REVIEW ARTICLE —
RECONSIDERING THE PLATONIC CLEITOPHON

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The riddle of the Cleitophon is a creature of modern scholarship. Since Friedrich Schleiermacher’s unitarian reconstruction of the Corpus Platonicum at the threshold of the nineteenth century, and his sophisticated disallowance of this minor dialogue as inauthentic, it has been repeatedly thrown away by many scholars literally into the dustbin of the Platonic spuria, or, more often, neglected altogether without a single word of notice. Notwithstanding the fact that, as Schleiermacher himself confessed, the old catalogues of the writings of Plato enlisted the little dialogue amongst the genuine ones, the distinguished scholar insisted on the existence of ‘internal reasons’ casting doubt on its authorship. In the first place, the dialogue starts with Socrates addressing Cleitophon in the third person, while showing signs of a peculiar and conspicuously non-Socratic sensitivity: he appears offended by what had been said in a rather depreciatory manner against him. This is, to go no further, according to Schleiermacher, completely unplatonisch.

But the philosophical grounds for dismissing the dialogue are far more decisive. Even if it is just a fragment, and assuming that Socrates (who after a short introductory statement falls totally silent) would have defended himself immediately after Cleitophon’s accusatory speech, it still remains difficult to understand why Plato should allow his Socrates to suffer such an unseemly attack. The more so as such an attack is fully misplaced and philosophically meaningless, for Plato’s Socrates by no means abstained from affirmative teaching. All things considered, according to Schleiermacher, it seems most likely that the dialogue comes from one of the best contemporaneous schools of rhetoric, and is directed against Socrates and the Socratics — Plato included. We can be reconfirmed to this verdict when we see how the text is actually a ‘Parodie und Karikatur’ of the Platonic manner, especially of

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all that appears against the sophists as teachers of the art of politics. In short, Schleiermacher’s commentary signalised the birth of a riddle.³

In effect, the whole story of the minor spuria and dubia is to a great extent an invention of modern scholarship. There is ample and incontestable evidence that the ancient commentators and intellectual historiographers were not, strictly speaking, concerned to discover a coherent philosophical meaning in Plato’s separate compositions.⁴ They were not disturbed by the pluralism of Plato’s ideas, neither did they seem to have bothered about explaining or neutralising the discrepancies and gaps that frequently occur between disparate passages. They had very little interest in the chronology of the works attributed to Plato; instead, they were more concerned with the order of reading them in accordance to a presumably self-evident criterion: the degree of philosophical complexity. Whatever the students in antiquity seem to have generally disregarded in their intellectual excursion to the dialogues as repositories of Plato’s thought, turned out to be the dominant themes in Platonic interpretation since Wilhelm Gottfried Tennemann. Kant’s devoted disciple applied the term ‘system’ to Platonic philosophy and, as Lutoslawski observed, relied throughout ‘on Plato alone as the interpreter of the Platonic teaching’.⁵

Turning to Plato as the sole interpreter of the essence of Platonism implied a dramatic redirection of emphasis from earlier approaches (to wit, from how one could utilise a certain dialogue to lend support to his own theoretical construction) towards ascertaining what Plato actually thought when he was writing a dialogue? What was the philosopher’s intention (and even motivation) in drafting a conversation, and how is this to be verified? How did he understand his own thought? How are his contradictions to be accounted for? Which of the moral and political doctrines introduced through the dramatic and fictional conversations of the dialogues can legitimately be attributed to him? This substantial methodological reorientation mirrored the thesis that philosophy must be systematic (a result of German critical thought under the auspices of Kant) as well as the romanticist view that a certain text is primarily shaped by the mind, spirit and personality of its author.

³ It is called a riddle (‘rätselhaft Schrift’) by H. Raeder early in the twentieth century, Platons Philosophische Entwicklung (Leipzig, 1905), p. 24, and afterwards it appears often under such a denomination. For a more extensive summary of the dialogue see section VI below.
