

How rude can Socrates be? A note on *Phaedrus* 228a5-b6

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In *Phaedrus* 228a5-6, Socrates recollects what Phaedrus has just said about his meeting with Lysias. In this passage, 228b5 εἰ μὴ πάνυ τι ἤν μακρὸς is traditionally read as an independent sentence, saying that Phaedrus is able to learn by heart a discourse unless it is not a bit too long. So read it would make Socrates behave in a rude way, as he gratuitously reminds us that Phaedrus' ability to retain discourses is pretty limited. But when εἰ μὴ is governed by a swearing such as 228b4 νῆ τὸν κύνα, it has emphatic force, meaning, in this case, that Lysias' discourse was in fact a bit too long. When the sentence is read according to this syntactical device, Socrates is not at all rude towards his friend Phaedrus; he is just teasing him and mocking rhetorical techniques in passing.¹

Phaedrus is the first guest to deliver a speech in praise of Eros in the *Symposium*, following Eryximachus' proposal to spend the evening making *encomia* to Eros as a most convenient way of commemorating Agathon's first victory in the Athenian tragic contest. Five other guests will follow in a row: Pausanias, Aristophanes, Eryximachus, Agathon, and to conclude the series, Socrates himself, the order being inverted only between Aristophanes and Eryximachus due to the former's hiccups. The banquet is an event, for sure, a philosophical moment, a much more important fictional meeting than merely having a bunch of guys getting together to drink, however comical drunk people might become. Socrates' report of Diotima's speech will have a definite impact on our culture, will inspire many poets, will give the main guidelines for the way we think of love, and will mark for ever our romantic expectations.

Phaedrus' praise is certainly not a brilliant speech, but it serves as the kick-off for this momentous gathering in the house of Agathon. His speech is pretty traditional, as it is concerned with mythology and genealogy. It begins by describing Eros's birth,

¹ This paper first appeared in a *Festschrift* to Raúl Gutierrez, published in a private edition: Bernhard Uhde and Miguel Giusti (eds.), *Symposion. Festschrift zu Ehren des 60. Geburtstages von Raúl Gutiérrez*, Freiburg 2015, pp. 175-184. I thank the editors for the permission to reprint it here.

taken to be one of the ancestral gods, eldest of all of them except Chaos. More reference to myths will come, as in the handling of the myth of Orpheus. But we also get considerations about the influence of love on human life. Love is indeed very useful for us as a society, and not only for the couples themselves, for, as the lover struggles to appear beautiful to the beloved, he strives for beautiful and right actions, and so love induces us to live beautifully or nobly, that is, living *kalôs*, forcing us to adopt the moral pattern of life. And it makes us adopt the moral way of living up to the point of sacrificing our own lives for the beloved, as exemplified for instance by Alcestis. Letting oneself die to benefit the beloved is a supreme mark of altruism, and altruism is the characteristic trait of morality: nobility and morality go hand in hand, as they are induced by love. Love bonds people together, making of them an invincible army. At the same time, the lover is ashamed to do mean things in the presence of the beloved, which is very convenient for mankind, and goes also in the direction of morality.

Nothing too enthralling, but nothing to be ashamed of either. A praise not without merit, but poor in substance, according to the judgment of Bury², and so in many other commentators as well.³ Maybe; but Phaedrus points right from the start to an essential tension within love: the lover wants to get satisfied by the beloved, he acts thus in strict regard to his own satisfaction, but goes to great pains to benefit the beloved, and becomes thereby unselfish. This is not a minor point, even if it comes blurred amid a great number of myths and genealogies: it is the human *gigantomachia* painted into a mythological fresco. Other guests will give their praises, and will come up with other ideas: love is a quest for a lost unity, a search for immortality, a natural instinct, the strength for ascending to beauty, and so. But Phaedrus, despite his attachment to the rhetorical techniques that function much more as a straitjacket to his ideas than as a useful tool to make them come to the fore, is neither mediocre nor uninteresting: he discloses a tension within love, and poetry will regularly build on this tension to compose its songs of love.

But before Phaedrus makes his speech, we get some information about Socrates' character from the prologue. Aristodemus tell us he met Socrates bathed and beautifully dressed, with slippers on his feet. This is unusual; Socrates is normally barefoot, and

² Bury : xxv, quoted approvingly by Allen 1991 : 12-13.

³ Among Brazilian commentators, see Cavalcante de Souza: "ele <Phaedrus> está 'dando uma lição', atitude perfeitamente conforme com a seriedade do seu espírito medíocre" (1966 : 102). For a much more symphatetic appraisal, see Francalanci 2005.

dressed with his well-worn cloak. But this time he is going to Agathon's feast, and should not be underdressed. Socrates then convinces Aristodemus to go together with him; only Socrates was invited to the banquet, but he is sure there will be no problem in bringing along a friend, even if he has not been previously invited. Old good times! However, as they approach Agathon's house, Aristodemus has to knock the door and come in alone, for Socrates stayed behind. This is a bit embarrassing. Socrates, caught by a thought, withdrew to a porch next door and remained there motionless; the servants had to keep calling him to join the other guests for dinner. This is typical of him. When Alcibiades storms into that calm gathering, drunk, supported by a flute-girl, crowned with ivy and violets, he dramatically changes the atmosphere. In his speech, this time in praise of Socrates himself, he remembers that once, when they were together on the campaign to Potidaea, Socrates began to pursue a thought he had at dawn, and stood in the same spot motionless considering that idea for the whole day; the next dawn, he offered a prayer to the rising sun, and finally moved (220c-d). And Socrates is not only strong on pursuing ideas. He is also moderate, as he rejects Alcibiades' offer as a lover (216c-219d)⁴, stays outside in winter-time barely dressed (220b), and never gets drunk (214a). In Delium, Alcibiades goes on to say, Socrates proved also to be really courageous and brave, not fearing death to help Alcibiades when the army was retreating in a disordered fashion (221a-b). Alcibiades concludes, drawing on the comparison to the Silenus statues, which contained other statues inside when you break them (215b), that when you look inside Socrates, you will find these marvellous statues, all these divine discourses with which he enchants everyone: he is wise, actually the wisest man Alcibiades ever met. There is no explicit mention or hint that Socrates is also just, but justice surely is one more virtue Socrates has, since he is fair to everybody. Being the wisest person in world, how could he not be just? Perhaps Alcibiades averts any talk about justice deliberately, not because of Socrates, but because of himself: this is a topic that would make him have hiccups, as Aristophanes had in the *Symposium*. To sum up: Socrates has the four cardinal virtues Plato has so much argued for in many of his dialogues.

⁴ To appreciate Socrates' moderation in relation to Alcibiades' attempts to seduce him, "most of us need to translate it into heterosexual terms and imagine Socrates as a healthy man who converses tranquilly, and then falls soundly asleep, when a beautiful girl has crept naked under his blanket and put her arms round him" (Dover 1980 : 164-5).

Plato's Socrates is thus brave, moderate, just, and, of course, wise, despite being keen on declaring that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing. The latter is the so famous Socratic irony, much resented by his adversaries as sheer pretence. But Socrates is also, as we shall see, ironic in the modern sense of responding in a jocular mood, making puns, and deriding even himself. But making fun of somebody may go too far, and one may become rather rude to a friend or to someone who does not deserve to be treated in such a contemptuous fashion. Does Socrates ever become tactless when making fun of someone? As a matter of fact, one may think that he can even be deliberately rude to someone who treats him as a friend.

Plato casts Phaedrus also in the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue which is named after him and in which he has a much more developed role than he had in the *Symposium*, in which he delivers the first speech in praise of love. Phaedrus is depicted in both dialogues as being passionate about sophistry and rhetoric. He is also mentioned in the *Protagoras*, where he is among the audience of Hippias. Phaedrus is fond of literature and an admirer of Lysias; in the *Phaedrus*, he attended to his speech on love, and is eager to discuss it with whomever crosses his way. In this speech, Lysias attempted to show that one should grant one's favours to a man who is not in love rather than to one who is – the theme, or at least one of the topics the dialogue deals with, is love again, as it was in the *Symposium*. There Phaedrus was a young man; here, he is a mature man. The speech is given in the early hours of the morning, as is typical in Athens for a class. It took place at Epicrates' house. Phaedrus remained seated there listening for a good moment, asked him a good deal of questions, which Lysias readily answered. Having got the written version of the speech, Phaedrus read it again and again, focusing on the main ideas put forward in it. At some point round noon, he goes for a walk outside the walls to stretch his legs, when he bumps into Socrates. Both then search for an idyllic place in the middle of a hot summer's day to discuss the core of Lysias' speech. The scene is thus set: under a very tall plane-tree along the Ilissus, they sit on the grass as they hear the song of the cicadas, and Phaedrus reads the speech to Socrates.

But not everything is so idyllic. Socrates has already indulged in mockery, as he remarks that, if one should grant one's favour to one who is not in love, perhaps Lysias will also go as far as to say that it should also be to a poor man rather than a rich one, or to an older rather than a younger man: that would be quite urbane, and Socrates can at last hope to be an appropriate candidate! But more is to come. Having heard from Phaedrus that he spent a long time sitting in Epicrates' house, since sunrise to be

precise, involved all this time in listening and hearing things about love from Lysias, he asks Phaedrus to tell him about what has been discussed. As Phaedrus says in false modesty that he would not be able to repeat what the “cleverest of present writers” (228a1-2) has said over such a long period of time, Socrates promptly retorts:

Soc.: Phaedrus – if I don’t know Phaedrus, I’ve even forgotten who I am. But I do, and I haven’t; I know perfectly well that when he heard Lysias’ speech he did not hear it just once, but repeatedly asked him to go through it for him, and Lysias responded readily. But for Phaedrus not even that was enough, and in the end he borrowed the book and examined the things in it which he was most eager to look at, and doing this he sat from sun-up, until he was tired and went for a walk, unless I am much mistaken actually knowing the speech quite off by heart, unless it was rather a long one; and he was going outside the wall to practise it. (228a5-b6)

This is Rowe’s translation⁵, which, despite minor differences, is representative of the way the passage is read. Socrates reports what Phaedrus has just said to him. Why does he do that, given that there is no philosophical point worth repeating, and Phaedrus has said all this just a moment ago? Well, one may say, Socrates repeats the content, but the style is not the same: it is now couched as a plea in the law-court. In this way we begin to be habituated to rhetoric and its techniques. More than this: it is a parody of the techniques later attributed to Tisias (273a6-274a6): we are already seeing them at work. This is true. But Socrates is also highlighting that Phaedrus is pretending: he is most eager to say aloud Lysias’ speech again⁶, and is able, or thinks he is able to do this word for word straightaway, but pretends that he will only be able to run through the purport of what Lysias said and give a summary of each topic in turn, but not to rend the speech word for word (228d1-5). Socrates thwarts the trick as his attention is directed to something Phaedrus carries in his left hand under the cloak: it is the written speech itself. In fact Phaedrus wanted to make Socrates his sparring partner as he sets out to deliver the whole speech he has just learnt by heart; instead, because Socrates rightly suspected Phaedrus had the book, they sit on the grass to read the speech aloud, and discuss its content. One may then say that reading a book instead of saying aloud the speech paves the way for the dialogue’s concluding remarks on the advantages and

⁵ Rowe 1986 : 23.

⁶ See 228c2 ἐθρόπτετο ὡς δὴ οὐκ ἐπιθυμῶν λέγειν: having met Socrates, the greatest lover of discourses he could ever meet, “he feigned coyness, as if he did not yearn to speak”. The verb *thruptô* means here “to refuse what one (really) desires”, ‘to pose’, especially in lovers’ language” (de Vries 1969 : 41-42).

disadvantages of written texts when compared to lively discussions⁷, but at this juncture the hiding and disclosure of the book is just a device to underline not only Phaedrus' deep attachment to Lysias' rhetorical tactics, but also, and more specifically, his eagerness to show off his own abilities in this field.⁸

Socrates is thus not fooled by Phaedrus, but would Socrates become rude just because of such a childish trick? He would, at least according to modern translations, for he lets us know that Phaedrus can learn by heart only small chunks, but certainly not a large speech. This is a rude remark, especially because Phaedrus has treated him as a friend all along, and deserves no such reproach. Perhaps this is how Phaedrus is? We do not know, and there is nowhere any hint in this direction, besides being unlikely. Anyhow, how inelegant would be to remind him of this shortcoming right at this moment. Actually, I do not think Plato makes Socrates lose his temper because of such a childish trick. Phaedrus may look a bit ingenuous, but Socrates need not be rude, or inelegant. Phaedrus is only one more would-be thinker enchanted with sophistry, another orator charmed by rhetoric, but, in spite of his intellectual weakness and shortcomings, he is a genuine lover of speeches, including Socratic ones: they are all *logoi*, and he is fond of any *logos*. As a matter of fact, Socrates is not rude to him, quite the contrary, or so I will argue: he is just teasing him, and mocking the rhetorical techniques in passing. It is the modern translations that make him observe that Phaedrus would have learnt the speech by heart only if it was a small chunk, as if he were rude or inelegant. Phaedrus may have intellectual problems in grasping the philosophical import of a point, but he does not seem to have any problem with his memory – or does he?

Apparently he does, according to modern translations: Phaedrus will know the speech quite off by heart, *unless it is rather a long one*. The Greek phrase is this: εἰ μὴ πάνυ τι ἤν μακρός (228b5). The manuscripts give *tis* instead of *ti*, but *ti* is Schanz' emendation now backed up by a papyrus (Oxyr. 1016). Both readings are possible, as de Vries remarks: *tis* would give a light accentuation to the quality denoted by the adjective, and *ti* does the same, as *panu* goes closely with *makros*: both come to

⁷ As a sort of anticipation of the opposition between memory and writing to be discussed at the end of the dialogue: see for instance Santa Cruz & Crespo 2007 : 50.

⁸ Otherwise, taking Phaedrus' words at face value, one should say that "no doubt it was customary for rhetorical teachers to encourage their pupils to make such summaries, and it is enough for Phaedrus to complain that Socrates, by detecting the manuscript, has cheated him of an opportunity for doing so" (Hackforth 1952 : 26). But Phaedrus is no longer a young pupil, and is depicted in too strong a turmoil and excitement to be willing only to produce summaries.

the same upshot, “unless it is a bit too long”.⁹ So Phaedrus has problems with his memory. But he doesn’t: he was about to recite the entire speech by heart, had Socrates not cheated him of an opportunity to show off his rhetorical abilities by pointing to the book he was hiding under the cloak.

Let us revisit the whole sentence before accusing Socrates of being impolite towards his companion:

228b2-5: καὶ τοῦτο δρῶν ἐξ ἑωθινοῦ καθήμενος ἀπειπὼν εἰς περίπατον ἦει, ὥς μὲν ἐγὼ οἶμαι, νῆ τὸν κύνα, ἐξεπιστάμενος τὸν λόγον, εἰ μὴ πάνυ τι ἦν μακρός.

As Phaedrus did all this (*touto* with a collective sense: listening to Lysias, asking him questions, reading the book over and over) remaining seated since the sunrise, he got tired at some point (near noon) and so went out for a walk. This much is pretty clear. Now comes the incriminated sentence: ὥς μὲν ἐγὼ οἶμαι, νῆ τὸν κύνα, ἐξεπιστάμενος τὸν λόγον, εἰ μὴ πάνυ τι ἦν μακρός. He went out doubtless (*as I guess* or *as I believe*: ὥς μὲν ἐγὼ οἶμαι) knowing the speech off by heart (ἐξεπιστάμενος τὸν λόγον). The verb *exepistamai* means exactly this: to know thoroughly, the prefix *ek* accentuating that you made it through all the steps, you do know it by heart. But in-between there is the oath νῆ τὸν κύνα. Here is what Dodds says about it:

A playful allusion to the dog-headed god Anubis. (...) The tendency to distort *nomina sacra* in swearing is evident in many languages (cf. ‘by gum’, ‘bedad’, ‘parbleu’, etc.). This particular distortion, though a favourite with Socrates, was *not* peculiar to him. (...) Socrates can hardly have adopted it ‘out of aversion to any light handling even of the Greek divinities’ (Lodge), since he quite often swears frankly by Zeus, Hera, and other deities. And I can find no basis for Burnet’s suggestion (on *Apol.* 22a1) that it may be ‘Orphic’.¹⁰

What the heck is it then doing here? That Socrates shuns swearing by Greek deities is ruled out, as Dodds remarked.¹¹ As a matter of fact, “by Zeus” is a very common swearing in Plato’s time, and Plato makes Socrates use it quite often. Maybe it “contributes to Socrates’ bantering tone”, as Yunis says?¹² That may be possible, if we take it to add something to the *meaning* of the whole sentence. But in this case, Socrates

⁹ Nehamas & Woodruff’s solution (“unless it was extraordinarily long”) looks like a compromise: his memory fails because it was extraordinarily long, but wouldn’t fail if it was only a bit too long.

¹⁰ Dodds 1959 : 262-3.

¹¹ Though still vindicated: “c’est un euphémisme permettant d’éviter un *nê tôn Díá* ‘par Zeus’” (Brisson 2004 : 193).

¹² Yunis 2011 : 89.

behaves in an impolite fashion towards Phaedrus, who behaves in turn in a friendly way towards him.

Perhaps then the swearing adds nothing to the picture in what regards its content, but has a syntactical role? I think it does. Aristophanes can help us understand this syntactical role, as it is (deliberately) blurred in this rhetorical summary of Phaedrus' intentions. The *nê* or *ma* swearing is typical Attic, and is quite common in Plato and Aristophanes. Actually there is a great deal of it in Aristophanes. Here are two passages from his comedies which are very helpful to us in my view. In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, when Mnesilochus is dressed as Helen, and Euripides is disguised as Menelaus, Critylla, who has just appeared in stage, keeps watch on Mnesilochus-Helen. Euripides, as he enters the stage, asks him who is this girl who keeps an eye on him. As Mnesilochus pretends that she is Theonoë, Proteus' daughter, in line with their imagined characters, she retorts immediately that her name is Critylla. Here is her reply in Greek:

vv. 897-899 μὰ τὸ θεῶ,
εἰ μὴ Κρίτυλλά γ' Ἀντιθέου Γαργηπτόθεν·
σὺ δ' εἶ πανοῦργος.

The translation is something like this: "By the twain goddesses if I am not Critylla, the daughter of Antitheus, of the deme of Gargettus; and you are a rogue". The two goddesses are Demeter and Persephone, in whose temple they are, and to whom the Thesmophoria are celebrated; the rogue is Mnesilochus. The meaning is clear: Critylla has no delusions about herself, she knows very well who she is. The negation in the *ei mê* clause is expletive as the sentence is not to be taken alone, but governed by the *ma*-swearing: "I am Critylla, by the two goddesses!"¹³

Here is another passage from Aristophanes. Right at the beginning of the *Knights*, after Demosthenes and Nicias had read the oracle Paphlagon was keeping in secret, Demosthenes tries to convince a sausage-seller, who happens to be at the market, that he should be the overlord to all the people, the Agora, the Harbours, and the Pnix, so that the oracle would be fulfilled and they could get rid of Paphlagon. The sausage-seller is astonished, as he wants merely to sell his sausages, and has no delusions about himself. In his own defence, he says he is surely not worthy of so great a power;

¹³ Austin and Olson (2004 : 287) comment that *ei mê Kritulla g'* literally is "unless I am Kritylla", but it here *means* that "I am Kritylla!" They are right, the phrase does mean "of course I am Kritylla", but precisely because it is governed by the preceding swearing, and as such is not to be understood literally, that is, *independently*.

Demosthenes, always trying to persuade him, reacts asking him if he is not a gentleman, a *kalos kagathos*. The question is introduced by *môn*, which normally is followed by a negative answer, but it can sometimes suggest an affirmative answer, as it clearly does here. Demosthenes wants him to have higher expectations, to fall prey to dreams of power and grandeur. But the sausage-seller sticks to reality and replies quite simply that he does belong to the vulgar, he is not a gentleman:

vv. 185-186 μὰ τοὺς θεοῦς,
εἰ μὴ ἴκ πονηρῶν γ’.

We have again the *ei mê* sentence governed by a *ma* swearing: “by the gods if I am not a base man”, meaning that he obviously belongs to the mean people, he is a vulgar sausage-seller and not a *kalos kagathos*, as Demosthenes was feigning that he was. This is not sophisticated language, it is a colloquial expression sausage-sellers employ commonly.

Let us pause and take stock. The lesson seems to be this: when governed by a swearing phrase, and notably in Attic by a swearing constructed with *nê* or *ma* <*tous theous*>, the *ei mê* sentence that follows should be taken not in the restrictive sense of *unless*, but in the reverse sense, as a way of accentuating the affirmative force of the clause: of course I belong to the base people, of course I am Critylla, there is no quarrelling about it.¹⁴ And, to come back to our text, Phaedrus, when tired, goes out to stretch his legs, knowing the text by heart – *and by the dog if it is not a bit long*, meaning that it surely is a bit too long, as is always the case in rhetorical pieces, since orators are fond of *makroi logoi*, long speeches, and Lysias surely indulges in such a practice. As a matter of fact, Socrates is not saying that Phaedrus will only learn a text by heart if it is not too long; he knows very well that Phaedrus learns his texts by heart, however long they are, and he also knows pretty well that rhetorical pieces tend to be a bit long, to put it mildly. The icing on the cake is that, as he couches his own speech in a rhetorical fashion, Socrates slightly displaces the swearing from the clause it governs,

¹⁴ The expression ‘swearing + *ei mê*’ is thus a colloquial expression in Attic. There are plenty of cases however in which the swearing precedes a sentence, but does not govern it; see for instance *Protagoras* 312e4-5 Μὰ Δί’, ἔφη, οὐκέτι ἔχω σοι λέγειν, where each sentence is to be translated separately: “For Zeus’ sake, I have no longer an answer to you”. Another example is found right at the beginning of *Gorgias*, said by Polus: 448a5 Νῆ Δία· ἂν δέ γε βούλη, ὃ Χαιρεφῶν, ἐμοῦ. There is also a great deal of these constructions in Aristophanes’ comedies, in which the swearing does not govern the following phrase; but when it is so governed in the ‘swearing + *ei mê*’ construction, the sense of *ei mê* changes dramatically, from “unless *x*” to “of course *x*”.

creating in this way an expectation of higher style and deepness, only to render the interpretation vague. Here is the translation I propose for the passage we have been examining, slightly changing Rowe's proposal:

Soc.: Phaedrus – if I don't know Phaedrus, I've even forgotten who I am. But I do, and I haven't; I know perfectly well that when he heard Lysias' speech he did not hear it just once, but repeatedly asked him to go through it for him, and Lysias responded readily. But for Phaedrus not even that was enough, and in the end he borrowed the book and examined the things in it which he was most eager to look at, and doing all this seated right from sunrise, when he got tired he went for a walk, knowing – I am sure – the speech quite off by heart – and by the dog if it is not a bit too long! And there he was strolling outside the wall to practise it. (228a5-b6)

So read, Socrates is not only moderate, courageous, just, and wise – he is also polite, not being in the least offensive towards Phaedrus who has been so friendly towards him. But, of course, Socrates loses no opportunity to make fun of rhetorical techniques and likings. He does not want to concede rhetoric any prize, even if it means to momentarily seem rude to Phaedrus due to a syntactical vagueness caused by these very syntactical techniques when applied to an otherwise unproblematic colloquial expression. This is one of the lessons Phaedrus will learn as the discussion unfolds under a tall plane-tree in the middle of a summer hot day.

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