Received: 3nd September 2023 Accepted: 16th September 2023

Chance Encounters in Plot and in Life. On Plutarch's De genio Socratis

[*Encuentros casuales en el argumento y en la vida. Sobre el* De genio Socratis *de Plutarco*]

by

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Abstract

Plutarch's *De genio Socratis* has been described as one of Plutarch's best and most sophisticated works. This article examines the qualities of that sophistication and the demands these place on a reader. The unity is not as obvious and smooth as in Plato's *Phaedo*, and it is, I claim, productively problematic. It is not the unity of a single theme, I argue, but the unity of a network of ideas. Yet, there is one topic that holds the whole dialogue together and gives it a complex unity. The *De genio* is a reflection on what a story is and what role chance has to play within a story (in life and in literature).

Key-words: Plutarch, *De genio Socratis,* Chance, Plot, Life, Literature.

Resumen

El *De genio Socratis* ha sido descrito como una de las obras mejores y más sofisticadas de Plutarco. Este artículo analiza las cualidades de esa sofisticación y las exigencias que plantean a un lector. La unidad no es tan clara y fluida como en el *Fedón* de Platón, lo que resulta, estoy convencida, problemático desde el punto de vista productivo. No se trata de la unidad de un solo tema, en mi opinión, sino de la unidad de una serie de ideas interconectadas. Efectivamente, hay un tema que une el conjunto del diálogo y le da una unidad compleja. El *De genio* es una reflexión sobre lo que es una historia y sobre el papel que va a jugar el azar dentro de una historia (tanto en la vida como en la literatura).

Palabras clave: Plutarco, *De genio Socratis,* Azar, Argumento, Vida, Literatura.

"for perhaps no story should be ignored"
(*Pelop.* 10.1-2)

Plutarch's *De genio Socratis* has been described as one of Plutarch's best and most sophisticated works[1]. This article examines the qualities of that sophistication and the demands these place on a reader. A number of scholars have recently attempted to understand the thematic unity of this text[2]. This unity is, however, not as obvious and smooth as in Plato's *Phaedo*[3], and it is, I claim, productively problematic. It is not the unity of a single theme, I argue, but the unity of a network of ideas.

Plutarch has been said to be a sophisticated writer who transfers the task of putting together the various pieces to his readers: "it is typical of him to organize his material in such a way that it is up to the reader to decipher its structure"[4]. However, the opening scene gives the reader a couple of clues about the texture and quality of Plutarch's text and its intended readership[5]. In his request to Caphisias[6] to tell the story of the liberation of Thebes, Archedamus[7] uses a comparison with art-viewers to present an ideal listener/reader who is not merely interested in the outcome, but in those details which show the struggles of virtue and chance[8]. This has been interpreted as Plutarch's own position[9]. But, I argue, Archedamus and Caphisias are only on an intermediate level of listeners/readers. Caphisias is not a philosopher and he follows Archedamus' request faithfully, giving all the details, including (as required by Archedamus) the record of all the discussions that took place (*logoi* and *praxeis*, 575D-E)[10]. We thus get a mesmerizing tale full of details and chance events: signs and

1 DONINI 2011: 422 ("capolavoro"); DONINI 2017: 9; BONAZZI 2020: 66, "one of the most sophisticated and successful works of Plutarch's".

2 Cf. below "1. Competing with Plato: The unity of the *De genio*?"

3 On the *Phaedo* as the model cf. below "Competing with Plato: The unity of the *De genio*?"

4 BONAZZI 2020: 66. Cf. below "5. Intended readers and listeners".

5 PELLING 2002: 269: "Proems and epilogues are particularly important in the narrator's characterization of self, of narratee, and of the dynamic between the two."

6 CORLU 1970: 14; HANI 1980: 44.

7 CORLU 1970: 13-14; HANI 1980: 44. Archedamus will only be addressed a few times (577B; 595B; 596DE).

8 Cf. below "3. Chance I: fortune, virtue and vice".

9 Cf. especially DESIDERI 1984: 570-571, 574, 580, 584-585. Cf. also STOIKE 1975: 237, 243; BABUT 1988: 389-390; GEORGIADOU 1995: 190; HARDIE 1996: 134; HIRSCH-LUIPOLD 2002: 1-2; PELLING 2010: 118-119; BONAZZI 2020: 67 note 18, 75.

10 In his distinction between action (*praxis*) and discussion (*logos*) (575D) Plutarch might be playing with Aristotle's distinction between poetry as speaking about universal and history dealing with particulars (cf. GEORGIADOU 1995: 190-191; GEORGIADOU 1996: 115 note 7).

omens, strangers who visit, letters and messages, brave men and cowards, drunken tyrants, a violent dispute between a man and his wife about a bridle, stories about the opening of a tomb and about the doubling of an altar, discussions about poverty and virtue, about divine guidance, demons and the *daimonion*[11] of Socrates. Where is the unity in this whirlwind of a plot? Plutarch, who has created this 'mess of a tale,' expects and requires the reader to be smarter than Archedamus and Caphisias, not to get lost in the details, but to connect and understand them and read the full picture, neither merely the general outcome or general message, nor merely the abundance of details, but the whole text as a network of ideas and themes. The apparent disunity or better the marked presence of the chance event and chance encounter challenges the reader to reflect on what it means to tell or hear or read a story.

In order to make the claim for a sophisticated text requiring a sophisticated reader we will first compare Plutarch's text to its Platonic model. Then we will take a close look at the opening scene and its clues for reading this text before investigating the role of details and chance events for a story and in particular for this story. The main chance event to be discussed is, of course, the presence of the stranger in town. Lastly, we will take a look at Plutarch's requirements for a sophisticated reader before coming to some conclusions regarding the specific kind of unity of this text.

1. *Competing with Plato: The unity of the* De genio*?*

Many readers have pointed out that Plutarch's *De genio* is modeled after Plato's *Phaedo*[12]. The *De genio*, however, lacks the natural unity of the *Phaedo*. We see, in the dialogue of the day of Socrates' death, a perfectly executed, clear picture, with an obvious topic, a central focus, and details that are connected to the main topic. On the other hand, we see a confusing mess of topics and ideas and details without a clear focus, without one dominant topic. The philosophical topic of the *Phaedo* flows from its scene: Socrates' imminent death leads to a discussion of the immortality of the soul

[11] Plutarch uses the term *to daimonion* to speak of the daimonic voice guiding Socrates. Plato rather speaks about the *daimonic sign* or the *daimonic voice*.

[12] Pelling 2010: 112 speaks of "pervasive Platonic intertextuality". On the connection to the *Phaedo* cf. Hirzel 1895, II: 148-151; Christ 1901: 58-59, 63, 93-94; Stoike 1975: 237; Ziegler 1964: 204; Corlu 1970: 82, 128-129 note 52; Riley 1977: 258-259; Hani 1980: 60; Hershbell 1988: 367; Georgiadou 1995: 188-189 and 188 note 5 with further references; Hardie 1996: 123; Georgiadou 1997: 40 and note 91 with further references; Pelling 2005: 125-126; Pelling 2010: 112-113 with further references in note 8; Roskam 2015: 128-129 (on *De genio*); Bonazzi 2020: 67.

and culminates in a myth about the fate of soul in the afterlife. In Plutarch's *De genio*, the topic of the daimonic sign and demonology in a broader sense does not arise from concerns about the conspiracy leading to the liberation of Thebes, but starts with Theanor, a fictitious character who does not take any part in the conspiracy[13]. Plato's *Phaedo* is certainly the or at least an important model, but Plutarch also takes other Platonic texts as inspirations for his firework of ideas, topics and events. There is an important historical event, there are many chance events, strangers appear, philosophical discussions take place about virtue, poverty, the soul, the afterlife, daemons, divine signs, etc. There are some other seemingly unrelated stories about Alcmena's tomb and the altar in Delos. And there is, of course, a myth.

It is therefore not a surprise that Plutarch's *De genio* has been criticized for this lack of unity[14]. It has been said that it is a "peculiar mixture of a historical novella and a philosophical dialogue[15] and that the connection between the "action" and the "topic" (demonology) is created "artificially" through the fictional Pythagorean Theanor[16]. Ziegler suggested that it is patriotic in that it wants to celebrate both the courageous acts and counteract the complaint that the Boeotians lack education[17]. Other scholars have argued in favor of the unity of the text[18]. The main themes[19]

13 On Theanor cf. HANI 1980: 46-47; CORLU 1970: 20-22.

14 Cf. for instance CHRIST 1901: 93-94; HIRZEL 1895, II: 151. CORLU 1970: 86-87 lists a couple of critical voices as does BONAZZI 2020: 66. Cf. also RUSSELL 2010: 3 who thinks that the motive for the combinations are "educational concerns". CORLU 1970: 89 assumes that the historical narrative is only there for an aesthetic effect, as relaxation for the reader. DONINI 2017: 11 rightly says that this does not explain a lot because it does not give a reason why Plutarch would have combined these specific topics.

15 ZIEGLER 1964: 204 (my translation): "eine eigentümliche Mischung aus einer historischen Novelle und einem philosophischen Dialog".

16 ZIEGLER 1964: 204 (my translation): "ist bei P. der Zusammenhang zwischen der Handlung, der Befreiung von Theben, und dem Thema, der Dämonologie, nur äußerlich und künstlich durch die Einführung des (sicherlich erfundenen) Pythagoreers Theanor […] hergestellt."

17 Cf. ZIEGLER 1964: 204.

18 Cf. RILEY 1977: 259 who argues that there is an "organic connection" and especially Babut 1984 who argues against dismissive statements about the quality of the dialogue; there is, in Plutarch, he claims, always a unity (54). Cf. also DONINI 2007: 101, 101 note 9, 102 note 12 and BONAZZI 2020.

19 One other topic suggested has been "freedom": Cf. BRENK 1996: 51: "This dialogue, then, remains faithful to the title. The obvious theme is liberation." STOIKE 1975: 237-246 argues that it is freedom and *aretê*. In support of Stoike cf. Hani 1980, 61 and as a critical voice cf. DONINI 2007: 104 note 16.

suggested in recent scholarship are the topic of signs and divine guidance[20], the topic of the valence of the active and contemplative life of the philosopher (with a specific focus on Epaminondas)[21] and the topic of the right form of Platonism[22]. Signs and their interpretation can be found everywhere in the text, and certainly Plutarch reflects on the value of the contemplative and the active life. Yet the state of scholarship shows that it is by no means clear what his thesis would be and whether Epaminondas is supposed to represent the ideal or not, and if yes, which ideal (the philosopher or the actively involved philosopher-politician)[23]. Plutarch reflects on these issues, but he does not present his

20 Hardie 1996; Schroeder 2010.

21 Cf. Riley 1977: 268-270; Babut 1984; Hershbell 1988: 375-378; Barigazzi 1988; Georgiadou 1995; Georgiadou 1996. Scholars have argued that Plutarch propounds the ideal of a combination of the active and the contemplative life (Méautis 1950: 201 states that it is a combination, but does not develop the idea. Riley 1977: 268-270 assumes that the ideal is represented by Socrates.) Babut 1984 argues that the dialogue's purpose is to show the opposition of the philosophical and the political life and the superiority of the former. He also refers to Eisele 1904, 30 who states, but does not develop this idea. Pelling argues that there is a tension (Pelling 2005: 133-134; Pelling 2010: 125-126 (this article is a revised version of Pelling 2008; I am quoting the article from 2010), the "existential dilemma" of a philosopher presented with the choice of the active and the contemplative life (Georgiadou 1995: 199.) On Epaminondas cf. below note 23.

22 Cf. below note 24.

23 In other texts, including probably his lost *Life*, Plutarch praises Epaminondas, which makes the more ambiguous picture in *De genio* a challenge (Cf. Cawkwell 2010: 101-103. On the lost *Life* cf. also Georgiadou 1997: 6-8). One of Plutarch's goals in writing the *De genio* might even have been to defend and explain "Epaminondas' questionable role in the liberation of Kadmeia" (Georgiadou 1996: 116). Georgiadou 1996: 117 argues further: "Epaminondas' defense is being conducted obliquely and unobtrusively through the exploration of the relationship between philosophy and politics". In the *Life of Pelopidas*, Plutarch writes that he was "being looked down upon, as one whom philosophy had made inactive and poverty powerless", and these two issues are certainly addressed in the *De genio*.

Epaminondas is seen as a model by some scholars (Christ 1901: 92-93; Hani 1980: 46; Desideri 1984: 576-577; 583; Barigazzi 1988: 420-425; Brenk 2002: 108; Bonazzi 2020: 69, 73-74). Epaminondas, Riley writes, comes closest to the philosopher who is an active citizen, but does not reach Socrates' perfection (Riley 1977: 268-270). On Epaminondas as similar to Socrates cf. Corlu 1970: 72; Hershbell 1988: 377. On Socrates as a model for practical life cf. Pelling 2014: 155. Pelling shows that Epaminondas cannot be the unambiguous hero of the tale (Pelling 2005: 129-134; Pelling 2010: 111, 125-126) even though he exemplified a "blending of philosophical training and political activity later in his life" (Georgiadou 1997: 42. Cf. Georgiadou 1996: 117, 120). On Epaminondas as a "flawed character" cf. Brenk 2016: 97-100.

readers with a definite answer. Another very interesting suggestion is Donini's thesis that Plutarch reflects on the right form of Platonism and that he presents a couple of figures, i.e. mainly Theanor, Epaminondas and Simmias, who all fall short of the ideal[24].

The fact, however, that all three recent theses seem convincing, shows that the text can be read as a contribution to all of these topics. There is not one single topic that explains every single detail and element of the text, but there is a network of topics. Plutarch did not get inebriated with all the ideas he put into the text, but he is aware of what he is doing and aims for a different kind of unity of his text, i.e. a unity which encompasses contributions to a number of important philosophical topics. Plutarch does not fail to imitate Plato's *Phaedo* appropriately, but he challenges the reader, from the outset of the treatise, to understand that this is a different sort of philosophical text, a text that branches out in a variety of directions and can be read as a contribution to more than one issue. It does, however, not fall apart, but it is connected as a "plot", as an artificial construction involving many chance encounters. How are we to read this plot?

2. *Art-viewers, historians and philosophers*

Plutarch's treatise *De genio* begins with the words *zôgraphou tinos*, with an idea "some painter" offered and which the Athenian Archedamus now uses in his request to Caphisias who is an envoy from Thebes to Athens and was actively involved in the conspiracy to free Thebes from the tyrants:

> From some painter, oh Caphisias, I remember having heard a word, which was not bad, spoken in an image, about those who contemplate drawn tablets. For he said that the laymen and unskilled spectators are like those who greet a crowd very much at once (*homou polun*), whereas the sophisticated and art-loving [spectators] [are like] those who address everyone they meet privately. The one have only an overview of the events which is not exact and of a general form while nothing escapes unseen or unremarked of what has been produced well or not well to those who distinguish the work by a judgment part by part (*kata meron*)[25].

[24] Cf. DONINI 2011; DONINI 2017 and – even though not quite as strongly as in 2011—DONINI 2009. In DONINI 2007, esp. 108-125, Epaminondas still appears as a representative of the academic eulabeia.

[25] 575A-B (my translation): A. Ζωγράφου τινός, ὦ Καφισία, <μέμνημαί ποτε> περὶ τῶν θεωμένων τοὺς γεγραμμένους πίνακας λόγον (B) οὐ φαῦλον ἀκούσας ἐν εἰκόνι λελεγμένον. ἔφη γὰρ ἐοικέναι τοὺς μὲν ἰδιώτας καὶ ἀτέχνους θεατὰς ὄχλον ὁμοῦ πολὺν ἀσπαζομένοις, τοὺς δὲ κομψοὺς καὶ φιλοτέχνους καθ' ἕκαστον ἰδίᾳ τῶν ἐντυγχανόντων

The *De genio* thus starts with an unknown painter who uses an image to speak about two groups of viewers of pictures: we get a *logos* from a painter, but a *logos* in form of an *eikôn*. The *idiotai* and *atechnoi*, i.e. those who are laymen and unskilled are like someone who greets a great group of people at once, while those who are *kompsoi* and *philotechnoi*, i.e. refined, sophisticated and art-loving, will greet everyone individually. He continues to add a third element of comparison, i.e. the interest in "real actions":

> It is much the same, I fancy, with real events. For the lazy-minded it satisfies curiosity to learn the basic facts and the outcome of the affair; but the devotee of honour and beauty, who views the achievement of the great Art (as it were) of Virtue, takes pleasure rather in the detail, because – since the outcome has much in common with Fortune, while the part of the matter <concerned with> motives and <the action itself> involves conflicts between virtue and circumstance – he can there observe instances of intelligent daring in the face of danger, where rational calculation is mixed with moments of crisis and emotion[26].

Thus Archedamus does not want Caphisias to tell just the general facts; he presents himself as *kompsos* and *philotekhnos*, as refined and art-loving, and wants to know all the details in order to discern the "conflicts between virtue and circumstance" (575C)[27]. This presentation has been read as an adequate presentation of Plutarch's own ideas about history and his intent for the present work[28]. A few details, however, suggest that this reader may be more sophisticated than the first, but that we should actually aim to be a third even more sophisticated reader. The usage of the term *kompsos* might have a bit of irony: the term can have the sense of being too clever, too

προσαγορεύουσι. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ οὐκ ἀκριβὴς ἀλλὰ τύπῳ τινὶ γίγνεται μόνον ἡ τῶν ἀποτελεσμάτων σύνοψις, τοὺς δὲ τῇ κρίσει κατὰ μέρος τὸ ἔργον διαλαμβάνοντας οὐδὲν ἀθέατον οὐδ' ἀπροσφώνητον ἐκφεύγει τῶν καλῶς ἢ τοὐναντίον γεγονότων.

26 575B-D: οἶμαι δὴ καὶ περὶ τὰς ἀληθινὰς πράξεις ὁμοίως τῷ μὲν ἀργοτέρῳ τὴν διάνοιαν ἐξαρκεῖν πρὸς ἱστορίαν, εἰ τὸ κεφάλαιον αὐτὸ καὶ τὸ πέρας πύθοιτο τοῦ πράγματος, τὸν δὲ φιλότιμον καὶ φιλόκαλον τῶν ὑπ' ἀρετῆς ὥσπερ τέχνης μεγάλης ἀπειργασμένων θεατὴν τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα μᾶλλον εὐφραίνειν, <ὡς> τοῦ μὲν τέλους πολλὰ κοινὰ πρὸς τὴν τύχην ἔχοντος, τοὺς δ' ἐν ταῖς αἰτίαις καὶ τοῖς .... μέρους ἀγῶνας ἀρετῆς πρὸς τὰ συντυγχάνοντα καὶ τόλμας ἔμφρονας παρὰ τὰ δεινὰ καθορῶντα καιρῷ καὶ πάθει μεμιγμένου λογισμοῦ.

27 On the importance of the topic (*aretê* and *tychê*) cf. Hani 1980: 211-212 note 2; Brenk 2016: 97-98.

28 Cf. above note 9. Desideri 1984 makes the most out of opening scene and it is thus the most interesting contribution, but he reads it as a description of what Plutarch wants to do and thus differs considerably from my interpretation.

subtle or over-refined[29]. Furthermore, in other works Plutarch claims that artists or the arts stand on a lower rank than the philosopher[30].

The opening comparison suggest that the higher kinds of art viewer and audience may be more sophisticated than the first, but they are lost in the details. An art viewer who can identify brushstrokes and admire the details of the painter's art is certainly better than the one who merely identifies the topic, but this does not seem to lead to a very complex viewing of the art work. Theme, larger issues of composition, and indeed relation to other works of art or texts or events seem lost on the admirer of brush-strokes. Similarly, we expect someone interested in real events neither to be merely interested in the result nor to get lost in the details, but to judge the whole situation in its complexity. Interesting details can be distracting and interesting in themselves, and Plutarch admits that here quite plainly[31]. And details will allow us to better understand a character[32] and Plutarch is certainly interested in the conflicts of virtue and chance[33]. But he also suggests that it is not the whole picture. The level of the *philotimon kai philokalon* (cf. 575C) is not the level of the philosopher who grasps the whole picture including its details, but of those who are learning to read a text beyond the attention to the mere story, of young readers who may, in time, arrive at the level of philosophical understanding[34]. Thus, there should be a third level of listeners and readers. It is, one might add, common to present categorizations of human beings in threes. Plato's *Republic* draws the picture of three classes of human beings. And in the *De genio* itself and the myth we can see three kinds of human beings: philosophers, conspirators and tyrants (i.e. those

29 In GEORGIADOU 1995: 190 it is just interpreted in a positive way as "refined". In Plutarch's texts it can be used in this positive way, but it can also suggest "overrefinement". The term *philotimos* may also be ambivalent, at least when it is first used in combination with *kompsos*. It can suggest a "love of honour", but it may also be used in a negative sense as ambition. Used in a positive sense: *Quom.* 30E: *philotimon kai philokalon*; *Quaest. Conviv.* 746D; *Dem*. III.2. In a somewhat neutral and descriptive sense: *De tranqu*. 465F: *philotimous kai philodoxous*. Used in a negative sense: *De gen*. 593D: *philotimon kai philosomaton*; *De recta* 47D. Cf. for other usages in a negative sense DUFF 2000: 149, 157; OPSOMER 2011: 163. Cf. also BRENK 2016: 98 who refers to PELLING 2002: 242-247, 350-353. On its usage in combination with *philokalon* cf. below p.111.

30 *Pericl*. I-II; *De fortuna* 99C.

31 Cf. HANI 1980: 69 note 1: "Plutarque avait le goût des images".

32 Cf. *Alex.* I, 2-3 (on this passage HIRSCH-LUIPOLD 2002: 42-48); *Nic.* 1. Cf. CORLU 1970: 13.

33 Cf. DUFF 2000: 147.

34 Cf. below "5. Intended readers and listeners".

who are controlled by their passion)[35]. And the festival allegory which might have inspired Plutarch, as Georgiadou[36] suggests, presents philosophers as "spectators" and hunters "for truth" while others hunt for "a prize" or "to buy and sell"[37]. These groups of three suggest that here too, at the beginning of the dialogue, we should realize that there is a third kind of listener and reader, one that Archedamus and Caphisias fail to notice, but that we, Plutarch's readers, are meant to be.

3. *Chance I: fortune, virtue and vice*

Archedamus wants to hear about the details because they show, as he writes, struggles of virtue and chance (575C). The main outcome is easily told, but such a tale would obscure how the outcome was reached, how difficult it was, how circumstances and difficulties had to be overcome, how men showed bravery and failed nonetheless. There is certainly an abundance of details and chance events in Plutarch's *De genio*, but a closer inspection reveals that very few of the details present such struggles. In a tale of a great historical event some details and chance events matter because they changed (or almost changed) the course of the story, but there are also chance events that do not matter because they have nothing to do with the story. Furthermore, some, but not all chance events show struggles of chance and virtue.

Some events in *De genio* allow main characters to show their bravery. The request that someone has to provide a house for the conspirators takes everyone by surprise (at least here, since in the *Life of Pelopidas* this has been arranged beforehand[38]), and brave Charon does not hesitate (576D-E). When he is later suddenly called to see the tyrants, everyone is worried that they might have been betrayed; but Charon shows his unwavering bravery (594E-595D). Then there are fortuitous events that support the conspiracy like the "the trumpeters who happened (*kata tychên*) to be in town for the festival of Heracles" and whose sounds cause "alarm to the enemy on every side"[39]. Simmias' leg injury gives him a valiant excuse not to be involved actively in the conspiracy, as opposed to

35 Cf. 591D-592C (for the myth); Babut 1984: 69-70 (for myth and dialogue). Donini 2009, 203-206, argues that the tripartition presented by Babut is correct, but that Plutarch introduces a subdivision of the highest group (Epaminondas and Theanor are philosophers, but they have not reached Socrates' level).

36 Cf. Georgiadou 1995: 189-190.

37 Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VIII. 8; Cicero, *Tusc*. 3, 9.

38 Cf. Plutarch, *Pelop.* 7.3. Later in *De genio*, Plutarch falls back to the version he supports in the *Life* because this fact seems to be known to the person who writes the letter to the tyrant (596E-F). Cf. Nesselrath 2010. 98 note 269.

39 598D 10.

Epaminondas who is under attack for his refusal[40]. Other chance events seemed to reveal rather the cowardice or other vices of some characters. The tyrant Archias who ignores the urgent letter which would have revealed the conspiracy shows how drunk and lustful he is (596E-F). And then there is a strange story of two chance events, one correcting the other. Hipposthenidas interpreted a friend's dream about Charon's house as a bad sign for the conspiracy and decided to send a messenger to the conspirators to tell them to abandon the attempt (586C-587B)[41]. Chlidon, the messenger, however, is met with an obstacle because his wife has lent his horse's bridle to a neighbor, and this chance event brings out his anger – he hits his wife and has to be held back by neighbors (587D-588A). The wrong interpretation of the dream could have proven fatal, but the missing bridle saves the conspirators.

This episode and other chance events also provide Plutarch with the opportunity to reflect on the role of chance. Phyllidas, another conspirator, is annoyed with Hipposthenidas because he alone of all the people involved tried to send such a message "today – when chance (*to automaton*) too has provided most of the condition for their return" (586C). The usage of the term *to automaton* suggests that there is some accidental constellation of events, not divine providence, favoring the conspirators[42]. Phyllidas thus suggests that the conspirators will succeed, simply because they seized the right moment. Other characters, including Theocritus, present a different view when they interpret dreams and events (like lightening without thunder) as signs that there is a divine will supporting the conspirators (cf. 587B-C; 594E; 595F). Among the believers in providence is Caphisias who says about the outcome of the Hipposthenidas-Chlidon episode:

> We now experienced an extraordinary change of feeling. A little before, we had felt frustrated by the obstacles; now the urgency of the situation and the speed of events brought us once again to an agony of fear. There was no putting things off. I spoke to Hipposthenidas and clasped him by the hand to give him heart; the gods too (I said) were urging us to act[43].

[40] Cf. PELLING 2005: 125; DONINI 2011: 421.

[41] The version of the *Life of Pelopidas* does not speak of a dream, but just of Hipposthenidas' fear in view of the imminent event (VIII.3).

[42] Plutarch uses this term a second time in *De genio* where the overflowing of a lake is not an event occurring by chance (*apo tautomatou*), but a "visitation of wrath" because the tomb of Alcmena had been opened (578A).

[43] 588A-B: ἡμᾶς δέ τις ἔσχεν ἄτοπος μεταβολὴ τοῦ πάθους. μικρὸν γὰρ ἔμπροσθεν τῷ κεκωλῦσθαι δυσχεραίνοντες πάλιν διὰ τὴν ὀξύτητα τοῦ καιροῦ καὶ τὸ τάχος, ὡς οὐκ οὔσης ἀναβολῆς,

In his words of encouragement to Hipposthenidas, Caphisias interprets the fortuitous connection of events (not one of them involving bravery) as a good sign for the conspirators, as a sign that a god is supporting them. However, just a little later, after Charon's return from seeing the tyrants and before the report about the letter sent to Archias, which revealed the conspiracy, Caphisias sings a different tune:

> But bad fortune (*hê cheirôn tychê*), Archedamus, which both evened the odds between the enemy's indolence and ignorance and our daring and preparedness, and had from the start varied the drama of our plot with scenes of danger, now accompanied us to the very moment of action, producing the sudden, dangerous crisis of a quite unexpected turn of events[44].

In this reflection on fortune, Caphisias does not speak about divine guidance, but about "bad fortune", a bad chance (*tychê*) which seems to favor the weak and ignorant tyrants against the daring and well-prepared conspirators[45].

We thus get a complex and ambiguous picture of chance and (good and bad) fortune[46]. Some passages suggest that there is mere chance at work[47] and brave men who seize their opportunity or fail to do so. Other passages speak of "bad fortune" which opposes the good and the brave. And yet another set of passages suggests that the divine is, after all, guiding the conspirators[48]. Plutarch has dropped his reader into a most uncertain universe.

These ideas can also be found in other Plutarchean texts. Plutarch reflects on the dual nature of causality and discusses whether a certain event has to be ascribed to material or divine causes[49] or whether there is ultimately no conflict between physical and theological or teleological explanations[50]. Furthermore, he often

εἰς ἀγωνίαν ὑπηγόμεθα καὶ φόβον. οὐ μὴν ἀλλ' ἐγὼ προσαγορεύσας τὸν Ἱπποσθενείδαν καὶ δεξιωσάμενος ἐθάρρυνον, ὡς καὶ τῶν θεῶν παρακαλούντων ἐπὶ τὴν πρᾶξιν.

44 596D-E: ἡ δὲ χείρων, ὦ Ἀρχίδαμε, τύχη καὶ τὰς τῶν πολεμίων μαλακίας καὶ ἀγνοίας ταῖς ἡμετέραις ἐπανισοῦσα τόλμαις καὶ παρασκευαῖς καὶ καθάπερ δρᾶμα τὴν πρᾶξιν ἡμῶν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς διαποικίλλουσα κινδυνώδεσιν ἐπεισοδίοις εἰς αὐτὸ συνέδραμε τὸ ἔργον, ὀξὺν ἐπιφέρουσα καὶ δεινὸν ἀνελπίστου περιπετείας ἀγῶνα. On the combination of historiography and tragedy cf. Desideri 1984: 573 note 22.

45 This version is thus more precise and stronger than the one in the Life of Pelopidas where he only speaks of a second blow of fortune (X.3).

46 Cf. Pelling 2010: 115, 124-125.

47 585C 8: "declined a lucky windfall".

48 *Contra* Desideri 1984 who assumes that the conspirators have demonic guidance (581).

49 Donini 1992: 103.

50 Cf. Opsomer 1998: 179-184.

debates when to ascribe something to *aretê* and when to *tychê*[51], whether to underline the hero's strength, his mere luck or his divine guidance[52]. Plutarch is generally aware of the fact that virtue does not always overcome fortune[53], that is, we can admire someone's virtue even if they do not succeed. Plutarch assumes that not all is guided by the gods, but that there is contingency, and that human beings are confronted with such situations[54]. But the word *tychê*, i.e. chance, can, at times, take on the "connotations of divine intervention"[55]. The same oscillation is visible in *De genio*.

4. *Chance II: a stranger in town*

The most important chance event determining the *De genio* is the fact that the Pythagorean stranger Theanor happens to be in town at the eve of the conspiracy. Most of the philosophical

51 INGENKAMP 1997. Cf. for instance *On the fortune and virtue of Alexander*; *De fortuna*.

52 SWAIN 1989 points out that Plutarch can sometimes underline divine providence in events, but points at the achievements of human beings without divine involvement in other cases. He thinks that the *Moralia* are different from the *Lives* in this respect (SWAIN 1989: 273: "In the religious and philosophical works of the *Moralia* Plutarch distinguishes clearly enough between events which are predetermined or guided by providence and those which happen by chance."), but the *De genio* at least does not seem to support this idea.

53 Cf. HIRZEL 1912: 68-69.

54 Cf. *Quomodo* 24A, 35C; *Ser.* 1, 1-3. Cf. also OPSOMER 2011: 157 quoting *De virtute morali* 444A: "wisdom is concerned with the unchanging intelligibles, whereas prudence operates in the sensible realm. This means that the letter must come down 'among things that are full of error and confusion, and is often confronted with *chance* and forced to deliberate about things that are unclear'". OPSOMER 2011: 158: "The context for human action is the sensible world, and environment that is less than fully rational. It is characterized by motions that are 'out of control', at times too violently and swiftly, at other times too weakly and slothfull than would be good (444B). To put it differently, this is a world in which there is true contingency, the turmoil and disorder of which make it unpredictable." OPSOMER 2011: 158: "we are living in a world that is not exempt from contingencies. Chance, luck, coincidences, disorder, and passions, though they are not the same thing, are closely associated." OPSOMER 2011: 160: "As regards the issue of determinism and contingency, let it suffice to say that for Plutarch, in my view, there is such a thing as real contingency, random events that may not be uncaused, but are not planned by the gods either. The irrational turmoil *is* part of this world. Higher powers do have a hand, however, in other events that appear as pure coincidences to us." Cf. Ps.-Plutarch, *De fato* 571E-572D.

55 OPSOMER 2011: 159: "the word that in *De virtute morali* and in philosophical texts in general is translated as 'chance' or 'luck', *tuchê*, takes on other meanings in the *Lives*. There it often bears connotations of divine intervention. This is not, however, of primary interest for us here. What interests us is still the tension between character (virtue), chance, and success. For the individual it does not seem to matter much whether external circumstances hindering or favouring her projects are the result of pure chance or caused by some divinity. It would make a difference if she were aware of divine intervention and took this awareness as a matter for reflection."

discussions are connected to him, some to another unknown or fictitious character. It is clearly relevant that philosophical discussions take place among the conspirators because they had used these as a veil to hide their plans and they had even at times invited the tyrants to persuade them that they were not dangerous (576B-C)[56]. The fact that there were philosophical discussions is, in itself, therefore relevant, but the topic or rather the topics (not just demonology!) are presented as the result of chance encounters (on what appear to be random topics, unconnected to the conspiracy). The discussions about Alcmena's tomb and Plato's solution to the oracle of doubling the altar all start with Phidolaus of Haliartus who is otherwise not known[57]. He is first questioned by Theocritus about Alcmena's tomb, and they further discuss the matter with Simmias who presents its message as an encouragement to peace, leisure, philosophy, muses, and against weapons (577D-579D), and he adds the story of Plato's use of mathematics in his solution to the oracle about doubling the altar which he, again, reads as an exhortation to rational discourse which should calm emotions (579B-D). The most important philosophical discussions (virtue and poverty; demonology) all start with the stranger Theanor who happens to be in Thebes at the eve of the conspiracy. He is first mentioned by Simmias (578D-E) and then presented by Polymnis who says that he came to Thebes because of "certain dreams and vivid visions" (579D-E). Simmias therefore praises him as "worthy of philosophy" (579E), but this sparks Galaxidorus' spirited attack on superstition and his vivid claim for rational philosophy (580A-B) which then leads Theocritus' to question Galaxidorus' about his ideas about Socrates' *daimonion* and to the long discussion about the *daimonion* and demonology in a larger sense[58]. This debate (580B-582C) will be interrupted by the arrival of the stranger (582C-D), his discussion with Epaminondas about poverty and virtue (582E-585D). When the discussion turns back to the topic of demonology, the narrator, however, happens to be called outside at this very moment, he misses Simmias' reply to Galaxidorus, but comes back just in time (588B-C) to hear Simmias present his own theory, a myth and to hear the stranger Theanor speak.

[56] Cf. also *Pelop.* V.3, where Epaminondas is said to have been allowed to remain in the city "because his philosophy made him to be looked down upon as a recluse, and his poverty as impotent".

[57] Cf. Hani 1980: 45; Corlu 1970; 16.

[58] Plutarch commonly speaks of *the daimonion*. Plato rather speaks of *the daimonic sign* or *the daimonic voice*. On Plutarch's demonology cf. Eisele 1904; Arnim 1921: 3-37; Hamilton 1934; Döring 1984; Méautis 1950; Corlu 1970; Babut 1983; Timotin 2012; Finamore 2014: 44-50; Timotin 2015.

These discussions do not have any influence on the outcome of the conspiracy, they are connected only by the confluence of the characters or of time – they happened to take place this evening when someone unrelated to the serious and planned matter of revolution showed up – or so Plutarch suggests. The tale of the conspiracy had to contain philosophical discussions, but the choice of the topics are entirely Plutarch's as he underlines by connecting them to fictitious characters and not to the main characters of the revolt. Thus, indirectly he shows the readers that he, Plutarch, is the author of these[59], that he is not merely retelling what happened once upon a time – even though in part, he is[60]. Indirectly, he draws attention to the artifice of the plot. The reader is not receiving the faithful report of a historian but is instead challenged by a dialogue of manifest caprice in its construction.

5. *Intended readers and listeners*

Some readers had suggested that Plutarch had combined the more serious philosophical topic with the exciting story to draw an adolescent and less philosophical group of readers[61]. It seems unwise to reify a text's complexity as a double readership—the exciting story like Lucretius' honey on the lip of the cup of wormwood for the young readers and the real philosophy for those hard-bitten readers who can take their philosophical medicine straight. A more literary and significant reading takes the dialogue as a whole and does not assign the fictional merely to a naïve reader. Plutarch is encouraging us to be far more sophisticated readers.

Plutarch is well aware of the fact that different kinds of readers can gain something from a text, according to their abilities and interests. In *Quomodo*, Plutarch uses the image of a number of animals, including the bee[62], foraging a meadow:

> Now just as in pasturage the bee seeks the flower, the goat the tender shoot, the swine the root, and other animals the seed and the fruit, so in the reading of poetry one person culls the flowers of

59 There is an additional hint in the name of the supposed author of the myth, Timarchus of Chaironea, which may just direct us to *Plutarchus of Chaironea* (HANI 1980: 47; HARDIE 1996: 131).

60 DESIDERI 1984: 574 points out that there is an overlap of details with other accounts of the conspiracy and thus not only free artistic invention.

61 Cf. RUSSELL 2010: 3: "It would be foolish to suggest that Plutarch is *primarily* targeting an adolescent readership (or his own pupils) but he certainly has one in mind" Cf. CORLU 1970: 89 assumes that the historical narrative is only there for an aesthetic effect, as relaxation for the reader.

62 On the image of the bee in Plutarch cf. FUHRMANN 1964: 135-136 note 2; BORTHWICK 1991; CANNATÀ FERA 2000: 89, 90-91 note 19.

> the story, another rivets his attention upon the beauty of the diction and the arrangement of the words, as Aristophanes says of Euripides, I use the rounded neatness of his speech; but as for those who are concerned with what is said as being useful for character (and it is to these that our present discourse is directed), let us remind them how strange it is if the lover of fables does not fail to observe the novel and unusual points in the story, and the student of language does not allow faultless and elegant forms of expression to escape him, whereas he that affects what is honourable and good, who takes up poetry not for amusement but for education, should give but a slack and careless hearing to utterances that look toward manliness or sobriety or uprightness, such, for example, as the following[63].

Plutarch speaks of three points of interest, of those who are "lovers of fables" (*philomythos*), of the "lovers of language" (*philologos*) and of those who are *philotimon kai philokalon*, i.e. lovers of honor and beauty[64]. The current text (*Quomodo*) is addressed to the latter, he writes. *Quomodo* reflects on how to train young readers to read poetry well, i.e. morally and thus does not encourage them to pay attention to the story nor to the beauty of language. Like Plato, Plutarch is worried about the effect poetry can have on young people, but his answer is different from the one Plato gives in the *Republic*. Instead of censuring the texts, D. Konstan shows, Plutarch wants to train the readers[65]. Like a bee they are

63 30C-E: Ἐπεὶ δ' ὥσπερ ἐν ταῖς νομαῖς ἡ μὲν μέλιττα διώκει τὸ ἄνθος, ἡ δ' αἴξ τὸν θαλλόν, ἡ δ' ὗς τὴν ῥίζαν, ἄλλα δὲ ζῷα τὸ σπέρμα καὶ τὸν καρπόν, οὕτως ἐν ταῖς ἀναγνώσεσι τῶν ποιημάτων ὁ μὲν ἀπανθίζεται τὴν ἱστορίαν, ὁ δ' ἐμφύεται τῷ κάλλει καὶ τῇ κατασκευῇ τῶν ὀνομάτων, καθάπερ ὁ Ἀριστοφάνης περὶ τοῦ Εὐριπίδου φησί χρῶμαι γὰρ αὐτοῦ τοῦ στόματος τῷ στρογγύλῳ· οἳ δὲ τῶν πρὸς τὸ ἦθος εἰρημένων ὠφελίμως ἔχονται, πρὸς οὓς δὴ νῦν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος ἐστίν, ὑπομιμνήσκωμεν αὐτοὺς ὅτι δεινόν ἐστι τὸν μὲν φιλόμυθον μὴ λανθάνειν τὰ καινῶς ἱστορούμενα καὶ περιττῶς, μηδὲ τὸν φιλόλογον ἐκφεύγειν τὰ καθαρῶς πεφρασμένα καὶ ῥητορικῶς, τὸν δὲ φιλότιμον καὶ φιλόκαλον καὶ μὴ παιγνίας ἀλλὰ παιδείας ἕνεκα ποιημάτων ἁπτόμενον ἀργῶς καὶ ἀμελῶς ἀκούειν τῶν πρὸς ἀνδρείαν ἢ σωφροσύνην ἢ δικαιοσύνην ἀναπεφωνημένων, οἷα καὶ ταῦτ' ἐστὶ.

64 Cf. Hunter and Russell 2011: 171-172.

65 Konstan 2004: 7-8: "Whereas Plato felt obliged to ban narrative poetry, assigning to his philosopher kings the responsibility for recognizing what was harmful in poetry and what safe, Plutarch places his confidence in the astuteness of the audience of reader, indeed the young reader. Accountability for the meaning or message of the text is thus shifted from the poet to the audience." Konstan 2004: 7: "The Academy that Plutarch knew endorsed skepticism with regard to ultimate truths, and ascribed this view, with some plausibility, to Socrates as well. Plutarch exploits the doubts of professional philosophers in order to reduce the student's confidence in the insight of poets, who have even less claim to arcane intelligence."

supposed to gather their nutrients even from the most pungent flowers[66]. In this context, Konstan speaks of "the notion of the resisting listener"[67]. He claims that Plutarch aims for the "joy of exegesis, the pleasure of the erudite commentator as opposed to that of the naïve reader who submits to the fascination of the story"[68]. Duff speaks of "active, engaged and critical readers"[69] and he claims this talk "of critical, sophisticated readers" is not "a rather desperate defence" of confused passages, but that there is "evidence that Plutarch expected the kind of sophisticated readers whom we have imagined"[70]. There is "need for the reader's active involvement in weighing-up"[71]. This suggest that Plutarch commonly writes for a sophisticated reader and that he transfers a considerable interpretative task to the reader who is meant to be

66 32E-F: "Now the bee, in accordance with nature's laws, discovers amid the most pungent flowers and the roughest thorns the smoothest and most palatable honey; so children, if they be rightly nurtured amid poetry, will in some way or other learn to draw some wholesome and profitable doctrine even from passages that are suspect of what is base and improper." Ἡ μὲν οὖν μέλιττα φυσικῶς ἐν τοῖς δριμυτάτοις ἄνθεσι καὶ ταῖς τραχυτάταις ἀκάνθαις ἐξανευρίσκει τὸ λειότατον μέλι καὶ χρηστικώτατον, οἱ δὲ παῖδες, ἂν ὀρθῶς ἐντρέφωνται τοῖς ποιήμασιν, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν φαύλους καὶ ἀτόπους ὑποψίας ἐχόντων ἔλκειν τι χρήσιμον ἀμωσγέπως μαθήσονται καὶ ὠφέλιμον.

67 KONSTAN 2004: 7.

68 KONSTAN 2004: 17. ZADOROJNYI 2002 develops a different picture; he thinks that Plutarch does not seem "a particular good reader" of literature (297).

69 DUFF 2011: 59: "I shall argue that the lack of explicit injunction is revealing about the kind of contract Plutarch envisages between the author and reader and about the kind of readers Plutarch constructs for his *Lives*: not passive readers expecting instruction but active, engaged and critical readers – just the kind of reader Plutarch imagines for some of the texts in the *Moralia*." Cf. 69.

70 DUFF 2011: 76: "One might argue that talking of critical, sophisticated readers is merely to mount a rather desperate defence of, or to try to put as good a face as possible on, passages or texts which might otherwise seem confusing and inconsistent. Is there any other evidence that Plutarch expected the kind of sophisticated readers whom we have imagined or indeed that ancient texts were ever read in this way?" DUFF 2011: 59: "You yourself will judge these things from the narrative (*Agis* 2.9.)." DUFF 2011: 77: "But whether we aim correctly at what we should it is possible [*sc.* For you] to judge (krinein) from my account" (*Per.* 2.5.)." DUFF 2011: 71: Duff writes that "in some cases in Plutarch it is not at all clear whether judgments made by minor characters in the *Life* are to be shared by the reader or which of two divergent points of view should be adopted."

71 DUFF 2011: 72. The reader is asked to get involved "in a mutual investigation, in which he or she does the work of assessing and judging the moral character of the subjects and responds actively to the text through which these subjects are presented, recurs in the very final words of that prologue." (DUFF 2011: 77).

the co-philosopher rather than a mere recipient of knowledge just as the listener of a lecture is not meant to be passive, but a co-worker of the speaker, as Plutarch points out in *De recta*[72].

Plutarch's *De genio* is such a text requiring a sophisticated reader. Not all is what it seems. Philosophical discussions can be a veil for a conspiracy[73], and women who are celebrating can in fact be dangerous conspirators (596D). Bonazzi writes "that signs occur throughout without any clear indication of how to interpret them" and that this is "typical of Plutarch, who is less willing to impose his views on the reader than usually assumed. It implies a second, equally important, characteristic, namely the need for interpretation, which reveals the 'adequate' reader, the reader who has proved himself able to meet Plutarch's challenge by reading the text with proper philosophical attention"[74].

Such a listener or reader is not to be found in the frame dialogue. The narrator Caphisias belongs to the conspirators, he has received a good education, but is interested more in the performance in the gymnasium than in philosophical discussions[75], his account "is likely to be a partisan point of view"[76]. Archedamus' group of friends is described as "sons of good fathers" (575E, my transl.) – their only claim to goodness is their lineage[77]. This does not suggest a particularly philosophical group of listeners. It is as if these listeners have understood the basic message of the *Quomodo* where the students have to learn to detect honor and beauty and

[72] *De recta* 45D-F. On similar techniques in other Plutarchean texts cf. Brenk 2000: 49: "Plutarch remains sublimely ambivalent, leaving it up to the reader to decide…" (on the *Erotikos*); Duff 2000 (on the "dissonance between *Life* and *sýnkrisis*", 160; reader as "jury", 161); König 2007 (on *Sympotic Questions*). Stadter 2000 argues that the *Lives* were not written for a young audience to be educated in "basic moral principles", but the "adult friends" who were "cultured men" and had a "solid grounding in rhetoric and philosophy" (494-495) and that Plutarch expects a high level of "sophistication" when presenting his audience with the "duplex mirror" of a "pair of lives" (508).

[73] Everyone involved in the revolt had regularly met in Simmias' house where they were free to talk about the conspiracy while seemingly (*phanerôs*) talking about philosophy (576B) (On the repeated usage of *phanerôs* cf. Hardie 1996, 125).

[74] Bonazzi 2020: 75. Cf. Hardie 1996: 135; Pelling 2002: 267: "Narrative is a slippery thing, and Plutarch ensured that his readers knew it."; "a rather sophisticated brand of complicity between narrator and narratee" (268). Brenk 2016 shows that Plutarch's texts are "highly literary creations" (89) and that it is impossible to identify characters in the dialogue as unambiguously presenting Plutarch's ideas (90-93).

[75] 583C-E; 585D.

[76] Pelling 2010: 121.

[77] Cf. Hani 1980: 72 note 1.

that the students are meant to be prepared for philosophy by reading poetry[78]. Later in the text, Plutarch even suggests that the mere interest in listening to stories may even be opposed to a true philosophical interest. The conspirators used to meet and discuss philosophy as a veil to plan their conspiracy, and they even invited the tyrants to deflect suspicion. And Archias was deceived and he "enjoyed listening" to Simmias' "stories and exotic lore" (576B-C) and so failed to move from stories to philosophy[79]. Furthermore, there are palpable gaps in the philosophical discussion. We miss Simmias' response to Galaxidorus' theory of the *daimonion* of Socrates because the narrator has been called outside to deal with the Hipposthenidas episode. Towards the end of the tale, Caphisias leaves Simmias' house right after Theanor's speech and we thus miss the final discussion of these issues – at least Epaminondas' statement that he will break off the conversation in the right moment suggests that the more philosophical participants might try to wrap up the conversation (594B). More philosophically inclined readers may lament that they have to follow Caphisias to deal with the conspiracy instead of being allowed to listen to the philosophical discussion, but they should know that Plutarch does not want to deprive them of a treat, but tells them to take part in the enterprise now and come to the conclusions that the text does not reach.

5. *Conclusion*

Plutarch wrote a sophisticated text for a sophisticated reader. Other, less sophisticated readers can, of course, read the text and gain something from it, but the reader for whom Plutarch is aiming is a co-philosopher who is able to take all the elements and ideas and threads of ideas, their connections within the text, but also with other authors and texts. The text is a dialogue in more than one sense. It is, in a literal sense a dialogue – or rather there is a frame dialogue, a narrative with narrative parts and dialogues, and with second level narratives which may again contain some short dialogue[80]. But it is also, of course, a dialogue with Plato and other philosophical traditions, and it invites the reader to take part in it[81]. The text becomes a complex network of ideas and topics which encourages the reader

78 Cf. RUSSELL 2010: 4. HUNTER and RUSSELL 2011: 172 point out that *phronêsis* is missing in the passage which speaks of the *philotimon kai philokalon*; if we speak about young readers that are supposed to be trained for virtue before reaching philosophy, this might not be a casual omission.

79 Cf. HARDIE 1996: 125.

80 On this very complex literary form cf. PELLING 2010: 124.

81 PELLING 2010: 126: "and the reader is involved in weighing both points of view [i.e. on "Epaminondas' stance"] – in a further dialogue, if you like, a more Bakhtinian dialogic sort of dialogue in which the reader converses with the text".

to become part of the philosophical investigation. The ideal reader would thus neither be the reader merely interested in the outcome nor the one who is particularly interested in the details, but the one who can put these together and go beyond. It is the art viewer who is not merely interested in the identification of the topic ("Madonna with child") nor just in the details (brushstrokes, colors, quality of the artistry), but in the whole work in its complexity, in its meaning, its connections or dialogue with or transformation of other artworks. Plato' *Phaedo* seems – and is supposed to seem? – tame, compared to this firework of ideas. There is not merely one topic under scrutiny in the *De genio*, but it can be read as a contribution to more than one. And not each and every part and detail has to contribute to every topic. There can be branches in this network that contribute only (or mostly) to one issue, and others which contribute to more than one. Yet, there is one topic that holds the whole dialogue together and gives it a complex unity. The *De genio* is a reflection on what a story is and what role chance has to play within a story (in life and in literature). Plutarch clearly likes details and often uses them to show the characteristics of his protagonists[82]. But the close reading of *De genio* shows that chance events have a very complex and ambiguous role to play. Chance events may or may not have anything to do with the main narrative and they may not contribute at all to it nor even to a better view of the protagonists. Plutarch deliberately populates his story with chance events and their varying interpretation. Is the missing bridle a chance event or a divine sign? Did some god send lightening without thunder or was it merely by chance that these weather conditions were the case? Were the conspirators brave men who defied all obstacles, were they divinely guided or did they in the end prevail against adverse fortune? Such questions are obviously relevant in a story, but also in real life. Stories (in life and in literature) do not have a linear line[83], they are full of detours, strangers appear and chance events happen, and it is up to us to make a story out of them, as a person living a life and as a reader figuring out a story.

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[82] Cf. Hani 1980: 212 note 4: "Encore une idée familière à Plutarque: il aime le detail, le trait particulier, dans la mesure où il permet de peindre un caractère ou un acte de virtue".

[83] van der Horst 1941: 85: "On pourrait estimer que les sujets d'entretien offrent trop de diversité. Mais n'en va-t-il pas ainsi de toute conversation?"

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