INTRODUCTION

Forty years ago Olof Gigon, stressing more than had been the case previously the mythico-poetical nature of the so-called traditional Socratic sources, which he denied had any reliability for the purposes of an historically-based interpretation of Socrates, revealed with great vigour, and not a little scandal, the error into which Socratic historiography had finally fallen, exchanging the Socrates of legend with the Socrates of history.

But precisely the radicalness of Gigon’s criticism which, by ruling out the very possibility of the positing and existence of the Socratic problem risked erasing the name of Socrates from the history of Western thought and, in general, of human civilisation, ought to have triggered off a fervent resumption of study and research into the historical persona of the son of Sophroniscus.

However, in the attempt to free the Socratic problem from Gigon’s sceptical conclusions and restore to history the human and philosophical personality of the Athenian master, some people have conceded too much to Gigon’s scepticism by abandoning the search for the historical Socrates in order to restate the Socratic problem as the historical problem of Socratism; others, too few in number, limited themselves to searching in those same traditional Socratic sources, refuted as such by Gigon, for new elements in confirmation of their historicity. The majority, however, have simply ignored Gigon’s arguments either by restating the problem of the historical Socrates according to the ancient combinatorial criterion of Socratic texts expounded by Zeller, or subjecting the same texts to a structural or linguistic analysis which systematically ignores whether the Socrates who is the object of the investigation is the Socrates of history or the Socrates dramatis persona of Socratic literature.

There have been but very few who noticed the pressing problematic exigency which underlies Gigon’s arguments and
therefore tried to overcome Gigon's scepticism, albeit taking as their starting point this very scepticism of his. On closer examination, this is nothing other than the radicalization of the thesis of the untenability of a certain way of stating and resolving the Socratic problem. Of that way which, by groundlessly or simplistically having faith in the essential reliability of Socratic sources, entrusted the solution of the problem of the historical knowledge of Socrates to the agreement of the sources amongst themselves or to the superiority of this or that over the others.

And so if Gigon's negative thesis, destructive and "provocative" as you wish, obliged historians, philologists and philosophers on the one hand to subject to a radical problematization all that one finally believed had accrued to the Socratic question, as if a century and a half of study and research and a huge literature had not had any effect; on the other hand, those who still wanted to study Socrates, having been warned finally to break with tradition and try another line of approach to the historical persona of Socrates that was different from the one theorized about and accredited by the authority of Schleiermacher, Hegel and Zeller.

Thus the Socratic problem was once again under discussion, but it was no longer the same.

The essays assembled in this volume are an example of this. An example, that is, of historical research which, over and above any scepticism and outside any historiographical schematism, aims at restating the problem of the historical Socrates as a problem of historical method: that is as an experiment of another line of approach to the historical persona of Socrates; another line of enquiry, in other words, capable of clarifying the reasons for that tragic link between Socratic cross-questioning and death by hemlock.

From this redrawing of the Socratic problem as a problem of historical method and from the related problematization of the texts of Socratism there will perhaps emerge a picture of Socrates which is less idealized but certainly more historically accurate; the picture of a Socrates, that is, who is not a model of wisdom beloved of the god of Delphi, and like Christ unjustly condemned, but of a man who thought of human things in a concrete world of men in a given moment in the civil history of Athens; the picture,
in fact, of that Socrates who in the Athens of the time of the Peloponnesian War found the conditions of his existence and the reasons for his fate.

The essays assembled here, though written in different and sometimes distant times, are all inspired by the same methodological criterion and all directed towards the same end.

The first, *Socrates, as a problem of historical method*, aims to be, over and above any scepticism, a restatement of the Socratic problem as a methodological problem, mindful of all the twists and turns of the Socratic question and of all the sources of Socratism: Plato and Xenophon no less than Aristophanes and Polycrates, the indictments and sentence of the Eliasts, which is the most explicit testimony of his contemporaries on the historical persona of Socrates and on the character of his teaching.

*Socrates. From myth to history*, is an exemplification of the criterion of enquiry theorized in the preceding essay, though chronologically the latter precedes the former.

If, as is alleged, all we know of Socrates is that he was charged, tried and condemned, the reason for his death ought to tell us something of the mode of being and thinking of that Socrates a citizen of Athens accused of impiety and corruption. An enquiry conducted along these lines tends therefore to reveal in the same reasons that motivated the charge of first Aristophanes, then Anytus, Meletus and Lycon, and lastly the sentence of the Eliasts, the essential and characteristic aspects of the teaching of Socrates, master of Alcibiades, Critias and Charmides, as well as of Antisthenes, Plato and Xenophon.

*Socrates between the first and second Clouds* and *On the trial of Anaxagoras* aim, each in its own way, to remove two errors which are serious and harmful to any possible solution of the Socratic problem into which modern Socratic historiography has fallen; the first error is that the *Clouds* gives grounds for distinguishing a "firstly" and a "then" in the intellectual life of Socrates, thereby giving grounds for believing in the existence of two different literary portraits of the same historical personage of Socrates: a physicist and master of natural science in the early years of his life, known to Aristophanes and unknown to Plato and Xenophon; a dissatisfied and problematic researcher in his maturity, known to Plato and Xenophon and so accepted
by a long tradition of study.

The paper *On the trial of Anaxagoras* is intended to remove the second error confirming the argument of the preceding paper on the *Clouds*, demonstrating how the *psephism* named after Diopeithes, which had provided the juridical basis for the condemnation of Anaxagoras, would not have allowed Socrates, between 432-31, (the date of the publication of the *psephism*), and 423, (the date of the staging of the *Clouds*), to exercise that same profession of the science of nature for which the greatest natural philosopher of Clazomenae had been accused, tried and condemned.

Lastly, the essay *On Aspasia Milesia* broadens and develops a crucial point barely touched upon in the essay *On the trial of Anaxagoras*, examining for the first time the juridical presupposition and the reasons for the judicial charge, if indeed it really was a judicial charge, to which the fair Milesian was subjected with a view to clarifying the nature of the activity of those learned metics gathered round Pericles, amongst whom Aspasia was the most influential because she was the most loved, and the reasons for the trials by which they were affected and dispersed and Socrates’ relations with Pericles’ entourage and Socrates’ friendship with Aspasia.

It might perhaps not be inopportune to conclude by adding that the collected essays were originally conceived and written in preparation for a larger volume, *Socrates. Physiology of a myth*, Gieben, Amsterdam, 1981, to which they are linked and to which they can provide, together with the complementary volume *De Socrate iuste damnato*, Gieben, Amsterdam, 1981, opportune clarifications and useful supplements.

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