

The Rebirth of Dialogue: Bakhtin, Socrates, and the Rhetorical Tradition by James P. Zappen. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004. 229 + viii pp. Plato wrote dialogues. Mikhail Bakhtin constructed a literary theory based on dialogue. And as part of this theoretical work, Bakhtin interpreted the dialogues of Plato. Rhetorical scholars have always been interested in Plato; recently, they have shown considerable interest in Bakhtin as well. Surely, then, someone has already undertaken a systematic study of Plato and Bakhtin. No. Not until now.

James P. Zappen's *The Rebirth of Dialogue: Bakhtin, Socrates, and the Rhetorical Tradition* is the first book-length analysis, and synthesis, of the work of Plato and Bakhtin. More, Zappen's book extrapolates two conjectures from Bakhtin's theories and Plato's dialogues: first, while recognizing the difficulties involved, Zappen reviews Bakhtin's attempts to retrieve something of Socrates' original work, and second, in his concluding epilogue, Zappen tries to apply the insights and techniques of Socrates, Plato, and Bakhtin to the task of revitalizing the role of dialogue in rhetorical theory and within the rhetoric classroom. This ambitious program is economically achieved in 160 pages of text and a further 60 pages of notes and references.

Zappen's rhetorical task in this study is formidable. He must explain two very different bodies of work for two nearly exclusive sets of scholars. Zappen devotes the first three chapters of his book to this task. In his "Introduction" (1-15), he provides an overview of the problem and of his book. He next surveys the literature on Socrates and Plato in "The Traditional Socrates: Dialogue, Rhetoric, and Dialectic" (17-36). And then he reviews the life, thought, and interpretation of Bakhtin in "Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Dialogical Rhetoric, and the Socratic Dialogue" (3

Reviewing these chapters from the standpoint of a Plato scholar, I can say that Zappen translates Bakhtin's work into terms that are intelligible to me and applicable to the texts I study. And Zappen brings appropriate scholars—Don Bialostosky, Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, Gary Morson, and Peter Stallybrass—into his discussions of the secondary literature. Whether scholars of Bakhtin will find the converse true is beyond my judgment. But here, too, Zappen consults the right scholars, interpreters who have shaped the contemporary conversation about Plato's work in the context of ancient rhetorical theory: Thomas G. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, Richard Leo Enos, Eric Havelock, Charles Kahn, George Kennedy, Andrea Nightingale, Edward Sehapp, Gregory Vlastos, and Harvey Yunis. The one somewhat unexpected voice in this chorus is that of Arthur W. II. Adkins, in whose *Merit and Responsibility* Zappen finds a note he sounds repeatedly: Plato's Socrates, through his constant questioning, uncovers the inherent contradiction between the Homeric cultural values of courage and cunning and the civic virtues of justice and temperance (33, 71).

The thrust of Zappen's argument in these first three chapters is that Socrates embodies aspects of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and that Plato, as the author of Socratic dialogues, prefigures the work of the polyphonic novelist. The essential foundation for these claims is that Bakhtin himself engaged the work of Plato in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In explicating this work, Zappen points to the work of engaged listening, which can manifest itself in anacrisis, the critical testing of one's views, and/or syncrisis, the critical comparison of opposing views (46). But critically judging discourse together can also lead to synthesis. And this synthesis can occur within a cultural discourse or across cultural discourses, two or more voices jointly creating a hybrid

discourse (56). But even when it encounters resistance to this mixing, however, dialogue can still disrupt monologue, the effort to impose authority, through the "carnavalesque intermingling of the lofty and the serious with the lowly and the mundane" (118). This can be done within a conversation. Or it can be done in the representation of a conversation, as when an author frames a dialogue in such a way as to remind the reader of facts or factors that undermine or refract the meanings of the speakers within the dialogue. It is the principal claim of Zappen's *The Rebirth of Dialogue* that we can see each of these aspects of Bakhtin's theory at work in Plato's dialogues.

Zappen warrants this claim in the three chapters that make up the bulk of his book, interpretations of Plato's *Laches*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias*. In "Cultural Conflict and the Testing of Persons and Ideas in the *Laches*" (67-93), Zappen highlights the dialogical techniques of anacrisis and syncrisis, the testing and comparing of personal convictions, but at the same time he calls our attention to the surplus of meaning that Plato wields as author. Within the dialogue, *Laches* and *Nicias*, two Athenian generals who figure prominently in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, are questioned by Socrates with regard to their understanding of courage. Over the course of this relatively brief dialogue, despite the earnest participation of all three figures, a succession of definitions fail. Socrates' relentless questioning demonstrates that *Laches* and *Nicias* do not really understand courage. Or, to be more precise, his questions reveal gaps and conflicts in their efforts to apply Homeric notions of courage in the circumstances of Athens' imperial democracy.

But Socrates' tactical use anacrisis and syncrisis in this depicted conversation with *Laches* and *Nicias* is considerably amplified by Plato's strategic framing of that conversation as the *Laches*. Appearing in a composition offered to readers/listeners in fourth century Athens, the names of *Laches* and *Nicias* would evoke memories of Athens' missteps in the Peloponnesian War (83). The public memory of the war thus becomes another voice that engages the reader in a dialogue with the conversation Plato portrays. In this way, Plato's work anticipates the craft of the polyphonic novelist (92).

Joint creation (or co-creation), according to Zappen, is the dialogical modality at work in the next Platonic dialogue he interprets, the *Protagoras*. Despite the many signs of conflict or contest apparent on the surface of the dialogue, in "Truth as Dialogic: Creating a Cultural Hybrid in the *Protagoras*" (95-116) Zappen urges us to perceive a deeper cooperation between Socrates and *Protagoras*. Both interlocutors shift between asking and answering questions, both propose formulations that the other tests, and neither determines the course of their argument. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates even suggests that they have reversed positions, indicating that they have more than shared their understandings with each other; their understandings of virtue have both been altered by their engagement.

And, Zappen suggests, Plato himself may participate in this dialogue. The *Protagoras* lacks the ironic framing that immediately refracts the meaning of the *Laches*. Plato does not stand apart from the conversation, offering us a transformative vantage point. Rather, he seems entangled in the conversation. And thus we as readers are also engaged in the work of denning virtue in the company of Socrates and *Protagoras*, wrestling with the conflicting voices of our own culture.

It is in the penultimate chapter of his book, "Dialogue as Carnival: Contesting Cultural and Rhetorical Practices in the *Gorgias*" (117-140), that Zappen takes up the concept for

which Bakhtin is perhaps best known. To treat something in a carnivalesque manner is to undermine high pretensions with mundane comparisons and/or low humor (118).

According to Zappen, Bakhtin saw repeated instances of this in the *Gorgias*: Socrates' quick reduction of Gorgias' claims to knowledge, the comparison of rhetoric with cookery, and the equation of the tyrant with the catamite, among others (118). In a dialogue that is often not a dialogue, when the interlocutors are never really listening to each other, then the strategy of carnival can create a dialogue of opposing discourses for an outside reader or observer. Plato's *Gorgias* presents the spectacle of Socrates belittling the violent pretensions of Callicles and, thereby, the presumption of the Athenian empire and of the sophists who were drawn by its wealth.

In each of these interpretations of Plato, Zappen's Bakhtinian perspective offers new ways to see these ancient texts. *The Rebirth of Dialogue* thus adds to our understanding of Plato as a writer-as, in Bakhtin's terms, a master of polyphony.

Less successful, in my view, is the final section of Zappen's book, his "Epilogue: Dialectical Rhetoric in Print and Digital Media" (141-161). Here he speculates on new possibilities for Socratic/Bakhtinian dialogue in recent experimental ethnographies-in which the authors/investigators self-consciously question and de-center their projects, bringing their subjects' voices into the analysis-and in the virtual class and meeting rooms of the web. But the ethnographic examples may evidence no more than the new costume of the auteur, while the digital spaces may feature a new game of dialogue rather than a new role for dialogue. In other words, we may still engage these new forms and technologies by suspending our reality rather than actually changing it.

Zappen's book does offer evidence for one significant change, however: *The Rebirth of Dialogue* presents as the new consensus the view that in the early works of Plato we find "a Socrates who practices dialogue as the only true art of politics and who rejects [sophistic] rhetoric as the dangerous tool of an imperialistic empire" (1). This is a view with which I am in full accord, but I do not think it is nearly as widespread or as readily accepted as Zappen suggests. While Arthur W. H. Adkins and Harvey Yunis can certainly be enlisted in this cause, I suspect scholars like T.H. Irwin, Terry Penner, and Gregory Vlastos would count themselves unwilling conscripts. Nevertheless, I am happy to see this viewpoint presented so effectively.

One final note: Zappen twice cites me to sound a skeptical note regarding Yunis's *Taming Democracy*. In his two chapters on the *Gorgias*, Yunis interprets the dialogue as a Platonic rebuttal to Thucydides' positive analysis of Periclean statecraft. From this we may infer the implicit claim that Plato had read Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Given that Xenophon was obviously familiar with the work, I think this is plausible, indeed probable. My point in my 1999 *Rhetorica* review of *Taming Democracy* was that no one has yet assembled the case for this claim. That work still remains to be done.

Works Cited

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Socratic Method

This name is given to any technique which induces the learner to examine his/her internal and external perceptions and to describe in detail what s/he discovers there:

- Describe anything in detail while you are examining it—describe it aloud, to a listener, and, while examining, describe what you are perceiving, and you will

discover more and more and more about what you are describing.

■ This Principle of Description is the operating instruction for how to realize Walt Whitman's dictum, that if you observe closely enough even an ordinary blade of grass, you will discover the universe. Whitman's dictum was more than metaphor; it is literal, provided that you describe in enough detail to your listener while you are looking very closely.....

■ Fully as significant as this effect on particular perceptions is the effect of such describing on the *behavior* of perceiving and on the perceiver himself. For example:

A method popular in Europe for training ordinary people into being sophisticated, sensitive winetasters or perfume testers, is: to provide that person a sample, and he is to describe rapid-fire everything that comes into mind, for some minutes. Then another sample, and again he describes rapid-fire for some minutes everything that comes to mind or awareness or imagination. Then a third sample.... Keep up three days of this activity, sustained, and reportedly that ordinary person has developed the sensitivities of a professional perfume tester or wine taster.

The first schools in our Western cultural tradition were those of ancient Greece. Those schools were not for the purpose of benefitting students, nor even to promulgate a particular "school of thought." Their main purpose was to provide the leading thinkers and perceivers with quality audiences to whom to describe their perceptions, in order to develop those perceptions even further. The Sophists and especially Socrates would return this favor and draw out their listeners in turn. Their doing so, and the various ways they did so, became known as "Socratic Method."

For 2200 years, classical Socratic Method induced the learner to examine his internal and external perceptions and to describe what he discovered there. Historically, this practice was always accompanied by such huge miracle leaps of perception, understanding and growth that all its main practitioners became convinced that all knowledge and understanding are already within each learner and need merely be "drawn forth." This "Socratic miracle" was frequent enough for the "drawing-forth" theory to have such currency that, for 2200 years, "education" itself became named after that idea—"educare" means "to draw forth."

During those 2200 Socratic years, from a population base of but a few thousand citizens—most of whom soldiered or sold olives or politicked or followed other such interests and pursuits—nonetheless, Classical Greece produced more cultural giants and geniuses than have all of Earth's 5 billion people during this past half-century.

Likewise, from a population base of but a few hundred thousand citizens allowed access to culture-related ways of living, Renaissance Europe radically out-produced our 5 billion in geniuses and cultural giants. But then, we are no longer on Socratic education but on

didactic teaching.

The drawback of the classical Socratic method, with its acute questioning of 1 to 2 students, or fierce argument with maybe a half-dozen, was that it could be practiced with only a few at a time while the remainder of a large group or class grew restless. Yet any procedure which has people examine their perceptions and describe at length, in detail, what they discover there, creates the Socratic miracle effect.

Surprisingly, many of the modern versions of Socratic Method work better the more students or participants there are at a time in a group. Hundreds of such techniques have now been published, most of them by Project Renaissance, and with most of these, with a mere tape recorder if live listeners aren't close to hand, any individual who can read and follow specific printed instructions can evoke Socratic miracle effects for himself or herself. Yet we've gone even a step further than that.....