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My Dinner with Socrates: Literary Shaping of Philosophy in Plato and Dostoevsky

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My Dinner with Socrates:
Literary Shaping of Philosophy in Plato and Dostoevsky

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by
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My Dinner With Socrates: 
Literary Shaping of Philosophy in Plato and Dostoevsky

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1. introductions

What is particularly interesting about *My Dinner with Andre* is that very little apparent distance is portrayed between the lives of the characters in the movie and the lives of the actors performing those roles. Andre Gregory, eccentric playwright, plays Andre Gregory, eccentric playwright; and playwright and sometime actor Wallace Shawn plays playwright and sometime actor Wallace Shawn. So throughout the myriad of bizarre and intriguing ideas that arise in their conversation, we constantly have to keep the thought in the backs of our minds: whose ideas are these? Would Andre Gregory and Wallace Shawn be having this same discussion about electric blankets and their effect on one's connectedness to humanity if the cameras were not on them? Or is there some particular political or philosophical agenda that the director, Louis Malle, is trying to push in the interactions of these two characters/men? Is he framing their conversation for a particular purpose? Or might it simply be a model for intelligent conversation in the twentieth-century United States? It is rare that form plays a part in the interpretation of a motion picture, but *My Dinner with Andre* presents that scenario. A study of the film could be intriguing, but its present value is as a hint at the work in another medium of two other men in two other languages, work which also has a lot to do with the way people converse, work which also has a lot to do with the uncertainty that conversation as a genre can intone.

In evaluating Plato's works, the question of form is central. Without an understanding of his use of the ambiguous dialogue form and its purposes and effects, any understanding of the philosophical significance of the works themselves will be at best incomplete. The primary difficulty of interpretation lies in Plato's straying from a form of direct address such as a
treatise, with its clear implications that whatever ideas are recorded are those of the author, and instead putting philosophy on a stage, leaving it to be spoken by and ascribed to the characters that populate his dialogues. In most works set up in this way (such as the Athenian tragedies), the implied distance between the author and the message of his or her works encourages the audience to focus on the dramatic quality of the plot and its immediate intonations, and not to concern itself as much with authorial intention. Yet unlike the Athenian tragedies, whose ethical ambiguity openly left any particular meaning to be discerned by the individual audience members, Plato's works do include one central philosopher who dictates the direction of the dialogue and always has a superior argument, and the topic is always openly philosophical. In this play on genre, it seems that Plato is almost inviting the audience to search for a significance to the form, to seek out where in the dramatic context, between the words of Socrates and those of the interlocutors, Plato's own thoughts lie and what the purpose is in veiling them so.

In the major novels of Dostoevsky we also note this effect of a play on genre leading to philosophical ambiguity. He enacts a similar conspicuous distance between the author and the ideas of his characters such that study of his works often discusses not Dostoevsky as their author but "a whole series of philosophical statements made by several author-thinkers . . . a series of independent and self-contradictory philosophical positions, each defended by one or another of his heroes" (Bakhtin 3), which makes the actual position of Dostoevsky as their single creator all the more intriguing and significant. Even more interesting is that, though his novels never soundly affirm or condemn any particular philosophical orientation or way of being, Dostoevsky did publish numerous non-fictional essays which do take strong stands; the fact that he chooses to make his fictional work enigmatic in the

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1 Aristotle was likely the innovator of the "treatise" form, but the philosophers who preceded Plato generally employed similar methods that implied direct communication of their thoughts through their media, usually poetry.
face of his own views makes him a particularly apt model against whom to compare and judge Plato's methods.

The ambiguous philosophical novels that Dostoevsky crafted help illustrate a particular significance to Plato's use of the dialogue form. The way Plato practices this form grants a depth to philosophy which is unrivalled by those writing in direct address. Its subtlety and dramatic content skirt around numerous stumbling blocks that confront traditional philosophical forms and are as crucial as Socrates' words to the way that the portrayed philosophy is to be interpreted. Plato's use of the dialogue form allows it to overcome the limits that he ascribes to the written word in his Epistle Seven, and it suggests an acute understanding of the interplay between the permanence of the Forms that he is trying to bring across and the constant change of the audience to whom the Forms apply. Like Dostoevsky, Plato, in applying literary techniques to philosophy, plays with readers' expectations of genre in order to engage them in a dialectic beyond the text that might lead them to the understanding that philosophy is not solely about argumentation, but about a way of living one's life.

2. expectations: good faith

Both Plato's dialogues and Dostoevsky's novels manifest literary techniques in philosophy through a confusion in the expectations that arise as readers assess the value of what they are reading. Wolfgang Iser, in his article, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," speaks of a "balance" we seek, when reading a literary text, between "a consistent, configurative meaning" and the "alien associations" that frustrate us in our attempts to project a single consistent interpretation onto the text (1226). "In seeking the balance" between these factors, he says, "we inevitably have to start out with certain expectations, the shattering of which is integral to the esthetic experience" (1227). In reading Plato, there are a number of things we
expect, few of which relate to achieving some "esthetic experience." We expect to be reading philosophy, philosophy that is sound; we expect that the author is not going to toy with us and hold back the answers that he has; and we expect, primarily, that the author of these dialogues wrote them for a purpose, to pass on to others his understanding of the world.

We expect that these works capture Plato's sincere thought, since outwardly these are works of philosophy, yet his *Epistle Seven*, written upon his return from being frustrated in his attempt to teach philosophy to Dionysius II of Syracuse and thus to put the political conditions outlined in the *Republic* into action, confounds this expectation. In the midst of explaining his quandary, Plato goes into a brief section in which he claims, in his own voice (as opposed to those of the characters that take part in his dialogues), that "There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of [his]" dealing with his own philosophy, for "it does not at all admit of verbal expression" (531) due to a "weakness inherent in language" (535).

but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself (531).

Beyond that, he claims that "every serious man in dealing with really serious subjects carefully avoids writing" (541). These statements most clearly put into question how one is to take Plato's dialogues--if they are not treatises and if he was not "serious" when he wrote them--and challenge the expectations

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2 The validity of attributing the *Letters* to Plato has long been in question. Most of them have been disregarded, yet, though computer analysis of *Letter Seven* is inconclusive, it is "nowadays accepted by the majority of scholars" (Ledger 150).

3 τούτως οὐκ ἐστι, κατὰ τὴν ἡμῖν δῆξαν περὶ τοῦ πρόματος ἐπείγειν οὐδέν. οὐκοῦν ἡμῶν γε περὶ αὐτῶν ἐστι σύγχρομα, οὐδὲ μήπως γένηται. (*Epistle Seven* 341c4-6)

4διὰ τὸ τῶν λόγων αἰσθενεῖς (342e3-343a1)

5ἀλλ' ἐκ πολλῆς συνουσίας γεγονομένης περὶ τὸ πρόματος αὕτῳ ἐκείνῳ καὶ τοῦ συζήτησαι ἐξ αὑτῆς, οἷον ἀπὸ πυρὸς πηθήταις ἐξαφανίζεται, καὶ ἐν τῇ ὑπόκρισιν γενόμενον αὐτὸ ἐκείνῳ ἡμῖν τρέφει. (341c7-d2)

6 Διὰ δὴ ποὺς ἀνὴρ σπουδαῖος τῶν ἱερόν ἐποίησε σπουδαῖον περὶ πολλοῦ διε ἐν ἑαυτῷ γραμμάς (344c1-3)
we bring to his works. But the questions arise as well, more indirectly and mysteriously, in the *Phaedrus*.

Socrates mentions toward the end of the dialogue that

you might think [written words] spoke as if they had intelligence, but if you question them, wishing to know about their sayings, they always say only one and the same thing. And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself. (565)\(^7\)

*Phaedrus* clarifies Socrates’ meaning here by opposing the written word, for which Socrates expresses disdain, with that of which Socrates is tolerant and has respect for, “the living and breathing word of him who knows, of which the written word may justly be called the image” (567).\(^8\) This establishment of opposition between the common understanding of the written word and the truth behind it recalls the methods Socrates uses to get his interlocutors in other dialogues (the *Meno* pops immediately to mind) to set aside their assumptions, based on societal factors, about the nature of things by having them define a Form (in the *Meno*, virtue). He eventually exposes all the definitions of virtue that his conversation partners give him as examples, corners of virtue that are far too limited to cover the whole of it. In the same way, in this passage Socrates is setting up the written word as something that at one moment in time, in one situation, may be applicable, but is on the whole an insufficient replacement for the spoken discourse of one who can defend and explain her or his words. Written discourse has a place in

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\(^7\)δέξας μὲν ἄν ὁς τὶ προφονούντας εὐτυχὸς λέγων, ἢν δὲ τὴν ἡμῶν λογικόν βουλόμενος μαθεῖν, ἢν τις σημαινόντας ταύταν καὶ ὅταν δὲ ἐπάνω γραφῆ, κυλύσθαι μὲν πανταχοῦ πάς λόγος ὁμοίος παρὰ τοῖς ἐπαίσκον, ὡς δ’ εὐτυχὸς παρ’ ὅς οὐδὲν προσήκει, καὶ οὔκ ἐπισταται λόγῳ ὥς δ’ ἤ γε καὶ μὴ πλημμελοῦσον ἐξ’ ἀλλ’ ἐμνεύσαςται οὐκε βοηθήσαι δυνατὸς εὑσο. (*Phaedrus* 275d8-e6)

\(^8\)τὸν τοῦ εὐδοτος λόγον λόγιος εἴναι καὶ ἐμφανὸς, οὔτ’ ὁ γραμματέος εἴδωλον ἢν εἰ λόγον δικαίου. (276a9-11)
Socrates' world only "to remind us of what we know" (573).  

Now that what we have expected, that the work we are reading is the philosophy of Plato, has been undermined, we once again look for a "consistent, configurative meaning" which will incorporate these "alien associations." So then the problem is in deciding whether Plato's assertions (through his own words or those of Socrates) about writing are to be taken at face value, whether they are somehow a function of the "Socratic irony" that critics like to speak so much about, or whether they do have a degree of resolution, that they are subtle intonations that hint at a higher level of understanding that Plato had of his dialogue form and the function it played in portraying the spirit of his philosophy.

A couple of critics try to skirt around the issue by downplaying Plato's condemnation. Guthrie approaches the problem of Epistle Seven very simply by cautioning that, because it was simply an "outburst of irritation" occurring in a letter and not a thoroughly formulated doctrine, readers should be reluctant to take it too seriously (57n). This is a plausible interpretation, but it does not account for the Phaedrus. Rosen uses "irony" as the deus ex machina for the problem, proffering that, in light of it, "the dialogues and letters do not contradict but supplement one another" (xliii). Although there may be a kernel of truth in what he says, what exactly he means by the function of this irony is vague and undefined; he does not try to substantiate his suggestion, just propose it.

James Arieti grants consistency to Plato's dialogues by taking them as works of art which "aim at an emotional reaction and not at discursive learning" (248). He takes them to be dramatic interpretations of philosophical situations which seek to leave their readers with general reactions to the whole rather than with curiosities about minute textual points. He explains,

Whomever Plato may have expected as his audience, it is certain that it was not those who would sit down with dialogues and

9 τῷ ὑπὸ οὕτων τοὺς βελτίστους εἰδέτων ὑπόμνησιν γενόμεναι. (Phaedrus 278a1-2)
analyze, with the aid of commentaries and dictionaries and scores of articles, every word that he wrote, word by word. [6]

Arieti assumes that most of Plato's Greek audience would have had the dialogues read to them by slaves, and would not have scoured the texts for subtleties as modern critics do. From this, he concludes that Plato's intentions were not nearly as deeply significant as we credit them to be. He suggests that Plato most likely had no intention of setting off centuries of debate about the internal validity of his statements about writing being inferior to speech. Arieti presents a strong argument, but it is difficult to believe that every complexity of Plato's texts that scholars note has been projected onto the texts by those simply yearning for significance. To an extent, Arieti may have a point. Some critical authors may be overzealous in the minutiae they squeeze from the dialogues. Yet it does not seem likely that, whatever their primary dramatic value, however general was the impression with which Plato might have hoped to leave his audience, the complexities of the dialogues and the controversies they raise are all incidental.

Other authors accept Plato's assertion that the dialogues are not treatises and try to incorporate it into their own consistent interpretations by looking at them as poetic. They attribute to Plato's apparent poeticizing of his dialogues a primary philosophical value. Seeskin offers that the supposedly poetic dialogue form was simply an alternative to the straight, expository prose that was the normal means of portraying philosophy, an alternative which might catch readers far enough offguard that a "responsive chord" might be struck in their souls, causing them to regrow the metaphorical wings that the *Phaedrus* suggests we have lost (184-5). Hathaway agrees that Plato might have recognized the power of poetry to "produce a concord between emotions and reason" (198), as Socrates notes in *Laws* 659e1-410 and 10\[6e\] εδώς καλείς, δύναις μὲν ἑγωδίνῃ ταῖς νοοῖς παύσαοντε, νῦν γέγονεῖται, πρὸς τὴν τοιαύτην ἢν λέγωσαν συμμονικὰν ἐκπληκτικὰν (*Laws* 659e1-4) ('[W]e have what we call 'chants,' which evidently are in reality incantations seriously designed to produce in souls that conformity and harmony of which we speak." [113])
Republic 401d5-e1, and sought to use it in his philosophy as a tool for enlightening those who might be reluctant to study philosophy closely enough to be as "maddened" (μανικός) by it as were Socrates and his followers.

One problem with looking at the dialogues in this light is that Socrates condemns poetry on a number of occasions. In the same Republic in which he praises the benefits of poetry, he also clearly asserts that, in an ideal republic, poetry should be avoided because of its danger, insidiousness, and hypocrisy. Not only does he cite some indistinct "ancient feud" between philosophy and poetry in which he obviously sides with philosophy (264), he also clearly criticizes it in Book Two for defying traditional morality and being a corrupting force in the education of children, and in Book Ten for being a "phantom" three steps removed from reality (255). And in the Phaedrus, Socrates asserts that poetry is simply inadequate as a tool for learning:

[T]he region above heaven was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be. . . . For the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul. (475, 477)

His critique of poetry is very similar to his critique of writing in general, that it cannot capture the truth of existence. It is limited by the boundaries of time and circumstance, and thus is faithful neither to humans nor the Forms:

11τούτων ὄντων ὡς κατωτάτη ἐν μούσικῃ τροφῇ, ἢτα μέλισσα κατασκέπασε εἰς τὸ ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς ὁ ἰχθύς καὶ ὁ βυθὸς καὶ ἄρμονία, καὶ ἐρωμένηστατα ἐπιτείνεται σῶσης φέροντα τὴν εὐκάθαρσιν, καὶ ποιοῦ εὐλογίμουν, τάν τις ἐκάστῳ τροφῇ (Republic 401d5-e1)

(T)he most sovereign nurture lies in poetry, because its rhythms and melodies enter the innermost part of the soul and powerfully seize it, bringing grace to make graceful one who is properly nurtured" [71])

12πολείπτε μέν τις διαφόρα φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητική (Republic 607b6-6)

13Πόρρω ἄρα που τοῦ ἀληθοῦς ἡ μυθική ἐστι καὶ, ὡς ζώικος, διὰ τὸ τοπίκα ἀπεργάζεται, ὑπὲρτῶν τί ἐκάστῳ ἐκάστῳ, καὶ τῷ-τού εἴδωλον . . . τὰ ἔργα σωτόν . . . τριτὰ ἀπέχοντα τοῦ ὄντος (598b6-8, 598e6-599a1)

14Τῶν δὲ ὑπερποιητῶν τόπων οὐκ ὅπως τὰς ὑποκλείει τῶν τῆς ποιητικῆς οὐκοῦν καὶ ᾧ ὅλος καὶ ἀρχιμάστατος καὶ ἀναφθαρίστας καὶ ὑπερποιητῆς οὐσίας ὄντως οὕσα μυθῆς κυβερνήτης μόνῳ θεατῇ νῦ, περὶ ἣν τὸ τῆς ἀληθοῦς ἐπιστήμης γένος τοῦτον ἔχει τὴν τόπον. (Phaedrus 247c4-6, c8-d1)
humans, because their constant evolution due to time and experience makes a poet's work, if ever applicable to their lives, always so for different, unstable reasons; the Forms, because language does not apply since it is shaped and tainted by the imperfection of the human experience.

But suppose we disregard these claims that Socrates made in the dialogues and assume that Plato was only faithfully recording Socrates' own views while at the same time playing with them a little bit. It is hardly deniable that much of Plato's work is poetic in its own way. The language is occasionally heightened, and we even see Socrates "speaking in hexameters" in the _Phaedrus_ itself (457). And the frequent use of myths, particularly the tremendously entrancing Myth of Er at the end of the _Republic_ and the _Phaedo_ 's closing myth, is clearly much closer to poetry than systematic philosophy, as Socrates acknowledges: "To insist that these things are just as I have described them would not be the act of a sensible man" (_Phaedo_ 110).

There is a role that poetry as such and myth play in the effect of Plato's dialogues, and it may well be that, in addition to what the authors above have noted about poetry, Plato uses it, often in the form of myth, to access a higher consciousness in his readers that argument cannot, to "hint at something highly significant" (Merlan 411). That is the subject of another study (and many have taken up the task). This study notes a limit to the prospective answers that poetry alone can give to the question of the effect of the dialogues and notes that the answers it does give are sketchy. Its effects are so indistinct, based greatly on its irrational value as a form of incantation, that a study of it cannot help but sketch a very vague outline of its implications and its subjective applications. A study of Plato as literary in a modern sense allows for closer, more tangible understanding of his works, because of literature's more clearly articulated effects, than does study from a poetic

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15 ὧν ξαθοῦ... ὅπη ἐπὶ φθεγγομαι (_Phaedrus_ 241e-2)

16 ὅτα μὲν οὖν τεῦτα διασχυπάσσεται σύνος ἥνων ὡς ἄκον διαλήλωθα, οὐ πρέπει ωσόν ἢχοντι ἀνδρὶ (_Phaedo_ 114d1-2)
point of view, which more inevitably becomes based on a level of supposition and subjectivity that is, as Plato notes, difficult to communicate through a static logos such as an essay.

3. expectations: genre

Plato's assertion that his works were not treatises of his thought is still an "alien association" that we have not resolved, remaining to puzzle our expectations, leaving us without a consistent interpretation of the effect of the dialogues. And before this fundamental issue of interpretation clears, we have to go back to the dialogues and have our expectations once again thwarted. Our original expectation was that philosophy could be written and that Plato has done just that, but close reading puts our assumption into question. Now we are to look at expectations on another level, that of genre, in the relationship between philosophy and literature. Iser claims that

we feel that any confirmative effect—such as we implicitly demand of expository texts, as we refer to the objects they are meant to present—is a defect in a literary text. For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of its didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. (1221)

We will first look at Dostoevsky as an exemplar of one who fiddles with "confirmative effects" in a literary work in order to illustrate the peculiar effect that Plato enacts by doing it backwards, making outwardly "confirmative effects" literary. This section will illuminate primarily that both these authors use an interplay of literary techniques with philosophical to intrigue their readers with and engage their readers in the philosophy that is either unconfirmed or imperfect, and secondarily that Dostoevsky as a literary dialectical author can be employed to unveil Plato also as a literary dialectical author.

Dostoevsky, in his major novels, seeks to make his readers wonder
whether he really is confirming expectations, whether he is sliding from literature into philosophical prose. *Crime & Punishment* illustrates the interweaving of literary and philosophical dimensions of Dostoevsky's style. It makes its readers wonder to themselves, why is this story filled with characters here being overrun by philosophy? It has the foreboding mood and unsolved murder of a detective novel, but what is unsolved is not who did it; we know that all along. What is unsolved is *why* he did it.

Even Raskolnikov himself is not sure. Was it for the money? Was it because he thought humanity would be better served with the pawnbroker Alyona Ivanovna dead (58-59)? Was it merely a result of the delirium he experienced from the fever that plagues him throughout the book? Or was it to prove to himself that he could verify his theory of the "great man," one "to whom all is permitted," by murdering her (238)? As the plot goes, we never really find out what it was that led Raskolnikov to commit his murder. But beyond the bare plot, what is most dwelt upon is the philosophical subject of personal freedom from societal constraints: are there some people who should be allowed to do whatever they wish? Raskolnikov wants to be one of these, the ultimate test of whom is to murder without remorse.

He cannot do it. He feels guilt. He fulfills Porfiry Petrovitch's prediction that "Freedom will lose its attractions, [the fugitive] will begin to brood, he'll weave a tangle round himself, he'll worry himself to death" (295). Petrovitch's statement refers immediately to the level of a fugitive from justice, but it also applies to Raskolnikov as a fugitive from the social order. Raskolnikov realizes, as Michel in Gide's *The Immoralist* does, that "The capacity to get free is nothing; the capacity to be free, that is the task" (*Immoralist* 5), a task to which Raskolnikov realizes himself ultimately unsuited. It is that burden of freedom as much as of guilt that leads him finally to confess. As the book closes, Raskolnikov, settled and influenced by his love for Sonia, has begun to read the Bible, has begun a "new life" (472), and even has had a symbolic dream about the horrors and destruction that
would ensue if everyone would decide, as Raskolnikov had, to accept no one else's truth but her or his own. Everything seems settled—but only for him. The question of whether there does exist someone to whom "all is permitted" is not answered: all we know at that point is that it is not Raskolnikov, and he has accepted his fate. Yet the way Dostoevsky structures the story makes it seem as if we are supposed to feel an ultimate closure to all points of the book, to feel a sound resolution; but the only real resolution is of Raskolnikov's character, and the appearance of more than that draws closer attention to the great argument that has not been effectively disproved. The ending of *Crime & Punishment* is not the end of the discussion, just the latest word in an unfinished dialectic.

Plato's dialogues achieve philosophical ends similar to those in Dostoevsky's novels, but in an opposite fashion in terms of Iser's literary model. The question we ask in reading Dostoevsky's works becomes reversed when reading through Plato's: why is this philosophy here being overrun by a story filled with characters? In Plato, there are indeed "confirmative effects" all over the place, just as in most standard "expository texts" of philosophy. His Socrates is constantly trying to teach others something (or rather enable them to "recollect" [ἀναμνῄσκειν] it), whether that the soul is immortal, how one comes to find beauty, or just that we do not know as much as we think we know. In this respect, he is not much different from an author of philosophical treatises such as Martin Heidegger. In his *Being and Time*, he states in the pre-introductory comments exactly what he intends to do, that he is raising anew the "question of the meaning of Being" and that his "provisional aim is the Interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being" (19), and he continues in systematic fashion throughout the book to complete his task and elucidate for his readers his understanding of these matters. As we expect of him as a philosopher, he presents us a clear thesis which we can "accept or reject."

What Plato does in his dialogues that defies this model, however,
making it more like the literary work of Dostoevsky, is that, though there
generally is a thesis of some sort, it is based upon so many conditions which
immediately have little to do with the validity of the thesis itself that the
readers are not quite so free to accept or reject it. Whether or not those
conversing within the dialogues or the readers outside of it consider the
arguments that are raised to be sound, there is always something within the
dialogues that interferes with the direct philosophical approach and puts the
conclusions into question. These could be viewed as flaws in the texts, and
many of us, because of the variance from the straight systematic philosophy
that Socrates seems to promise every time, thus reject Plato as illogical and
faulty in his method. The fact that the expectations that Socrates (and Plato,
we suppose) raises of sound philosophical conclusions are not confirmed
shapes the entire way that we assess his dialogues. Whereas, initially,
Dostoevsky’s incorporation of unresolved philosophy into his literature,
specifically Crime & Punishment, seems incidental to the storyline which we
primarily seek, Plato’s unsoundly resolved arguments make us question the
very merit of his work.

An easy example of questionable yet not entirely dubitable conclusions
occurs in the Phaedo. Simmias and Cebes are unconvinced by Socrates’ early
arguments that the soul is immortal. Socrates summarizes their arguments:

Simmias, I believe, doubts and fears that the soul, though more
beautiful and divine than the body, may be a kind of harmony
and perish before it. Cebes, I think, agrees with me that the soul
is longer-lived, but doubts if anyone can be certain that it doesn’t
wear out many bodies and, in leaving the last, perish itself, so
that this—the soul’s destruction—would be death, since the body
never stops perishing. (87)17

Of course he goes on to placate them, but with arguments that, like many

17Σώματα μὲν γὰρ, ὡς θυμίζει, ἢπειρεῖ τα καὶ φοβεῖται μή ἢ ψυχή ὑμως καὶ θεότητα καὶ κάλλιον ὅν
tοῦ σώματος προαπολλύσθαι ἐν ἀρμονίας εἰςε ὅσα: ἦμεν δὲ μοι ἐδοξήτο τοῦτο μὲν ἠμοι συγχωρεῖν,
pολυποριστερὸν γε εἶναι ψυχὴν σώματος, ἄλλα τὸ γε ἐξῆλθον ποιοι, μὴσολὴ δὴ σώματα καὶ
πολλάκις κατατρίσασα ἢ ψυχή τὸ τελουταῖον σώμα καταλυτοῦσα νῦν ἢν ἀπολλύσθηται, καὶ ἢ ἀυτῷ
θέαντας, ψυχῆς ἠλεθροῦ, ἐκεῖ σώμα τε καὶ ἀπολλύμενον σώμα πιστεύει. (Phaedo 91c7-d7)
others of his, follow each from the one previous but in actuality do not seem to make our experiences of life any less obscure than before. He effectively disproves Simmias' analogy of the soul to a harmony, thus soothing Simmias' doubts whether the soul outlives the body. The effect of the argument, however, is achieved not by using another, superior analogy, but simply by turning Simmias' analogy around and claiming that, because it does not capture the soul's relationship to the body but is the opposite of how Simmias conceived it, then the conclusion must be the opposite of Simmias' and thus the soul must outlive the body. Yet it has never been established that there is any connection at all between the way lyres work and humans work, so such a reversal, though convincing, still hinges on Simmias' unproved assumption.

To Cebe's objections, Socrates runs through a string of opposite Forms and from them arrives again at the conclusion that the soul is indeed deathless. The process, though, is essentially semantic. The biggest problem with the argument for a non-Greek speaker is that the only response that Cebe could have given to Socrates' question, "what must be present in any body to make it live" (101), is ψυχή ("psyche") which is generally translated into English as "soul," but in Greek has meanings ranging from "soul" to "breath" or "life." So though the argument does not hold the same validity in English as in Greek, it would sound more logical to a Greek. However, the equating of physical opposites like hot and cold with metaphysical ones such as life and death (Dorler calls it an "inference from imperishable to immortal" [154]) is suspect in any language.

So we have a thesis (the soul is immortal) arising from the text, but its arguments do not hold up, so to accept it on Socrates' bases would be foolish. We could thus simply reject Socrates' thesis, but a simple rejection does not recognize that other factors are at work in bringing about his choice of arguments, one of those factors being that the arguments he uses have a lot to

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18 Ἀποκρίνου δὴ, ἢ δὲ ὡς, ὡς ἔστι άρκεται σώματι ζοῦν ἔσται; (Phaedo 105c9-10)
do with the context his interlocutors give him. We can consider what he could have said at points at which he strays from applicable logic, but we do not know how that might have changed the responses of his interlocutors. Yet we also cannot claim outright that the soul is not immortal solely because Socrates' arguments are not altogether valid, again because we have to take into account that the dramatic situation introduces a number of confounding factors that may have influenced the way in which the dialogists approached the argument. Perhaps were the situation not so urgent, they could have formulated more deliberately the arguments they presented, and perhaps Socrates would not have felt so compelled to convince himself that his convictions were correct instead of maintaining an air of objective distance as he usually does. And a very fundamental confound that we must also address is that this dialogue is not recounted by an omniscient narrator whose perceptions the readers can unquestionably trust. It is one of the observers of the dialogue (Phaedo) that tells its tale, so at all points we have to be aware of the perspective he assumes and the elements of uncertainty he brings to our experience of the arguments.

From this critique, three main factors arise in Plato's dialogues which defy the expectations raised from these supposedly philosophical texts and thus throw us out of our element in interpreting them: characters, dramatic context, and secondary narration. In Dostoevsky's fiction, these are the only elements in terms of which we can conceive of life. Ideas are subordinate to the characters for whom those ideas are an issue, and the characters are inevitably subject to their surroundings. There is no need, within Crime & Punishment, to answer the question whether there exists a being to whom all is permitted, because the only one to whom such a question has real bearing is Raskolnikov, and he comes up with as much of an answer as he needs to, based on his own guilt and the presences in his life of Sonia and Porfiry Petrovitch. And secondary (tertiary, etc.) narration brings an added element of mystery, a desirable quality in literature, to tales heightened beyond
everyday experience, such as the stories of "One Onion" and "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*. But Dostoevsky used other non-literary venues to vent his opinions on such philosophic and metaphysical issues, and in them he "was by no means a stranger to narrow-minded, one-sided seriousness, nor to dogmatism, nor even to eschatology" (Bakhtin 138).

The only outlet through which Plato chose to express his philosophical beliefs, though (other than in his *Letters*, which, if valid, tell us more about what he did not believe than what he did), were the dialogues, so any attempt to disguise his intentions in them seems peculiar. So again, why did he use such a form? Why did he arouse expectations of a confirmative philosophy yet employ elements that invalidate such a philosophy?

**a. characters**

We will first look at characters and how they influence the philosophical outcomes of the dialogues. It is not merely the use of characters *per se* in philosophical discourse that muddles its philosophical message. St. Augustine successfully employed a dummy interlocutor who would bring up to him possible problems of his philosophical propositions. But the way Plato uses characters makes them conspicuous as characters and as individuals, diverting the focus from the philosophy they are trying to discuss. In Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel" (Bakhtin 4), the focus is on the interrelation of humans and the growth that arises in them through one another: "Dostoevsky does not know, does not see, and does not represent the 'idea for its own sake' in the Platonic sense or the 'ideal existence' in the phenomenologists' sense" (26). So for him, a dialectical style seems natural. But Plato's "idea for its own sake" would seem to be compromised by such diversions, especially since one primary way these diversions occur is in the questions characters raise about Socrates' method of dialectic without receiving adequate reassurance that what Socrates is doing is aiming solely at
the truth. Meno voices the effect that many others of Socrates’ interlocutors (as well as readers) feel when, stupefied by Socrates’ refutation of his definition of virtue, he responds, "I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed" (12).²⁰ A few lines later, he claims Socrates to be like "the broad torpedo fish, for it too makes anyone who comes close and touches it feel numb . . . both my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you" (12-13).²¹

And in Book Six of the Republic, Adeimantus speaks for the other dialogue partners in expressing similar suspicions about Socrates’ method, though they cannot pinpoint any fault in his logic:

Socrates, no one could dispute what you say—your listeners are in the same position as always when you talk about this. They think that because of their inexperience at question and answer the argument leads them astray a little bit at a time until finally, when all the bits are collected, they find themselves lost in apparent contradiction to what they said at the start. (150)²²

This numbing trait of Socrates’ argumentation style is a primary issue in assessing his arguments’ general effects. Once Socrates is granted that one of the initial assumptions he makes in his arguments is valid, his power over language and logic helps him coast to conclusions that it is difficult for others to stay with, though he never seems to make a wrong move at any step. So initially it appears that Socrates is confirming the expectations that he raises early in each dialogue by making his way, point by point, from a hypothesis to a conclusion. Yet these internal challenges to his method make the

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¹⁹δέ γέ μοι δοκεῖς, γοντούς με καὶ ἀπεχρύζεις καταπάδεις, ὅποτε μεστὸν ἀπορίας γεγονέναι. (Meno 80a4-2-4)

²⁰καὶ δοκεῖς μοι παντελῶς . . . ὑμισῶτατος εἶναι τὸ τε εἶδος καὶ τὰ λόγα τῶν τῆς πλατείας νάρκης τῆς θελατίσεως καὶ γὰρ αὕτη τὸν καὶ πλησίασέντο τῇ κράτους καὶ κράτους ναρκήν ποιεῖ, καὶ οὗ δοκεῖς μοι νῦν ἐμὸς οἷς τοιούτων τὰ προηγηκέναι ναρκῶν: ἀληθῆς γὰρ ἤκου καὶ τὴν μνήμην καὶ τὸ στόμα ναρκῶ, καὶ οὐκ ἤχον ὑπ’ ἀποκρίσεως σοι. (80a4-b2)

²¹Ὡς Σώκρατες, ἡμέρα, πρὸς μὲν ταῦτα οὐκ ὀδύκει ἐν ὀφθόνι τ’ εἰπ’ ἐντεινέων. ἀλλὰ γὰρ τούτῳ τι πάσχοντες οἱ ἀκούοντες ἐκεῖστο καὶ οὗτοι λόγοςς ἤγοντο δὴ ἀπειρίαν τοῦ ἐρωτῶν καὶ ἀποκρίσεώς ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου ποι’ ἐκείνου τὸ ἐρωτημα τῶν σιμίτων παραγόμενοι, ἀδιαφοροῦντες τῶν σιμίτων ἐπὶ ταλαιπωρίας τοῦ λόγου μόνον τὸ σγαλίμα καὶ ἐναντίον τούς πρώτος ἀναφαίνεσθαι (Republic 487b1-7)
dialogues' "didactic purpose" suspect, and sometimes those challenges seem well justified. In the *Meno*, he attempts to defend his deconstruction of virtue, claiming that "I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others, but I am more perplexed than anyone when I cause perplexity in others" (13), which works in that case; but in the case of the *Republic*, when instead of trying to dismantle others' arguments he is trying to build his own (that philosophers should be running cities), he does not bother to respond to Adeimantus' accusations. Even to defend his slippery technique he employs a slippery technique. It is his use of such wily rhetoric that puts into question whether, in some respects, he might be no better than the Sophists for whom he holds such disdain, using his superior wits to make "the weaker argument prevail" (*Apology* 27), confusing others into submission.

A looming question of whether or not Socrates, in the eyes of his author, is arguing legitimately leaves uncertain whether we can be content with any expectations Socrates confirms. We can read Kirillov's assertion in *The Possessed* that "Life is pain, life is terror, and man is unhappy" (133) without projecting such a view upon Dostoevsky, because Kirillov's voice is acknowledged as just one in a milieu of voices that go into the composite of unpredictable personalities that lead to a literary work. But for an author of a primarily philosophical work to undermine the readers' confidence in the main mouthpiece of the philosophical message leaves the readers with difficult decisions as to whom they will trust. Were the character of Socrates not consciously distanced from the immediate perspective of the author, such a quandary would not arise.

And all the secondary characters seem to do is sidetrack the main argument, bring up subsidiary points, and eventually, by their internal affirmation, allow Socrates to conclude triumphantly with arguments which,
if argued in treatise fashion, might be lacking. And mention of such emotional reactions as Simmias' and Cebe's hesitation to question some of Socrates' assertions for fear of bringing up something he "may find unpleasant in [his] present misfortune" (Phaedo 81) only digresses from the main argument. The individual feelings and circumstances of rounded characters cannot help but color the discourse of philosophy and bring attention to it as a human endeavor, when it seemed that Socrates' search was for some understanding free of the subjectivity of the human experience.

b. context

The question of the dramatic context might be even bigger yet in its philosophical implications. What does it do for the argument? In the Phaedo, it adds an urgency to it which Cebe captures in his exhortation that "if Simmias here or anyone else has an objection, he'd better raise it now because I don't think he can postpone the discussion until some other time" (103). But is philosophy best practiced in urgent situations, or in calm deliberation? This urgency even touches the usually implacable objective air of the great Socrates:

I'm afraid that at present, I regard that very subject [immortality of the soul] not philosophically but tendentiously, like the completely uneducated. They too, when they argue about something, don't care about the truth of the matter; they just want to make their listeners believe that things are as they say. In my present circumstances I think I'll differ from them only in this: I'll be eager to make my views seem true not to

24πάλαι γὰρ ἦμεν ἐκείνοις ἐπορῶν τὸν ἐπειν προσθεὶς καὶ κελεύει ἐρεθεὶς διὰ τὸ ἐπιθυμεῖν μὲν ἀκούσαι, ὡς εἰς ὕψος ἐφεξῆς καὶ διὰ τὸν παροῦσαν συμφοράν. (Phaedo 84d5-7)

25 ἔννοια τοι ἡ Σιμμίας ὡς ἡ ζῆλος ἔχει λόγον, ἐν ἑαυτῇ μὴ καταστημάτισθαι ὡς τὰς σεὶς ἐνυπα τὰς ζῆλον καὶ πῶς ἀναβάλλοντο ἢ τὸν παρόντα, περὶ τῶν τοιούτων βουλομένως ἢ πρὸς εἰμέν ἢ ἀκούσα. (107a3-7)
my listeners--except incidentally--but to myself. (87)²⁶

In Crime & Punishment, as we have seen, the urgency of Raskolnikov's personal and legal dilemma does spoil the argument-for-its-own-sake. We never find an answer outside of the plot. Arieti sees the philosophy of Plato's works so similarly muddled by their dramatic context that he grants them no philosophical credence. He proposes that the Phaedo

is not about the immortality of the soul at all, but about the courage with which the noble Socrates met his death. We see then that the arguments had to fail, not only because we cannot in this life know about our souls' longevity after death, but because the drama of the dialogue requires them to fail. Only if the arguments fail can Socrates meet death with courage. What courage would be needed if he had actually proved the immortality and happy futurity of his soul? (4)

He may have a point. In that particular dialogue, personal sentiment and character strength are emphasized to such an extent that its philosophical emphasis is undermined.

But to view the dialogues, as a rule, as fundamentally dramatic, incidentally philosophical, is to ignore vast quantities of the texts. In the Republic, for instance, Socrates' argument does not have to fail to achieve some dramatic effect. Whether his system of government would be good or right or effective is beside the point for now: what is important is that there was something about the ruling of cities that Plato himself believed in enough that he was willing to risk his life to try to teach it to Dionysius II of Syracuse, or so his Epistle Seven tells us. In light of this political ambition,²⁷ it seems highly plausible that something of the published system that Socrates illustrates in the Republic might resemble the ideas that Plato himself had.

²⁶ἐκθετούντες ἢ ἐν ὑπορέην περὶ σοτικῆς τούτου σοι ὕποπτη εἴχη ἔδει ὠσπερ οἱ πάντες ἔπαιξαντο μελετέως. καὶ γὰρ ἔκθειν όταν περὶ τοῦ ἐμποτικοῦ, ὦτη μὲν ἔχει περὶ δόν ὢν ὅ λόγος ἢ οὐ φρονεῖται, ὦτις δὲ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ἐκεῖνον τεῦτα δόξαι τοῖς παραβέβαιναι τούτῳ ποιεῖται προθυμόστης. καὶ γὰρ μοι δέκας ἐν ὑπορέην τοσοῦτοι μόνον ἔκθειν διὸς ὀνομάζων σύν ὧν ὡς ὀνομαζόν τοὺς παρακαλεῖν ἔλεγεν ἢ χείρ ἀλλ' ὡς ὀφθαλμοὶ ἐμοὶ ἢ μάλιστα δόξαι οὕτως ἔχειν. (91a1-b1)

²⁷His "ambition" is not in the sense of a quest for personal aggrandizement, though: it seems that Plato's intentions were more closely based on beliefs that he might benefit the pólas by his system.
Certainly such moving stories in the dialogue as the simile of the cave and the depiction of the ideal republic have a strong dramatic effect. But since with them there appears a significant element of philosophical intention on Plato's part, it seems unfair and short-sighted to assume that a similar intent does not exist in the *Phaedo*, hidden behind all of the development of the irrepressible character of Socrates and the compassionate reactions to his imminent loss that the other characters display.

What we come to find as we search for the "consistent, configurative meaning" to Plato's dialogues that is "essential for the apprehension of an unfamiliar experience" (Iser 1226) is that, in fact, we find ourselves with only a better understanding of all the "alien associations" that we must incorporate in order to comprehend what we are experiencing in reading them. What we must come to accept is the fundamental effect that the literary nature of the dialogues plays on their philosophical interpretation. The dashing of our expectations of Plato's works as the untainted philosophy they claim to be, and the confounding factors that developed characters and eventful context introduce to the expectations of philosophical truths that we thought we could trust Socrates to confirm, leave us marooned from our realm of understanding and searching for answers. Such a method which these dialogues employ certainly "activates our own faculties, enabling us to recreate the world it presents," which Iser claims is a trait of a literary text (1222), by leaving us without the grand answers we sought, but rather with a world of characters whose lives we must enter in order to glean any significance at all from the dialogues.

*c. narration*

Entering their lives becomes even further problematic when we consider as well the use of distance between the actual events of a dialogue and the narrator's account of it. Though subtle, it may play as significant a
role in the interpretation of our texts as either the characters or the dramatic context. The dialogues use this technique fairly often, in at least three besides the *Phaedo*. In the *Theaetetus*, Euclid's servant reads Socrates' dialogue with Theaetetus and Theodorus out loud to Euclid and Terpsion from a manuscript based on notes that Euclid had taken shortly after talking to Socrates, who originally told him of the events that had taken place, and who later reminded him of parts of the dialogue that Euclid had forgotten to write down. This scenario seems particularly to play upon Plato's expressed disrespect for written words. Not only does the portrayed philosophy face the ignominy of being put into written form once; the written form itself is also based on another written guide, which is further based on a preliminary sketch. And the *Timaeus* makes an accurate representation of the actual events seem ridiculous even to consider. The narrator of the argument, Critias the Younger, who is "about thirty" during the conversation (Taylor 57), is giving a fifth-hand account of a tale that his grandfather, at age ninety, told him when Critias was ten (20e) [29]. And he claims that he is not certain "whether he could recall to mind all that I heard yesterday; but as to the account I heard a great time ago, I should be immensely surprised if a single detail of it has escaped me" (45).\(^{28}\) A.E. Taylor thinks it hyperbole on Critias' part to say that he cannot remember what happened yesterday (57), and that may be what Critias intends; it brings to light, though, what appears to be a fairly basic belief of Plato's: when people try to speak of events they remember, what they remember is generally not quite accurate.

This comes to light even more explicitly in the *Symposium*. From the start, the dialogue plays on methods of discourse and the problem of veracity in them, which are basic to a proper understanding of the texts we read. Even in the first few lines, Apollodorus says "I should be able to tell you the story--

\(^{28}\) ἐγὼ γὰρ ἐμὲν χθὲς ἔκακος, οὐκ ἐν οἷς εἰ δυναμήν ἔκακην ἐν μνήμῃ πάλιν λαβέων τεῦτα ἐκ τῶν πάμπολαν χρόνων διακήκοις, παντεῖπαν θεομάσωμεν ἐν εἰ μὲν ἀκόλου ὀπαξόμεθα. (*Timaeus* 26b4-7)
I've practiced it enough" (1), setting a framework that shows up again and again throughout the dialogue. With whatever is said by any character in any context, the reader has first to take into account that there is not an omniscient narrator at work, but one who acknowledges an imperfection to himself that puts every speech into question.

The central ways in which the narrator's account of this dialogue might be suspect are not at all shrouded in mystery, either. The effects that time, a succession of narrators, and each of the narrators' personal factors contribute to the transmission of the story are clearly displayed, and even the issue at the very root of the problem of narration in Plato, memory itself, is addressed far more explicitly here than in any of the other dialogues. Though the philosophical implications of the Symposium are not as weighty as those of other dialogues, such as the Phaedo, its open, even exaggerated dealing with the intonations of narration discloses that Plato was aware of its force. Thus we can take indications about its role in Plato's philosophy from the Symposium and apply them and their implications to other dialogues that touch more subtly upon it.

It is easy to assume without much thought that, as in the Timaeus, factors of time and the succession of narrators are going to undermine somewhat the validity of this recounting of the Symposium's story. We learn just a few lines into the dialogue that Apollodorus was not at the party whose tale he will tell, that he heard about it from Aristodemus, and that easy arithmetic based on the historical context suggests that the party happened quite a few years ago. Even if Greeks of the time took particular pride in their memories, they would likely acknowledge that elements of this story are probably compromised by these factors, especially since Aristodemus was drunk when witnessing all of the speeches and conversations that he later related to Apollodorus. But what does this matter, we might ask. These

29 ἄκαρτο μοι πρὶν ἐν παρδάνας τῶν ἐμπνεύσεως εῖναι (Symposium 172a1-2)

30 Larson, in his translation of the Symposium, surmises that it has been about fourteen years between Apollodorus' telling here and the actual party of which he speaks (2n).
components simply contribute to the farcical, carnival-like tone that pervades the work.

Memory is addressed in a less light-hearted manner, though, in one of the few sections of the dialogue tinged with notably little silliness or irony. In Diotima's speech about Love, we note a direct hint that Plato may have agreed with Iser that "The memory evoked . . . can never resume its original shape, for this would mean that memory and perception were identical, which is manifestly not so" (Iser 1222). "What we call 'practice,' or 'reviewing,' exists because knowledge departs," says Diotima. "Forgetting is the departure of knowledge; reviewing preserves knowledge by implanting a fresh seemingly identical memory to replace a departing one" (Symposium 36) (italics mine).31 The difference between calling the memory "seemingly identical" (τὴν σωτήν δοκεῖν εἶναι) and "identical" (τὴν σωτήν εἶναι) is enough to suggest that, even if Plato did not agree with Diotima's view of the slight imperfection of memory, he was at least aware of it as an issue. Granted, her speech occurs in the same context of bumbling remembrance whose narrative content distances it from the philosophical intent of the author, and it actually exaggerates the distance further since Socrates, in relating her speech, acts as another link in the established chain of narrators.

What must remain clear, though, is that attitudes that Socrates or any other charcters express in the dialogues are not necessarily disqualified by the dramatic or narrative context or Plato's own disclaimers as those with which Plato would agree. They mask any direct attribution to him of the portrayed ideas, but if the ideas show up consistently enough in the context as well as the text, we might more confidently consider those ideas to be among those that we would associate with the Platonic corpus as a whole (as opposed to the attitudes of the historical Plato). And certainly memory as a central matter in non-omniscient narration does show up in the context, as the Theaetetus,

31 ὁ γὰρ καλεῖται μελέτην, ὥς ἔξωσεν ἡττὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης· λήθη γὰρ ἐπιστήμης ἔξοδος, μελέτη ἡ ἔποιν καιῆν ἐμποιοῦσα ἀνὴρ τῆς ἐπιστήμης μνήμην σύζει τῇ ἐπιστήμῃ, ὡσε τὴν αὐτὴν δοκεῖν εἶναι (Symposium 208a3-7) (italics mine)
Timaeus, and the rest of the Symposium exhibit.

The narrator of the first is so uncertain of his ability to remember accurately the dialogue of which Socrates had told him that he wrote down what he recalled of it as soon as he was able and went back to Socrates a number of times to have his memory refreshed. This tells us in practice, where Diotima told us explicitly, that, in Plato’s works, accurate memory cannot simply be assumed. We should be apprehensive about whether we are being told the tales as they appeared at the time. The latter two dialogues obviously undermine the highest accuracy of their tales by clouding them with time and an entirely human, imperfect narrator, sometimes one not even recounting events he has witnessed personally.

Starting with the basic assumption that Diotima and Euclid supply us, that memory is not to be taken for granted, we can examine how Plato might specifically have conceived of human memory being compromised by time and personal factors in the Theaetetus, Timaeus, and Symposium. As Plato asserts in his Epistle Seven and addresses also in Socrates’ condemnation of poetry in the Phaedrus, whenever any given person attempts to translate her or his perceptions into words, there is going to be a loss in the translation. The world does not correspond to precise words: we have to fit it into them, even if that means the fit will be imprecise.

The translation of those words from one moment in time to the next also intones a subtle, yet significant shift in meaning, as Diotima claims. As beings who are "becoming" (γενόμενοι),\textsuperscript{32} constantly changing and being influenced by our environments, we cannot claim to cling to the same connotations for the same words we use from one minute to the next. There is always a translation in our language from ourselves at one moment to ourselves at the next.

Keeping this in mind, to try to bring across the same meaning to another being then becomes a significant task. The words of one never carry

\textsuperscript{32} This is how Plato frequently refers to humans. I will address it more completely in Part 6.
quite the same weight in the personal language of another. To use the same words in another person's language will never carry across the same meaning as it did in the first person's. And to try to translate the spirit of the first person's discourse to the second person's personal language might be even more hazardous to the accuracy of the original.

So to use any narration at all, as Plato makes clear in his *Epistle Seven*, is going to cause problems. But to put the burden of narration upon a character within the text whom we know is not omniscient makes whatever he or she will try to bring across suspect as regards its fidelity to the original scenario that is supposedly being recounted. Especially when the narrator is bringing across something which Plato considers as fragile as philosophy, the attention placed upon her or him as storyteller should rightly raise the readers' suspicions as to the faith of the portrayed work to the original words of each speaker, much less to Plato himself.

So even in the *Phaedo*, although Phaedo's competence and accuracy as a narrator are not dwelt upon, we have to hold in the backs of our minds the peculiar narrative situation of the *Symposium*, which, along with the *Phaedo*, is dated as one of Plato's Middle Dialogues, and consider the confounding power of narration that Plato exhibits. The *Theaetetus* and *Timaeus* were likely written after the *Phaedo*, but their aping of narration's role in the dialogues, since it had been earlier employed in the *Symposium*, also suggests that Plato likely had at least similar ideas of it when he was writing the *Phaedo*.

What all this establishes is that his play on narration and its essential role in any discourse is the element which acknowledges beyond question the need to step back from Plato's dialogues, primarily those with multiple levels of narration, and recognize the central position that literary techniques occupy in any accurate appraisal of his philosophy. We are forced to take something of a circumspect view of the narrative situation and the arguments presented and maintain an essential skepticism and distance from them; we are not free
instantly to accept a judgment on any of the dialogists or the arguments as sound, but rather must look at them in a less distinct picture and contemplate them from there.

The ideas that we note, then, in these indirect dialogues cannot be attributed directly to anyone; they become ideas without sponsorship, the cogency of which we must decide for ourselves. It is that effect that makes Dostoevsky's "The Grand Inquisitor" so haunting: Dostoevsky the author initially distances himself from The Brothers Karamazov by assigning the general narration to a character removed from the main plot; that character narrates the story that Ivan supposedly told Alyosha; Ivan distances himself from the implications of the story first by claiming that he is merely reciting something which "about a year or so ago I composed" (296), secondly by having his Grand Inquisitor character, not himself, say everything provocative, and thirdly by suggesting that "perhaps [the Grand Inquisitor] was just having hallucinations, which can easily happen to a ninety-year-old man close to death, and what's more, excited by the previous day's burning at the stake of a hundred heretics" (302); and even the Grand Inquisitor himself "narrates the sayings of his own absolute projection, the Devil" (Belknap 104). Its inability to be pinned down to the attitudes of anyone in particular gives this tale a special element of transcendence above any treatise form in which it might be put. If Dostoevsky had merely published an article in which he claimed, as the Grand Inquisitor does on 311, that

Freedom, free-thinking, and science will lead men into such confusion and confront them with such dilemmas and insoluble riddles that the fierce and rebellious will destroy one another; others who are rebellious but weaker will destroy themselves, while the weakest and most miserable will crawl to our feet and cry to us: "Yes, you were right. You alone possessed His secret, and we have come back to you. Save us from ourselves!",

the effect would not have been as strong. Someone could have opposed him just as eloquently. But because, in the way the story of the "Grand Inquisitor" is presented, no one is outwardly claiming to be right because it is an "artistic
representation of an idea," it holds a unique power "beyond confirmation and negation" (Bakhtin 65).

Yet "confirmation and negation" have benefits too; they make for a much less ambiguous world. When we read in Being and Time that "Being-anxious discloses primordially and directly the world as world" (232), we are comforted to take for granted that we can attribute such a statement to Martin Heidegger, the twentieth-century German philosopher, and thus we might take it particularly seriously and trust its wisdom because its author is to be respected. But when we read in the Phaedo that "soul is above all immortal and indestructible" (103),33 we cannot so confidently, in light of what we understand about secondary narration, claim that the words are clearly Socrates', though the dialogue attributes them to him. Even less can we attribute them to Plato the philosopher. The only one to whom we can genuinely attribute those words is to Plato the author of this written work. And we do not even know if he meant them.

In this distinction, we see again how the Phaedo plays on expectations, on the fact that we expect to be able to believe the philosophical reasoning of the great Socrates, but, in the reality of Plato's portrayal, before we trust the Socrates of the dialogue we have to trust the one who is re-telling his story and the one who is recording it for a particular dramatic effect. But the example of "The Grand Inquisitor" also illuminates a new realm of power that is opened up to the dialogues by their frequent use of multiple levels of narration. Whereas many acknowledge that Plato's numerous myths "aim at capturing our emotive, imaginative nature instead of our rational one" (Dorfer 195), the indirect dialogues, along the lines of "The Grand Inquisitor," themselves become subtly mythical, difficult to confirm or deny, difficult to nail down, very literary in their denial of expectations.

33 Παράδειγμα μάλλον ... ψυχή άθανατον και άναληθον (Phaedo 106e9-107a1)
4. intentions

Having discerned that Plato's dialogues are not purely philosophical treatises, we now can begin to consider Plato's possible intent with his extensive use, under the guise of philosophy, of these particular literary techniques: "shattering" our expectations that we are reading straightforward philosophy; toying with confirmative effects only to expose their inadequacy as such by introducing characters and drama which regularly confound any philosophical message we might hope to take or even deny; and even employing strings of narrators to distance, from time to time, the philosophical intention further away not even from just himself, but from Socrates as well. Rosen postulates that, for Plato

philosophy is a condition of the psyche and so a way of life, rather than solely a system of true propositions. The mode of writing peculiar to philosophy is the dramatic portrait of individual human types confronted by a disguised Socrates. (xlviii)

And since humans dwell "within the domain of opinion, an accurate portrait of philosophy must reflect its context, or the manner in which it emerges in human life" (I). That means that people who study philosophy do not always do it flawlessly and distinctly from their emotions and contexts. Rosen also introduces the idea that Plato may indeed, through the workings of his ironic poetics, be "forcing men to think for themselves" (l iii), eventually asserting that "A dialogue is the articulation of a question into a family of questions" (197).

Hyland takes the question of why Plato wrote dialogues a step further, beyond bracketed acknowledgments that it does somehow effect the nature of the philosophical discourse which arises, to hypotheses as to what the "serious philosophic, not primarily artistic" significance was (38). He interprets Socrates' mention in the Phaedrus of written documents making one forgetful as being consistent with Plato's written corpus, since the
"Platonic dialogue does not enable us to 'forget to philosophize' by dwelling endlessly on textual subtleties because the very function of the dialogue, manifested most clearly in the 'aporia' dialogues, is to drive the reader beyond the dialogue itself" (40). Hyland further suggests that this going beyond the dialogue "must be done in terms of the dialogue itself," and that in the quest to understand the dialectic between the various contradictory views of the interlocutors in Plato's works, "an insight into something like a 'Platonic teaching' will emerge" (40).

He then fleshes out his argument, proposing that the dialogue form suits Plato's view of philosophy because, for him, "philosophy was not entirely propositional," but rather too intimately connected to human experience to be divorced from it in the discourse of philosophy (42). He contends that

the traditional dichotomy between Plato the philosopher . . . and Plato the artist . . . simply will not do; because Plato is denying the very conception of philosophy as 'arguments' (a series of propositions) which allows the dichotomy. (42-3)

He claims that the dialogues are simply philosophical works of art, to be taken not as the sum of artistic and philosophical parts but as wholes. As works of art, they are, in internal consistency with other Platonic claims, imitations, "three removes from reality" (43). But "like the best works of art, these imitations may lead the beholder to the reality itself. The image of philosophy which is presented in the dialogues may lead us to be philosophers" (43).

This is a terribly attractive concept, that the words on the pages of Plato's texts somehow transcend their finite value in order to change not just how readers of the texts think about whatever issues Plato is addressing in particular, but also to change the way these readers think in general. What Hyland claims is that Plato, in his dialogues, is not talking about what virtue really is (as in the Meno), or what justice is (the Republic), or what love is (the Symposium), as much as he is hinting at what philosophy itself is. On a
simple level, philosophy itself, to Plato, is not about a single person sitting alone in a room, writing his or her opinions of the workings of the world, and letting an audience take it and be enlightened. It has more to do with the interactions with other people which engender questions of one's world and its significance, and which spark insights that illuminate a consciousness of matters beyond merely the immediate matters with which we concern ourselves.

5. audience

What all this development of Plato as a literary artist in the fashion of Dostoevsky primarily affirms is that he was working with an audience in mind, that he was employing a form that is incomplete without the interaction of the reader. Iser speaks of such a form in terms of "text" and "work" (1219). The "text" is the actual words on the pages, the concrete, substantial product of the author's pen or typewriter. The "work" is that which comes about when the reader interacts with the text, giving the text a life bigger than itself: "The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized. . . . The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (1219). More than most philosophers, who more generally write what they see as the truth and let the readers read and learn, Plato, like Dostoevsky, tailors his work more toward the experience of the reader.

They both strive to "activat[e] our own faculties [as readers], enabling us to recreate the world [they] present" (Iser 1222). By giving us no answers, or better yet, by giving us answers that force us to question them, we as readers are forced to become a part of the dialogue, to make the next objection, or to put it in terms of our own world, to apply the dialectic to our own experience, to find the Thrasymachoses and Grand Inquisitors, or even the Alyoshas and Socrateses, in our own lives and engage them in a similar dialogue.
This audience-conscious form, in placing much of the responsibility for manifesting textual significance upon its readers, grants that no reading can ever exhaust the full potential [of any text], for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. (Iser 1223)

The author acknowledges through this process that everything he or she means and understands is not going to get through to all the readers, and in fact some of it will not be realized at all. For Dostoevsky, part of his reasoning for keeping his "answers" from the reader was a simple respect for his own characters, which admits also of a respect for the humans that would be reading his style.

Whether he may have sanctioned their actions outside of a literary setting or not, he made each of his characters into "the carrier of a full-valued word, not the dumb voiceless object of the author's word" (Bakhtin 52). He took pains to make sure that this "carrier" of a word was not simply a type but rather an "integrated point of view...[an] integrated notion of a personality" (76). As such, to try to characterize these individuals psychologically from a third person position was, to Dostoevsky, to oversimplify vastly: "In every person there is something which only he himself can reveal in a voluntary act of self-consciousness and expression, something which is not amenable to an externalizing definition" (47). Such a feeling shows up a number of times in his novels, and is one topic about which there seems little room for debate. "[I]t is very crude to look into a man's soul that way and judge him as you judge Hippolite," says Aglaya to Myshkin in The Idiot after Myshkin analyzes the motivations for Hippolite's suicide attempt. "You have no tenderness; nothing but truth and so you are unfair" (445). And in The Brothers, Lise scolds Alyosha for attempting to project Snegirev's future actions based on an analysis of his motivations: "isn't there in all this analysis . . . a certain contempt for that unhappy man, just in the way we allow ourselves to
examine his soul as if from somewhere high above...?" (260). In Dostoevsky's works, an individual cannot be analyzed from without but can make personal revelations of a state of mind or being at a given time only, always subject to change. There is not a stagnancy to his characters, but an extreme subjective vitality, a humanity, that analysis insults.

This respectful treatment of his characters intones a similar attitude toward his audience. They also are not constantly the same, but change and grow with experience and realization. It is the highest compliment Dostoevsky can pay them to allow them to form their own interpretation of his fiction which can only be "selective" as to any meaning it chooses at a given time (Iser 1223).

What Plato accomplishes with this method is to take Socrates' philosophy (and probably his own), which is large and manifold and able to be comprehended only during great flashes of insight, and bring it to a level that his readers can respond to and build upon. His method acknowledges that "the reader will strive, even if unconsciously, to fit everything together in a consistent pattern" (1225) "through a perspective that is continually on the move" (1223), a process antithetical to the unchanging philosophy, embodied in the Forms, that is behind everything that Plato writes, and which he also claimed was one of the problems in writing down philosophy. So what does he achieve by putting philosophy into literature, which recognizes "the text as a living event" (1229)?

6. applications

Important in understanding any apparent intention behind Plato's use of literature in philosophy is the way that Socrates speaks of his audience, in terms of γεννήμενος ("becoming"), as opposed to ὄν ("being"), which is the nature of the Forms. This "becoming" has everything to do with the way
people trapped within a body tend to live: it manifests itself in eating, drinking, viewing, hearing: everything we take in via the senses. Fascination with the physical world and its pleasures distracts our souls from concentration on the things that are. So education, according to Socrates, should have as its goal to "turn the whole soul and its organ of learning away from becoming until it faces being and can endure contemplating the brightest of what is" (Republic 179). The method of this education is through dialectics:

dialectics is the only method that advances this way—by demolishing assumptions—up to the source itself to secure confirmation; it gently drags the eye of the soul out of the odious ooze in which it lies buried and leads it upward, using the studies we've gone through as helpers for turning the soul around. (Republic 193)

A gentler side of the philosophical quest for "being," flattering, though, to the human as "becoming," comes across in the Phaedrus and Symposium. Some sort of "inspired madness" (Phaedrus 469), "the best and of the highest origin" of which Socrates links to Love (483), is also acknowledged as playing a part in the eventual contemplation of the divine Forms. A lover, when she or he "sees the beauty on earth, remembering the true beauty," longs to take flight in the chariot of the soul and commune once again with it (483).

Though the souls of all human beings have "by the law of nature

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34ον δή τι ψυχή έκ του γνωσμένου περιεκτέον έναι, έως άν είς τό διν και του άντων τό φανέται διονυσία γένεται άναπαράστασις θεωμένη: (Republic 518c8-10)

35ή διαλεκτική μέθοδος μόνη τούτη πορεύεται, τάς ὑποθέσεις δυναμόντα, ἢν' εὐθύνῃ τὴν αρχὴν ίσω βεβαιώνηται, καὶ τῷ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀκροατικοῦ τιν ἢ σε ψυχής ὅμα κατορθομενονημένα ἔλθει καὶ ἔνοχες ἦκεν, συνεργόντας καὶ συμπερισσομενος χρωμένη ἀλλὰ δηλαπεμινην τέχνης: (Republic 533c7-d4)

36μανίας γνωσμένης ἀπ’ θεῶν (Phaedrus 245b1)

37σιτη ποιῶν τῶν ἐνθουσασόμενων ἀρίστη τε καὶ έκ ἀρίστων τῷ τῇ ἡχοῖ καὶ τῷ κοινωνοῦντι σωτηρί γύρευται, καὶ ἐπὶ τευτών μετέχον τῆς μανίας ὁ ὅρος τῶν καθὼν ὑποστηθης καλεῖται. (249e1-5)

38"Εστιν δὴ οὖν δεύτερον τῆς ἡμῶν λόγου περί τῆς τετάρτης μανίας, ἣν ἔχει τὸ τῆς τῆς ἀνθρώπων καθώς, τού ἀληθείας ἀνακριβοσκόμενος, περιτῶθα ταὶ καὶ ἀναπτυχόμενος προθυμοσκόμενος ἀναπτύχθηκε, ἐ∂ικοκαθίζεται δὲ ὡς ἐκ πρὸ τοῦ βλέπον σωτηρί, τῶν κατὰ δὲ ἀνθρώπων, οἷαν ἔκει ὡς μανικοῦς διηκολόμενος. (Phaedrus 249d5-e1). The simile of the chariot of the soul is illustrated in Phaedrus 246a4-249d4 (471-493).
beheld the realities" (483),\(^9\) recollection of each is not similarly easy. Beauty happens to be more visible to humans through sight, "the sharpest of the physical senses" (485),\(^a\) than are "justice or temperance and the other ideas which are precious to souls" (485),\(^a\) and so it arouses the strongest feelings in us, intangible feelings of madness occasioned by our excitement at beholding a close reflection of a Form. Beauty is not itself transcendent over the other Forms, for "wisdom" and "the other lovely realities" would "arouse terrible love" if they could be seen as beauty is (485)\(^a\): beauty just happens to be the Form which we humans can most readily recognize, and thus it is the object of the pursuit of our Love.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima specifies that this Love "is necessarily the love of immortality" (35),\(^a\) which is seen obviously in the desire to reproduce which often accompanies Love. But, strangely, she adds that

> Even the individual, though each creature is said to be the same throughout its life ... is constantly being renewed, and old attributes are being destroyed ... All mortal creatures are preserved the same way: not by remaining exactly the same forever like a god, but by each aging and departing individual always leaving behind a new, different one like himself. That's the device, Socrates, by which mortals partake of immortality. (36)\(^a\)

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39ἐπάσας τὸν ἀνθρώπον ψυχή τόσοι τεθέται τὰ ὑπάτα (249e5-6)

40δύναται γὰρ ἢ μὴν ὁμιλάται τῶν διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἧρκεται αἰσθήσεων (250d4-5)

41ἐπειδήσεως μὲνοῦ καὶ σωφροσύνης, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τίμια ψυχής (250b1-2)

42φρόνησις ... δεινοῦ γὰρ ἐν παρεχθὲν ἐρωτεύεται, εἰ τι τοιοῦτον ἐαυτής ἐναπόθεκε εἰς ὅμιλον παρεχθέντος εἰς ὅμιλον ἢ ὅμιλον τίμων --καὶ τέλλα τίμων ἢ ἀκρατείας (Phaedrus 250d5-8)

43ἀναγκαῖον δὴ ἐκ τούτου τοῦ λόγου καὶ τῆς ἀθεουκασίας τὸν ἱερωτάτον εἶναι. (Symposium 207a3-4)

44ἐπει δὲ καὶ ὅτι ἐν ἔκκεντρον τῶν ζῷων ζῆν καλεῖται καὶ εἶναι τὸ σώματος --ὅσον ἐκ παθαιρέσεως ὁ σῶματος λήγεται ὡς ἐν προσβάσεις γενίσται σῶματι μένονος ὑπόθεται ἀκρατείας τῶν σώματων ἐν τούτῳ ἢμων ὁ σῶματος λήγεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν ἔκκεντρον, ἤττο τὴν ἁπαλλάσσειν τῶν ἄθεους ἀκρατείας, τις δὲ ἀποκλαίειν ... τοῦτο γὰρ τῷ ἐπὶ πάντων πάντων τὸ νηπιαῖον αἰτίαται, οὐ τῷ παντόκρατον τὸ σωματικόν καὶ εἶναι ὅπως τῷ θεῖον, ἡγεῖσθαι τῷ ἀκρατοῦ καὶ παθαιρέσεως ἔτερον ὅμιλον ἵστορείαι τὰ ὅμιλα ἢν τοῦτο ποταμός τῆς ἀθεουκασίας μετέχει (207d4-8, 208a7-b3)
the world, humans as "becoming" are viewed in a more favorable light:
without even realizing it, they have the mechanism for attaining immortality
and practicing it as they live.

Diotima also proposes a way in which we can take this raw,
unstructured madness of Love, experienced outside of spoken dialectics, and
incorporate it into a dialectical style as a way of consciously finding truth.
Diotima claims that those who would "approach love properly" must be
couraged to follow a path by which they first note the beauty of a single
body and love it, then notice the beauty of all bodies and think their previous
appreciation of one to be hollow; then notice the beauty of all things upon
frustration with the limits of the beauty of the one previous, until finally they
might note that which, in reality, they sought from the start: the beautiful
itself (210a4-211d1) [38-39].

So based on these two acknowledged means of searching for truth, we
might wish to apply them to our interpretation of the dialogues as
philosophical in a literary sense. We might wish to look at them first in
terms of the Republic's method, in which we judge the merits of the
dialogues in terms of their strict educational value as simulations of the
dialectic. In the Phaedo, this leads to some tricky conclusions. On 91c1-2,
Socrates exhorts his interlocutors, "think little of Socrates but much of the
truth, and if my ideas seem true you'll agree; if not, resist every argument"
(87). In this case, the implications of disagreeing with Socrates are much
greater than in the contexts of most of the dialogues. In Book Ten of the
Republic, for instance, Socrates cautions the others that "we mustn't honor a
man above the truth" (252), but Homer, to whom he was referring, was not
going to be threatened particularly one way or another by the actions and
judgments of these men hypothesizing about his place in the ideal republic.

45 ομιλιούσαν διδάσκαλον Ὀνομάζοντο, τῆς δὲ ἀλήθειας πολὺ μᾶλλον, ἓν μὲν τὰ ὅμως ἀλήθεις
λέγειν, συνομολογήσατε, εἰ δὲ μὴ, ποινή λόγῳ ἀντιπάλευστε (Phaedo 91c1-3)
46ού γὰρ πρὸ κτῆς ἀλήθειας τοιοῦτος ἀνήρ (Republic 595c2-3)
But for Socrates, his argument for the immortality of the soul is, as Prof. Gene Garver mentioned in a lecture this spring, "the argument of his life" (Garver). The life of Socrates is either vindicated or undermined by the outcome of the soul after death. If the soul is immortal, then everything he has said can be valid. If not, then the basis for all of his propositions is eliminated. All the elements most crucial to Socrates' philosophy are based on the soul's primary immortality: recollection, the Forms, even the purpose of the dialectic itself. If he is wrong in this regard, then everything that he had previously postulated based on it is also wrong.

The simple fact, though, is that Socrates' arguments are not perfect. Based solely on their logical value, we are going to emerge unconvinced by his words. As Prof. Garver noted, there is a conflict in the Phaedo between belief in the argument itself and trust in Socrates, who is putting forth the argument in a situation of extreme urgency. Since the argument is the test of Socrates' whole life, though, the tendency is to be drawn into arguments that would otherwise be unconvincing simply for the sake of each interlocutor's and each reader's need to believe that if anybody is going to be right, it must be Socrates. That is a function of Plato's artistry, to create a tension that thus closely links the strict argument and the emotional connection of the audience to it.

Yet, as we noted above, philosophy in Plato's works is not separate from the dramatic or literary situation in which he might present it. We cannot remove the drama and ponder the arguments separately; we must interpret them as they arrive in context. If the dramatic situation links the character of Socrates almost inseparably with the arguments he presents, then we take Socrates as we would take his words. So, in the spirit of the dialectic as presented in the Republic, if we disagree with or even question the conclusions on immortality reached by Socrates, we disagree with or question

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47 This conflict is based on the capacity of πίστις or πίθυμα, forms of which Plato uses in this dialogue "with the frequency and regularity of a leitmotiv" (Dorier 94), to intone either "belief" in an argument or "trust" in a person.
the whole life of this character for whom we likely have come to feel quite a fondness, one whom Phaedo accounts as "the best, the wisest, and the most just of his time" (113), whom even Plato himself calls "the most just of men then living" in his Epistle Seven (479).

Yet it seems that this is what Plato calls us to do, if the rest of his dialectical corpus is at all valid. We must loose all of our moorings as we enter into the true understanding of philosophy. Just as Socrates illustrates in the Meno that we cannot believe our unfounded assumptions about virtue, we also cannot maintain absolute faith even in a man such as Socrates. The path of philosophy is unique to each who follows it, and to maintain fundamental assumptions about the nature of things was antithetical to Socrates' (and Plato's) view of philosophy. Thus Socrates encourages Simmias' doubts about the veracity of the conclusions about immortality that Socrates has reached: "You should also examine our original assumptions more carefully, even if they seem trustworthy to you" (103). Philosophy for Socrates and Plato was the continuing quest for answers, not the answers themselves. Even the very Forms, which are Socrates' standby and basis for everything else, come under siege eventually (in the Parmenides); for that matter, so does being itself (in that same dialogue). If the philosophical function of each dialogue is, as we quoted Hyland earlier, to "drive the reader beyond the dialogue itself" (40), we become painfully aware in the Phaedo that we must submit even our fondness for and trust in Socrates to the greater dialectical quest for truth.

The dialectical search for beauty that Diotima presents also supports such conclusions and even can be used as an explanation of the conflict between Plato's expressed disrespect for the written word and the fact that he

48 τούς τοὺς δὲ τὸν ἐπιφανήμενον δρίστου καὶ ἕλλος ἱπταμένων καὶ δικαιοτάτου. (Phaedo 118a16-17)

49 Σωκράτω, δ'un ἐγὼ σχεδόν οὐκ ἐν καίσχυνομεν εἰπών δικαιοτάτου εἶναι τοὺς τοὺς (Epistle Seven 324 e1-2).

50 οὗ μόνον γ', ἔθη, ὁ Σμίλια, ὁ Σωκράτης, ἀλλὰ τούτα τε εὗ λέγει καὶ τάς τις ὑποθέσεις τᾶς πρώτας, καὶ εἰ πισταὶ φήμεν εἰςν, δόματος ἐπισκεπτόμεαι σαφέστερον. (Phaedo 107b4-6).
did write. Her "hierarchy of disappointment,"\textsuperscript{51} which she applies to Love, plays out in similar fashion to humans' experiences of literary works in general and the dialogues in particular. We look for truth in the dialogues but continually find ourselves frustrated by the various levels of confusion within them. We find ourselves disagreeing with Socrates' arguments after they originally sounded so convincing, but then we consider the dramatic context and the effect it may have had. Might it validate his arguments? We cannot be sure, so we might finally, in anger, disregard them. But the message that Plato seems to be sending us through this process of frustration is that, even if Socrates' arguments would appear flawless, just as we are not going to find beauty itself through physical beings, we are not going to find truth itself through the imperfection of the written word. We have to search beyond it through different methods, holding it only as a model for our further search.

7. conclusions

Yet the frustrations themselves of reading the dialogues are not going to lead people to come to the realization, "on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark,"\textsuperscript{52} of the very truth they were looking for all the time. The dialogues act more as an introduction to frustration, leading all of us sight- and sound-fanciers toward something more permanent, giving us enough of a taste of the allure of philosophy that we are tempted, despite its disappointments, to continue on. They act as an introduction to ponder more about the ideas that the dialogues address, to try to come to some resolution about them, hack through all of the nonsense answers to more nonsense answers, and eventually to find that we are not going to find the Forms and

\textsuperscript{51} This phrase was coined by Fr. Rene McGraw, OSB, to capture the effect of reaching beauty only through constantly being frustrated in one's attempts to find it in the physical world.

\textsuperscript{52} See note 5.
perfect peace through our minds.

But what is particularly significant about the dialogues is that they do seem subtly to suggest this intangible process-oriented means of philosophical understanding. They suggest that a fuller understanding of the real message of the dialogues comes with each new perspective we assume in regard to them and that each new perspective is a hint at another at the next level. Yet as processes, the dialogues seem to acknowledge the individual sovereignty of each step along their indescript continua. We are at any time free not to search for meaning in the dialogues beyond their value as charming stories about a clever man. We are similarly free at any time to view them as The Word, the truth, without seeking to challenge them. And we are free to doubt, free to side with Thrasymachos and Gorgias against Socrates without searching for significance in their interplay. The texts leave room for these and any other number of attitudes toward them. Just as Dostoevsky makes Ivan Karamazov, with all "the hell in [his] heart and [his] head" (Brothers 317) no less attractive than his personal favorite, Alyosha, Plato, while making Socrates his clear hero, leaves room for other views, but in a more insidious, maybe even more literary manner than Dostoevsky.

The steps in Plato's process of understanding are sovereign, but always leave one questioning, always leave holes, do not quite fulfill one's Iserian "expectations," so one is compelled to go back to the texts, at least in one's head, and contemplate them further. The millions and millions of pages of analysis of Plato's works, arguing every single possible point with none ever quite resolved, serve as testament to their irresolvable quality, a quality that continues to draw people back and back for different views of it at different points of their lives. Like The Brothers Karamazov, Plato's works never quite sit with people, never, despite their fairly straightforward subject matter, lie in peace. Might it be that Plato sought to employ a method wrought with beneath-the-surface literary implications to attempt, despite his disdain for the written word and its philosophical value, to simulate a dialectic within
his readers despite the stagnancy of the medium in which he chose to work? Might he have hoped to kindle a spark by initiating some kind of "esthetic experience?"

Regardless, we eventually realize, in this dialectical process of searching for philosophical significance within the dialogues, how closely intertwined the character and characteristics of Socrates seem with any truth we could hope to discover through our searches. Though we are rightly exhorted to "think little of Socrates but much of the truth,"\(^{53}\) the πίστις that we feel in any arguments may be eventually less important in our search for truth than the πίστις we feel in Socrates. All of life is not an argument. Just as people become maddened by Love when they perceive beauty and, by their very nature, subconsciously note in it a means of attaining immortality, so people reading the dialogues have to recognize that there is a realm that argument does not reach, a part of life that resists being put in those terms, but which can, similarly to Love, lead us to our own realizations of rightness that might not necessarily arise from any dialectic. Thus it may be more important to believe in a person like Socrates, who lives the life of philosophy and walks its walk, than it is to believe in the argument or even the method of argument, which is inevitably going to fail and which we cannot even comprehend with our feeble human minds. The eventual purpose of the dialogues may be to go beyond them in our search for truth, but we need a sturdy ship to sail in our search for it, and that ship is Socrates.

The arguments that Socrates presents are just not quite right much of the time; but he is a human being, he is becoming, just like Plato's audience is becoming. He is destined by his humanity to make mistakes in trying to interpret the things that are. But he is a model to whom others who are becoming can cling to guide them as they also attempt to sail through life. Dostoevsky's novels are the same way, in that all of his characters are similarly two-sided, none perfect, but that gives them a special attractiveness.

\(^{53}\)See note 44.
Alyosha lives with a beautiful air of kindness and peace, but he does not have any refutation to Ivan's intellectual challenge to his beliefs in "The Grand Inquisitor." At the same time, whereas Ivan is frightening and utterly unhappy with himself in the world, he is extraordinarily attractive for his doctrines, as is Raskolnikov. We see not answers, we see lives, we see attitudes which we can never rightfully confirm or deny. At root, Plato's dialogues and the novels of Dostoevsky seems to be about human life and how it should be lived. Their philosophical imperfection and incompleteness and invalidity are only a reflection of that of philosophy itself as it can be pursued by humans who can truly know only when separated from the body.

What both authors make painfully clear in both of their writings is that they have no answers to give us. Raskolnikov may take up Christianity at the end of Crime & Punishment, but Dostoevsky does a good job of intimating that he does so not necessarily because it is right; Ivan renounces his nihilistic ways, but does that make "The Grand Inquisitor" any less haunting? Zosima, for his absolute holiness among humans, still rots in his tomb. In Plato we see the same intimations. We may love Socrates, we may respect him above all others, but as the numbness from the hemlock creeps up his body, we cannot be any more certain that his soul is going to be frolicking with the Forms in a matter of minutes than we were before he gave us his argument for immortality, or even before we had even heard about him and his crazy antics.

Our quest is for truth, but we do it always with a realization of ourselves in-the-world. The human life in itself can be a means of seeking truth, simply through the living of it. Plato makes clear the courage it takes to live in a world without the meaning that everyone wants to give it, a world where anything we might want to think of as true is always going to be at best a shadow of something that could be true, and that the meaning we seek in our lives is always just one sharp philosopher away from being throttled. To live and believe in the midst of this, as Socrates did, is to give our indistinct
lives the only meaning they can hope to be a part of in their present grounded state.

With all of our possible logical answers inevitably disqualified, what we are left with is the dialectic, the simple act of conversation. All that remains after Ivan's "Grand Inquisitor" meal with Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov is a great deal of fear, a great deal of uncertainty, and two people who are the better for having shared themselves and acquired a better working understanding of the world in which they live. That is the same scenario as at the end of Plato's dialogues: two or more people have given of their convictions and found them either lacking or still sturdy, but only until the next dialogue. What all the grandeur and depth of Plato and Dostoevsky boil down to is the simple scenario of the humble 110-minute film My Dinner with Andre. All we can hope to do is listen and share and challenge ourselves, as the more down-to-earth Wallace Shawn does with the profound Andre Gregory. We do not have to be convinced that we should give up our theories of "the great man" to whom "all is permitted," nor do we have to believe Socrates' conception of justice, just as Wally is not convinced that he cannot be fully human and still sleep with an electric blanket. We owe it to ourselves only to take the arguments and make them our own, allow them to expose our worlds to us anew, as Wally's is to him during his cab ride home. My Dinner with Andre models for us how intelligent people converse and renew their worlds and quests for meaning. Beneath all of the profundity, beneath all of the philosophical innovation, in that same spirit lies the base of philosophical appreciation of the dialogue of Plato and the novel of Dostoevsky.
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