietzsche the relationship with Plato will shape up to be of the mimetic-agonistic kind. In the course of the years, Nietzsche will live the tensions of his own conflicting multilateralism, the dangers of relationships and readings felt as potentially pervasive and pathological (Schopenhauer, Wagner...), a

17 Cf. already Author 1999: 136ff.

18 The quotes not otherwise specified are from KGWII 4 at pp. 7-9, in my transl.; cf. also: NL 1884 26 [355]: «It is not the *good*, but the *individual* which is nobler! Plato is worth more than his philosophy!» KGW VII 2 p. 242).

personal existential and philosophical dialectics played between health and illness, affirmation and negation, success and failure, all at times projected on Plato.

Considering the reference to the *Dialogues*, besides their educational value¹⁹, Nietzsche valorizes their antiquarian wealth, balanced critically by negative references to the style. To Nietzsche, the Platonic writings are a precious source and empathetic testament to Plato's contemporary and earlier Greek culture. The *Introduction* explains: «the importance of Plato for the philologist is even bigger. He must be of help as a replacement for the great writings of pre-Platonic philosophers that have been lost. Just think if Plato had not been preserved: if for us Philosophy had started with Aristotle, we couldn't even imagine that more ancient *philosopher* who, at the same time, is an *artist*'». For that matter, they also represent a kind of inexhaustible philosophical and literary mine Nietzsche will constantly draw from, only minimally referring to the source.

Finally, it is relevant to consider the importance of the critical register, itself already present in the Introduction, where Plato is said to be:

The only Greek who makes a criticism: for us he represents the greatest θάῤμα, if we consider how much regard we have for the world Plato set in front of his forum. [...] we should not regard him as a systematic thinker [...], but as a political agitator, who wants to overturn the whole world and who, among other things and always to achieve this goal, makes use of writing.

According to Nietzsche, Plato embodies in this the type of philosopher-lawmaker, who evaluates and makes others evaluate, at the same time «judge and judged»²⁰. The critical register particularly concerns the issue of interpretation and the historical impact of Plato's thought, the controversial outcome of his legislation. It is the setting where Nietzsche deprecated the Plato of the tradition of Platonism, denouncing his harmful greatness.

The opportunity to distinguish the judgement on Plato the man from the

19 In several annotations Nietzsche recommends to «read Plato» to approach philosophy and more in general for educational purposes. For ex. he advises «not to rely on the guidance of random and academic philosophers, but to read Plato» (NL 1872, 19 [211]: KGW III 4, p. 72).

20 NL 1884 26 [425]. The whole fragment, which begins with the index-statement «Because the philosopher *rarely* succeeds», seems to be conceived with reference to a puzzling overlapping of the «philosopher» on one side with Plato and on the other with Nietzsche himself. The conditions described as necessary for the philosopher, and which are usually «a man's ruin», are in fact: «1) an enormous plurality of qualities; he must be a compendium of man, of all his noble and vile desires: the danger of contrasts and also of self-disgust 2) he must be inquisitive in the most sundry directions: the danger of dispersion 3) he must be just and fair in the highest sense, but also profound in love, in hate (and in injustice) 4) he must be not just spectator, but lawgiver: judge and judged (as he is a compendium of the world); 5) extremely versatile, yet firm and hard. Flexible» (KGW VII 2 p. 262f.). For that matter, the fragment reminds of Nietzsche's doubts concerning the «success» of Plato (cf. NL 1884 26 [42, 48]) and/or his corruption in several other annotations, not only contemporary.

one on Platonism is quite often underlined by secondary literature, but rarely in depth. On the contrary, it can lead to recognize clues in Nietzsche about a Plato «other» from the one of mono-tone metaphysical-moral Platonism he strongly opposed.

In the *Introduction* to the Basel lectures on Plato, in support of a presentation of the *Dialogues*, Nietzsche states that he intends to privilege the attempt to outline his personality more than a systematic or theoretical reading of his thought. This seems to combine with the choice to rediscover a meaningful interaction, if not a circularity, between thought and existence²¹, a theme that refers to the idealization of the unity of philosophy and life²² in young Nietzsche.

The same focusing on Plato's «personality» can be found in other courses and writings of those years. In the lectures dedicated to the pre-platonic philosophers, against their monolithic purity, Nietzsche, echoing Diogenes Laertius, sees in Plato «the first majestic mixed character, so much in his philosophy and as a philosophical type. Socratic, Pythagorean and Heraclitan elements are brought together in his doctrine of ideas, which cannot definitely be considered an original concept. Even as a human being, he has blended in himself the traits of Heraclitus, regal and haughty, of Pythagoras, melancholic, mysterious and lawgiver and of Socrates, the dialectic connoisseur of souls»²³. A similar configuration recurs in *Philosophy and the Tragic Age of the Greeks* § 2. Nietzsche seems to identify the peculiarity of Plato's personality in his overflowing multiplicity. A character destined to remain quite constant and, from time to time, subject to alternative readings, which can also be related to the success or failure of Plato the man in bearing his own contradictions and/or managing their (unstable?) harmonic composition.

In his lectures on Plato, though he preserved Plato's «image of a bulging nature», Nietzsche identifies the innermost core of his personality as well as his thought in an impulse of the ethical-political kind. This reading already shows a decided independence from Schopenhauer's interpretation and, although it was shared at the time by authors such as Grote, it was not particularly common.

On the contrary, in *Homer's Contest*, an agonistic impulse seems to be the focus of Plato's multiple personality. It shapes his multifaceted productivity too, with Plato intent on competing «with the art of the orators, the sophists, the

21 For example, consider how Nietzsche encourages to find an image of the «fundamental character» of Plato «in certain widely written-upon actions, for example in his political journeys».

22 «Only if one manages to live according to philosophy, then he can partake of it: so that all does not become only word (as Plato says in epistle VII)» (NL 1873 30 [17]: KGW III 4, p. 348; fragment 29 (205), from the summer-autumn of the same year, reads: «The product of the philosopher is his *life* (even more than his *works*). That is his work of art» *Ibid*, p. 320.

23 PPP § 1: KGW II 4 p. 214.

dramatic poets of his age». The competitive impulse combines with the strong sense of self, an egoism, an «absolute faith in himself»²⁴, which Nietzsche will refer to repeatedly. Self-affirmation based on the full deployment of one's own skills is, after all, Plato's true driving force:

Look, I can do what my great rivals do, indeed, I can do it better than them. There is no Protagoras that has created such myths as beautiful as I have created, there is no dramatist that has created such a whole as lively and as compelling as *the Symposium*, there is no orator that has composed a speech such as the one I present in *Gorgias*: well, I throw it all away and condemn all imitative arts. Competitiveness alone has made me poet, sophist, orator²⁵.

Nietzsche constantly goes back to focusing on the redundant plurality of Plato's writing style, which extends over multiple registers and accommodates a variety of styles. Sometimes (more often), he does this as a negative remark, as in *Socrates and Tragedy*²⁶, where «the essence of the Platonic dialogue» is «the lack of form and style, generated by the mix of all existing forms and styles», at other times with a more articulated judgement. So, in the *Introduction* to the lectures on Plato, he is described as «a refined prose writer: immensely versatile, the master of any undertone», although «Plato the writer is only an εἰδωλον of the real Plato the *master*, an ἀνάμνησις of the conversations held in the gardens of Academia», both cultured and rich in «dramatic talent»; or, in *The Birth of Tragedy* 14, the Platonic dialogue is «the boat on which the older forms of poetry, together with all her children, sought refuge after their shipwreck»²⁷.

The theme of multiplicity in the characterization of Plato's personality and his writing style can be found also in the works following the Basel lectures, enhanced by the aphoristic mode.

One after the other, Plato the artist²⁸ comes into focus, the Plato «tyrant of the spirit» who «was the incarnate desire to become the supreme philosophical lawgiver and founder of states»²⁹, Plato the agonist³⁰, Plato the dialectician, Plato the moralist, Plato the skeptic, Plato the socialist³¹, the Plato who betrays

24 KGW II 4 p. 55.

25 HC: KGW III 2 p. 284.

26 *Socrates and Tragedy*, p.38; ST KGW III 2 p. 35.

27 BT § 14: KGW III 1, p. 89, Speirs, p. 69.

28 «In the end, Plato, as the artist he was, had *chosen illusion* over being» NL 1887 7 [2] KGW VIII 1, p. 261.

29 HH I 261; KGW IV 1 p. 218f., Hollingdale p. 123.; NL 1884 27[47]): «one must mind one thing in philosophers: behind them a sickness, a satiation hides, for example in Kant, Schopenhauer, in the Indians. Or else, a will to dominate, as in Plato». KGV VII 2, p. 287. Besides, at least cf. NL 1884 26 [407] and NL 1885 38 [13].

30 For example, the theme returns in a large fragment of NL 1882 8[15].

31 HH I 373, 374; WS 285.

«souls and talents which were so much those of founders of religions»³²; Plato the mystic³³, Plato the playful character³⁴, the pre-Christian Plato...

Nietzsche also keeps emphasizing his distance from the style of Plato the writer, as it hyperbolically stands out in *Twilight of the Idols* where Plato is said to be «a first-rate decadent of style», who produced dialogue, «this horribly smug, childlike type of dialectic», and it is bluntly concluded that, compared to the French, «Plato is boring»³⁵. He certainly rejects the logical-argumentative heaviness of the more abstractly theoretical dialogues³⁶, which he was maybe personally little predisposed to³⁷. Nonetheless, the dialectics is often evaluated in anything but a negative mode (for ex. in D 43), when not emphatically: «he who does not hear the continual rejoicing which resounds through every speech and counter-speech of a Platonic dialogue, the rejoicing over the new invention of *rational* thinking, what does he understand of Plato, of the philosophy of antiquity?»³⁸.

Anyway, even Nietzsche acknowledges that the dialogic mode allows Plato to give shape to a wide variety of positions and, to a certain extent, as it has been authoritatively pointed out³⁹, to conceal something about himself in his several interlocutors/characters⁴⁰. This trait seems to connote to a certain degree even the evolution itself of Nietzsche's thought and writing style⁴¹.

32 GS 149: KGW V 2 p. 171, Nauckhoff p. 130.

33 NL 1884 26 [312].

34 NL 1882 3 [1] 417.

35 TI «What I Owe the Ancients» 2: KGW VI 3, p. 149, Norman, p. 225.

36 Already in the lectures on Plato, Nietzsche observed that «the dialectical element in Plato is often the one that is boring for us (*das Langweilige*), it makes us smile and so on. For him and his times, though, it constitutes the distinguishing trait of the philosopher and has the quality of the rarest aptitude». However, «*ist Platons Natur durchaus keine absolut Logische*» and «sometimes his strength unfolds right where we notice a certain discontinuity in the logical pattern»; KGW II 4 p. 15.

37 According to Colli, «Nietzsche lacks the superior deductive ability in an extreme way, in terms of being able to coordinate and subordinate a gigantic heap of abstract representations, as befits a philosopher. Instead, he has an eminently mystic and mysterious disposition, but he wants to hide it. What he aims at is rational excellence, exactly what he is paradoxically lacking»; cf. Colli 1978: 10f. Wiehl is more prudent: «Nietzsche was no friend of dialectics. For this reason, he was maybe lacking the patience of thought», cf. Wiehl 1990: 285.

38 D 544: KGW V 1, p. 318, Hollingdale, p. 217; D 550.

39 Friedländer, 1979: 222 observes: «Plato is not only in Socrates – and in the disciples of Socrates, in Charmides, Teages, Alcibiades – but to a certain degree and in a certain way also in the enemies of Socrates. Indeed, this relationship cannot be seen completely, if one can only glimpse the opposition to a nature, to a thought, to a polemic attack that come from outside. Controversy is a fight against oneself: this brilliant formula by Novalis is true primarily for Plato».

40 Cf. for ex. GM III 18: «Behind every oligarchy [...] the lust for *tyranny* always lurks; [...] (For example, it was like that with the *Greeks*: Plato testifies to it in a hundred places, Plato, who knew his peers – and himself . . .)» KGW VI 2, p. 402, Diethel, p. 101 or also already NL 1880 4 [301] or NL 1884 25 ([137, 163, 167]).

41 In the typical «dissimulation» of Platonic writings (the author talks in his characters) Lacoue-Labarthe (1973: 33ff.) saw a practice used again by Nietzsche in *Zarathustra*, a meaningful aspect of his «infinitely ambiguous» relationship with Plato. Likewise, Rosen 1992: 105 writes: «the Platonic dialogues are Plato in action, that is to say, Plato presenting multiples of his psychic unity

The complexity of Plato's personality is affected by influences that gradually act on the development of his thought. At times, according to Nietzsche, these influences play a decidedly pathological role and they are somehow used to justify the onset in Plato, whose basic nature seems then to be implicitly assumed as an expression of primal and vital health, of processes of decadence and corruption that settle in his thought. Alternatively, Socratic⁴², Jewish, Egyptian, Pythagorean traits seem to influence him in a negative way. Motifs such as an excess of rationalism (from Socratism), moralism (from Judaism), the lack of historic sense (Egypticism), the belief in reincarnation (from Pythagoreanism) are to a certain extent derived traits that can be found in the «dogmatic» Platonism that Nietzsche openly rejects. Especially the metaphysical-moral dualism reformulated by Christian Platonism and the related ascetic-nihilistic traits revamped by Schopenhauer's Plato account for Nietzsche's open hostility. Of course, they combine with Plato's most celebrated Ontological-Gnoseological thesis, that doctrine of ideas that is in open conflict with the flowing historical character of being and knowledge asserted by Nietzsche and its related radical perspectivism⁴³. Nietzsche's refusal of any foundationalist ontology, of any metaphysical-moral Platonism, of the hypostatization of a stable and permanent world⁴⁴ is determined and unequivocal.

However, this is not supposed to overshadow the fact that Nietzsche was fully aware of Plato's perplexity and criticism concerning the doctrine of

[...] the soul in his round dance of presence and absence. And the same can be said of Nietzsche's writings». On Nietzsche's psychology cf. Parkes 1994, focused on Nietzsche's complex relationship with Plato's thought (7f.) and precious for his investigation on the Platonic images of the soul in Nietzschean writings. On the analogies between Platonic philosophy and Nietzsche's philosophy, see the nice dissertation by Dixsaut 2015 in the chapter «Méthodes contre système», which highlights the shared opposition to a systematic approach in the name of writing and thinking methods that privilege «the mobilization (*deplacement*) of the problems, the same respect for differences, for *nuances*, the same pleasure to discover, the same priority granted to inventive ability over results» p. 180.

42 Cf. for ex. NL 1875 6 [18], HH I 261 or also GBE 190 where it says: «there is something in Plato's moral philosophy that does not really belong to him, but is there in spite of him, as it were: namely, the Socratism that he was really too noble for» (GBE 190: KGW VI 2, p. 113, Norman, p. 79f.)

43 In GBE pref.: KGW VI 2, p. 4, Norman, p. 4, Nietzsche accuses dogmatic Plato: it would mean «standing truth on its head and disowning even perspectivism which is the fundamental condition of all life»; in the same text, the same doubt concerning the corruption of Platonic nature returns: «How could such a disease infect Plato, the most beautiful outgrowth of antiquity? Did evil Socrates corrupt him after all?»

44 In his anti-metaphysical controversy, which started with *Human All Too Human*, besides the invention of a metaphysical world, Nietzsche also criticizes the missing acknowledgment of the combination of opposites in Plato (for ex. in WS 285). However, he somehow returns to Plato, hinting at the discussion in *Phaedo*, as observed by Figal: 1999 chap. III, incidentally quoting HH I, 1: «almost all the problems of philosophy once again pose the same form of question as they did two thousand years ago: how can something originate in its opposite, for example rationality in irrationality, the sentient in the dead, logic in unlogic, disinterested contemplation in covetous desire, living for the others in egoism, truth in error » KGW IV 2, p. 19, Hollingdale, p. 12.

ideas. In several places he presents it as if it was upheld instrumentally⁴⁵ and he acknowledges it as openly refuted in late writings⁴⁶.

Anyway, more than from the level of an abstractly logical-theoretical criticism, the metaphysical-moral dualism andgnoseological objectivism implied in the doctrine of ideas are challenged because of the anthropological mold potentially behind them. This constitutes Nietzsche's true target, as it is an expression of renunciation and denial of vital instincts, calumny of the senses and the body, the fruit of resentment and will to take revenge. Nietzsche's fight against the Plato of metaphysical-moral dualism, the Plato somehow hostage of the ascetic ideal, boosted by Christian Platonism and taken up by Schopenhauer, net of its theistic declinations, is well documented and established. In this sense, Nietzsche's anti-Platonism is an undoubtedly legitimate «standard view»⁴⁷. However, the criticism of the ascetic ideal, as it does not imply an absolute refusal of asceticism, but only of its decadent, hostile-to-life variations, so it does not imply or necessarily identifies with the disapproval of Plato's whole philosophy and political-anthropological project.

The fact that Nietzsche highlighted the philological limitations and at times the reductive and manipulative character, on the brink of falsification, of the way Plato was read by Schopenhauer and the Christian commentators is not to be underestimated.

The reaction to Schopenhauer's Plato is already explicit in the lectures on Plato, where Nietzsche challenges the origin of the theory of ideas suggested by the philosopher from Gdansk, but above all he gives a central role to the political Plato, who Schopenhauer arbitrarily marginalizes. Again, in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche openly plays the reference to the Platonic eros and the «divine Plato» against the denying asceticism of Schopenhauer, who sees art as a stage of the way towards the weakening and potential annihilation of the will and life⁴⁸.

As far as the Christian appropriation of Plato is concerned, the issue is more complicated. Indeed, Nietzsche mostly adheres to the traditional image

45 Cf. Zuckert 1985.

46 For example, in NL 1872 23[27] he is seen first as «a follower of Heraclitus, a coherent skeptic: everything – even thought – is in a flow», then, «led by Socrates to believe in the permanence of the good and the beautiful», assumed as «objects that are», ideas known by virtue of «Pythagoras's transmigration of the souls», finally arriving at the «confutation of the doctrine of ideas»: «end of Plato: skepticism in *Parmenides*» KGW III 4, p. 146. Cf. also NL 1873 29 [174]; it winds up on the theoretical skepticism of *Parmenides*, which does not invalidate, though, the interpretation of «Plato as above all lawgiver and reformer, in this never a skeptic» KGW III 4, p. 312 and Cf. KGW II 4, p. 127. It must be considered that, at the time, *Parmenides* was frequently considered spurious, maybe also owing to the difficulty to accept such a radical self-criticism by Plato.

47 As reiterated, not without irony, by Bett 2019: 249.

48 TI «Skirmishes of an Untimely Man» 21,22,23.

of Plato corroborated by Christian Platonism, for example by Augustine⁴⁹. The reaction to this image is almost completely played on the argumentative reversal of the value judgement formulated on the subject. The Plato Nietzsche challenges is the one that had hegemonized the development of European philosophy and theology for a long time, the one that had been appreciated and Christianized by the apologists and the Church Fathers. Nietzsche accepts this image of Plato as his battleground. His choice to challenge it is strategically justified in the perspective of the fight against the ascetic ideals and an enemy-of-life anthropology underlying the moral reading of metaphysical dualism conveyed, in his opinion, by Christian «Platonism». It is this image of Plato that allows him to put himself forward as the judge of the whole development of European philosophical culture.

However, in an important note of 1887, the image of «moralist» Plato, which is essentially the one put in place by Christian Platonism, is overtly referred to as a «caricature»⁵⁰, exploited by a Nietzsche who introduces himself as «immoralist». The Christianized image of Plato is accepted, radicalized and challenged. However, it is acknowledged as a caricatural, argumentative and simplistic image.

In more than a few passages, it is deplored, more or less explicitly, as a vulgarization that mortifies and somehow misinterprets or removes relevant elements of Plato's thought. Nietzsche's definition of Christianity as Vorrede's «Platonism for the "people"» in *Beyond Good and Evil*⁵¹ is very well-known. Nietzsche goes back to it with harsh words deprecating with Overbeck the «vulgarized Platonism» («Philosophical value zero!») of Augustine, «old rhetorician», «false and misrepresentative» who «adjusted to suit slave natures» «a way of thinking which was invented for the highest aristocracy of the soul»⁵². Augustine completes an appropriation which, already present in

49 Already in Helm 1976: 31f. He believes Nietzsche's image of Plato to be very similar to Augustine's. Helm, who does not consider the presence of «other» Nietzschean images of Plato, points out how «the elements of caricature» present in both interpretations do not tarnish the implicit tribute of both thinkers, from diametrically opposite points of view, to Plato's momentous role in the development of Western culture.

50 «For example, to me Plato becomes a caricature» (NL 1887 10 [112]: KGW VIII 2 p. 187).

51 The formula, derived from Schopenhauer, has sometimes implied Nietzsche's criticism to Christianity to be primarily oriented towards the belief in a metaphysical world. However, the traits that Nietzsche mostly refuses in «Christianity» are rather the levelling egalitarianism, the hate for a nature corrupted by sin, the admittedly contradictory refusal of egoism, the spirit of renunciation and revenge that nihilistically settle in the idea of a life beyond, the exasperation of death linked to the fear for one's own eternal destiny, promoted in a much more radical and systematic way than in Plato's ambiguous mythical narratives, where, anyway, rewards and punishments are not eternal and leave prospects of new lives. After all, believing in a netherworld might not necessarily lead to a radical devaluation of this world; with regard to this cf. NL 1888 15 [20]: KGW VIII 3 p. 212: «For 1) "true world and apparent world": 1) Putting them close to each other demeans the 'apparent world' 2) when you think about it: it would not be necessary for the apparent world to be demeaned» or NL 1887 11 [55].

52 KGB III 3, p. 34; letter 589 of 31 March 1885, Middleton, p. 240. Augustine is indicated as

the apologetics of the early centuries, Nietzsche even backdates to St. Paul, when he speaks of «Pauline Platonism». A fragment from the summer-autumn of 1884 stresses the partial character of this appropriation. In it, Nietzsche observes how Paul had extrapolated from Plato only the motifs that he could enhance according to his own nature. By observing that there is «in great spirits, wealth of conceptions and possibilities, so to say a game of figures», he sees the relationship with them conditioned «to something chosen previously. The *dependence* of inferior natures from inventive ones is *unspeakably* great. (...) For example, Plato and Christianity»⁵³.

If St. Paul's Christianity acquires only what had been «chosen previously» from Plato, at the same time the Athenian philosopher's thought offers a «wealth of conceptions and possibilities», a «play of figures». The theme can be found in a couple of later fragments where Nietzsche talks about the charm of the dogmatics, capable of dwelling in a «house of knowledge appropriately built and firmly believed in», this time relating Plato to Dante. Plato is presented as the creator of his own truth, compared to Dante, who lives in the «Christian-Patristic house»⁵⁴. However, Nietzsche praises Dante's writing style, which shows how «under an absolute regime it is not necessary to be limited at all. If there were any limitations, they contained immense space, thanks to Plato; and it was possible to move inside it like Bach within the forms of counterpoint, *with great freedom*». (FP 84-85 34.92). Again, the reference to Plato's thought configures boundaries which include «an immense space» in which to move «with great freedom»⁵⁵.

So, behind the fight *against* Plato, a parallel fight *about* Plato seems to glimpse, though in a minor key and in the background.

Nietzsche's fight against the Plato of dogmatic-Christian Platonism does not in any way exhaust his personal relationship with either Plato or the Platonic texts, which constitute with continuity for him a treasure trove of issues, metaphors, strategies and occasions for thought, myths, words, etc.

Plato's field of thought is not always identified with a monolithic «Platonism» which, considered as a system or strategy of thought, does not clarify or account for the problematic wealth of the *Dialogues*. Nietzsche sees dogmatic and skeptical issues as both present in Plato; he acknowledges the speculative depth of Plato's inquiries, the problematic wealth of his interrogations; in Plato's teaching, he notices, though ambiguously, an exoteric

the one who makes Platonism prevail over Jesus's original Christianity in NL 1887 11 [364].

53 NL 1884 26.53. The fragment closes with: «Paul will hardly have been aware of how much everything smelled of Plato in him». KGW VII 2 p. 159f. The curious motif of «St. Paul's Platonism associated to Augustine's» returns in NL 1887 11[356] where Theology is said to be «unashamed caricature of philosophy and rabbinism» KGW VIII 2 p. 398.

54 NL 1885 34 [25].

55 NL 1885 34 [92] KGW VII 3 p. 170f.

level unfurled in political and educational terms, and an esoteric level, almost mystical-experiential. The multiplicity of these perspectives of interpretations might obviously confuse, but Nietzsche does not probably feel the need to organize or tighten up this variety of Platonic positions logically, if not in a polemical way.

Once Nietzsche's fight is understood as also aimed at a controversial «caricature», then the opportunity to investigate the presence of «other» interpretations of Plato in Nietzsche arouses new interest. Maybe even a Plato not without, but beyond Platonism. As mentioned earlier, the fight against Plato is accompanied by a more sporadic fight «about» Plato, about the use that has been made of his thought. The fight against Plato, the impulse to «reverse Platonism», seems to include the impulse to oppose, if not to reverse, its dominant christianization.

In Nietzsche there are traces of different readings of Plato⁵⁶, which combine the lasting awareness of the multiplicity of Plato the man with the consciousness of the excess of his thought compared to any system or dogmatic framing.

In his youth, Nietzsche wondered about a possible characterization of Plato «without Socrates»⁵⁷. Then, he often admired Plato's freedom to «interpret something refined and noble into his teacher's claim: above all, himself». Almost as another contest where to triumph, proving to be «the most daring of all interpreters, who treated the whole of Socrates just like someone might treat a popular theme or folksong from the streets, varying it to the point of infinity and impossibility, into all his own masks and multitudes»⁵⁸. This is an attitude that he does not disdain to recognize as his own: with reference to the *Untimely Meditations* on Wagner and Schopenhauer:

I took hold of two famous and completely undiagnosed types the way you take hold of an opportunity, in order to express something, in order to have another couple of formulas, signs, means of expression. [...] This is the way Plato used Socrates, as a semiotic for Plato⁵⁹.

56 A fragment on Schopenhauer seems to be related also to what Nietzsche could think of Plato: «a man of his talent and of his inner *discord* had material in his mind for five better systems, one more and more true and more and more false than the other». Cf. NL 1885 34 [117]: KGW VII 3 p. 180.

57 NL 1875 6 [18]. Cf. on this fragment Bremer, op. cit. p. 52f.

58 GBE 190: KGW VI 2, p. 113, Norman, p. 80; concerning the Platonic variations on Socrates, also noteworthy NL 1885 34 66: «I believe Socrates's magic lies in this: he had a soul, and behind this another one, and behind this last, yet another. In the first one Xenophon went to sleep, in the second Plato and in the third Plato once again – yet a Plato with his second soul». Müller 2005: 233 finds in this passage «the most beautiful evaluation of Plato's dialogues» and at the same time the «admission of a philosophic spiritual kinship (Seelenverwandschaft)». On Nietzsche's relationship with Platonic texts cf. Baracchi 1995: 90-117.

59 EH, *Untimely Meditations* 3, KGW VI 3, p. 317f., Norman, p. 114.

Occasionally and in mostly anti-Christian terms, Nietzsche also showed sympathy for Platonists such as Plutarch⁶⁰, Proclus or Platonizing authors such as Giordano Bruno or Emerson. To mention only Proclus, in a fragment that is unfortunately one of the very few references to ancient pagan Platonism, Nietzsche observes:

At the end of antiquity there are still figures completely unrelated to Christianity, who are more beautiful, purer, more harmonious than all the Christian figures, like Proclus, for example. His mysticism and syncretism are things that Christianity doesn't just have the right to blame him for. Anyway, it would be my wish to live with *such people*. Compared to *them*, Christianity simply appears as the crudest decline, set up for the mob and the scum⁶¹.

Moreover, Nietzsche's impressions concerning Gustav Teichmüller's interpretation of Plato are relevant and fruitful. A reading that suggested an «ultimately Pantheistic Plato, but disguised as a Dualist»⁶². It filters through *The Dawn*⁶³ and finds unexpected and explicit resonance in *Zarathustra*. Indeed, it is true that Nietzsche refuses any association or presumed source of inspiration for a book he claims to be absolutely unique. And first of all, he refuses the one prematurely proposed by his friend Rohde⁶⁴, who had introduced him to the Platonic *Dialogues*⁶⁵. However, it is then Nietzsche himself who admits a manifest closeness, though with hasty and reserved honesty. Indeed, he writes to Franz Overbeck : «While reading Teichmüller I am more and more amazed at how little I know Plato and how much Zarathustra *platonizes* (πλατωνίζει)»⁶⁶. The traits of this closeness, which goes together with and does not rule out the lingering controversy against metaphysical Dualism at all, are several and intriguing⁶⁷. Teichmüller's Plato still echoes in the late 1880's, with the resumption of the theory of the Platonic negation of

60 Cf. NL 1887 9 [18].

61 NL 1875 5 [18], KGW IV 1 p. 120f.

62 NL 1880 4 [190].

63 In D 497 Plato possesses, like Spinoza and Goethe, 'the pure and purifying eye [...] which looks down on the world as on a god and loves this god' (KGW V 1, p. 297, Hollingdale, p. 203). The motif is echoed in NL 1884, for example in 26 [416].

64 «Everything in it is my own, without model, kindred, precursor» (KGB III 1, letter 490 to Rohde of 22 February 1884, p. 479; Middleton p. 220). A resentful reply that betrays signs of identification in the development of the letter, as argued in Author 2011 p. 62 ff.

65 After receiving the first book of *Zarathustra*, Rohde had congratulated Nietzsche: «To tell the truth, *you* are the wise Persian, but directly declaring entirely personal opinions is a completely different thing from creating an ideal individual who expresses all this as *his* opinions; only in this way one truly lets them out of oneself and stands, so to speak, above oneself. Undoubtedly for this purpose Plato created his Socrates, and so now you with your Zarathustra» (KGB III 2, letter 218 of 22 December 1883, p. 412).

66 KGB III 1 letter to Overbeck 469 of 22 October 1883, p. 449; sent just before completing the first draft of Book III of *Zarathustra*.

67 Cf. Author: 2011: 67 ff. e Orsucci 1997: 47-63.

the soul's immortality⁶⁸, which is associated with the use of the doctrine, as Platonic *pia fraus*, in political terms.

For that matter, the «Machiavellian» reading of Plato suggested by Nietzsche⁶⁹ is connected to the one that ultimately sees Plato as a «Skeptic». A reading that had been maintained by Cicero⁷⁰ and that Nietzsche finds again in Montaigne, whose concealed influence can be detected at the times of *Beyond Good and Evil*, where the Christian appropriation of Platonism is repeatedly decried as the belittling vulgarization of a thought created by and for an aristocratic soul.

Finally, another ambivalent perspective on Plato puts him in a relationship with The Law Code of Manu⁷¹, in a series of annotations and comparisons that alternatively allow either a possible organization of several motifs (the *pia fraus* being the most relevant) coherent with the anti-vital and nihilistic image of Plato, or the alternative, affirmative, elitist and hierarchical one. The latter shows undeniable syntony with positions and idiosyncrasies of the «untimely» Nietzsche for example, in terms of a possible elevation of man⁷², of the need for new philosophers and a new great politics, as also of other specific themes Nietzsche considers diriment, such as the denial of compassion, education meant as «selection» and «breeding» as opposed to the decadent education of modernity, the appreciation of eros, sexuality and madness etc.

Nietzsche's attention for non-dualistic-nihilistic interpretations of Plato's thought and his interest in some themes and directions go along until the end with the unresolved issue concerning the true nature of Plato's personality.

This persistent connotation of Plato's nature as irreducibly multilateral and elusive suggests that after all Nietzsche had created a second unintentional caricatural reading to be matched with the explicit caricature, by subtraction and absolutization of traits, of the challenged and to-be-challenged moralist Plato. In this way, he might have outlined an implicit and changing «fluid

68 In NL 1888 14 [116]: «Is Plato's probity maybe beyond any doubt? ... But at least we know he demanded to be taught as an absolute truth what he himself not even relatively believed as true: i.e., individual existence and the individual immortality of 'souls'» (KGW VIII 3, p. 85), where he agrees with Teichmüller 1874-1966, p. 176f.

69 In NL 1888 11. 54, where he defines Machiavellianism as «superhuman, divine, transcendent, unattainable by men, who can, if anything, touch it lightly [...] Even Plato just brushed against it». KGW VIII 2, p. 268).

70 In the lectures on *Academica*, Nietzsche had taken note of the «judgement on Plato» by Cicero, who called him «*varius et multiplex et copiosus*» in <*Ciceros Academica*> KGW II 3 p. 72.

71 For ex. cf.: «Plato is all in the spirit of Manu: he was initiated in Egypt. The morals of the castes, the god of the good, the "only eternal soul". – Plato the Brahmanist – Pyrrhon the Buddhist. Copied. The type of philosopher. The castes. The division of the doctrine into esoteric and exoteric. The "great soul". The souls' transmigration as inverted Darwinism (it is not Greek)» (NL 1888 14 [191]: KGW VIII 3, p. 170). The phrase '*umgekehrter Darwinismus*' reprises KGW II 4, p. 72.

72 «One can think of the philosophers as those who make the most extreme efforts to *try* how far man can raise himself (especially Plato): how far his strength will reach» (NL 1885 34 [74]: KGW VII 3, p. 163, Sturge, p. 5).

caricature», using the phrase chosen by Nietzsche himself to describe the Platonic Socrates in an early fragment⁷³, a caricature that consists in hyperbolically multiplying the traits and the connotations referred to Plato's personality. Such proliferation, with no concern for coherence, probably means to evoke together both the greatness and the dangers of an overabundant and intimately contradictory nature such as Plato's, which Nietzsche, more or less consciously, identifies with. For example, let's consider the dialectics without stable reconciliation between health and disease, which concerns both Nietzsche's Plato and the self-comprehension of the German philosopher; or the tension uniting both philosophers in the complicated relationship between thought and writing (among multiplication of styles, communication and dissimulation, silences and omissions). Anyway, Plato's personality remains evasive until the end, elusive to any exclusive appropriation. To Nietzsche, Plato remains a «man with many caves and faces»⁷⁴, a «Sphinx nature»⁷⁵.

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73 NL 1876 18 (47). Plato is accused of not being able to «keep the same image of Socrates even just in a single dialogue». KGW IV 2 p. 423. As in other occasions, Nietzsche seems to blame Plato for a limitation that to a certain degree he shares with him.

74 NL 1885 34[66]: KGW VII/3 p. 160.

75 «Nothing I know has given me a better vision of Plato's secrecy and Sphinx nature than that happily preserved petit fait: under the pillow of his death-bed they did not find a «Bible» or anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic – but instead, Aristophanes. How would even a Plato have endured life – a Greek life that he said No to – without an Aristophanes!» GBE 28: KGW VI 2, p. 43, Norman p. 30.

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