The idea that Plato’s Socrates – even the Socrates of the ‘Socratic’ dialogues – is a construct (see Book Notes on Socrates and Plato, Phronesis 1999/1) is fundamental to Alexander Nehamas’s The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault (based on his Sather Lectures of 1992-3). Plato operates like a kind of philosophical version of Thomas Mann, enticing us, his audience, into a position where we think, wrongly, that we know where we are with his characters: ‘[his Socratic dialogues] revolve around a character who remains completely mysterious to the other figures that share his fictional world, to the dialogues’ readers, and finally, like Hans Castorp [in The Magic Mountain], to his own author as well. And though Castorp and Socrates are vastly different characters, Mann’s novel and Plato’s Socratic dialogues are two of the most scornful displays of the weakness of readers who assume they are morally superior to various characters while they are in fact revealing that they are made of the same stuff as those they deride’ (32). Thinking we have recognised Euthyphro’s self-delusion, we turn away from the Euthyphro, but in doing so ‘we demonstrate [self-delusion] to be ruling our own lives as well – which is really the aim of this whole mechanism’ (41; author’s own italics). We are being invited to make our lives chime with our beliefs, in this case identified with Socrates’ call to perpetual examination of ourselves; but we refuse the invitation.

For ‘the art of living’, read ‘philosophy as a way of life’. Plato’s depiction of Socrates – again, in the ‘Socratic’ dialogues – is a description of one properly philosophical way of living, which he thought the way. (Nehamas himself is less certain than ‘Socrates’, or Aristotle, that there is any single philosophical way of life.) Plato’s ‘Socrates’ is a construct at once philosophical and literary (like The Art of Living itself): literary, because it has in the end to be a written construct, even if in Socrates’ case it had to be written for him. Plato’s chief weapon is
irony – his own, as he works his effect on us, but also, and crucially, Socrates’, which gives us that apparent licence to share his disdain for others. Nehamas’s second chapter is primarily devoted to understanding Socratic irony, which he sees as implying both superiority and concealment. Irony here is not, pace Dr Johnson, a matter of saying the contrary of what one means, but rather of saying something merely different from what one means, which in principle leaves that meaning uncertain. Hence the title ‘Silence’ that Nehamas gives to his first Part and first three chapters: Socrates is ‘a character whose irony does not allow us to see what made him a possible human being’ (69).

The basis for the claim that Plato too fails to understand his own creature – developed in the third chapter – is that Socrates thinks knowledge necessary for a successful life, claims (seriously, according to Nehamas) that he does not have this knowledge, and yet is ‘confident in thinking he has actually lived such a life’ (86). The rest of Plato’s oeuvre constitutes an attempt to work out a system that might somehow do the same job as whatever was behind Socrates’ mask. But this is a different kind of philosophy, no longer a philosophy conceived of as an art of living. Part II of the book describes three ‘voices’ – those of Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault – echoing in the space left by Socrates’ silence, each in their own way (in Nietzsche’s case, despite itself) imitating his idiosyncratic style, and fashioning a self for themselves that is coherent and philosophical despite the lack of system in the views of which it consists.

As this no doubt crude attempt at summary should begin to indicate, Nehamas’s book constitutes a complex and challenging reading of Plato, and of Socrates. Founded on more traditional modes of scholarship, and engaging – especially through a set of endnotes about half as long as the main text itself – with many of the standard issues relating to Socrates, Plato, and the Platonic corpus,3 it provides a sophisticated model of what it might be to acknowledge Plato simultaneously as creative writer and as philosopher. One may wish to resist certain features of Nehamas’s account. For example, what will work for some of the aporetic dialogues may not work so well for others; too much may be made both of Socratic, and of Platonic, irony; and to at least one reader there is a certain sense of strain, not just of paradox, in the way in which we arrive at the ‘silence’ of the voluble Socrates – if what he was after, and was conscious of lacking, was a systematic knowledge of the good and the bad (rather than of the virtues), it would be entirely intelligible that he should nevertheless be able to see

3 By a lucky coincidence, Princeton has this year published a collection of Nehamas’s essays on Platonic topics, written over the past twenty-five years: Alexander Nehamas, Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates, Princeton University Press, 1999. pp. xxxvi + 372. Hardback $65; paperback, no price given. ISBN 0 691 00177 4 (hardback); 0 691 00178 2 (paperback). The collection is dedicated to the memory of Gregory Vlastos; it is entirely consistent with that that it (like The Art of Living) demonstrates the inadequacy of some of Vlastos’s views, especially on the nature of Socratic irony and the ‘disavowal of knowledge’.