

## The Last Champion of Play-Wisdom: Aesop.

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### 1. *Huizinga and the play-element in Greek culture.*

"Culture arises in the form of play... it is played from the very beginning... it proceeds in the shape and the mood of play": it is with these words that Huizinga gave to play, that free, pleasurable, self-contained activity with no economic or utilitarian aim, the status of a fundamental element in culture. Since by "culture" he generally meant any form of human life entailing artistic or intellectual elaboration, he asserted by the same token that play factors are central in the development of knowledge, that is in the activities aimed at establishing what is "reality" and what is "truth". With reference to Ancient Greece, he took the sophist as a typical practitioner of "play-science", considering him as a successor to primitive prophets, thaumaturges and poets<sup>1</sup>.

Huizinga was not afraid of asking more questions than he could answer; so the notion of culture he tried to construct could never reach complete coherence<sup>2</sup>. In *Homo Ludens*, the treatment of the relationships between "play" and "seriousness" is, on the whole, as stimulating as it is baffling. Play is inseparable from civilization (a term which is on an equal footing with "culture"); but not all historical epochs are equally "playful", and indeed in some of them the original union ends in divorce for reasons which are never very clear. The main question is left standing: if play is a creative force operating in culture, why should culture relinquish it at all?

Huizinga's insights, nevertheless, seem worth picking up; not in order to revise the description of play factors in Greek culture given in *Homo Ludens*,

1. J. HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*, Boston 1955, 46 and 146.

2. The relevance of Huizinga's idea of culture for Greek history has been specifically discussed by A. MOMIGLIANO, "L'agonale di Burckhardt e l' "Homo Ludens" di J. Huizinga", *ASNS Pisa*, 4, 1974, 369-73.

still less to attempt a fully-fledged recognition of the anthropological area of play<sup>3</sup>, but in order to explore some aspects of Greek cultural evolution from a (hopefully) different angle. Huizinga insists on the fact that play factors *were* at work in the development of Greek thought; that some specific "culture operators" made extensive use of them; and that some representations of reality and notions of truth were elaborated thanks to this "method". This essay will focus on some play elements in the specifically Greek concept of *sophia*, originally meaning both practical and theoretical knowledge. The main question is: why, after having held for some time a recognized status as elements of *sophia*, play features were pushed into a marginal position, and eventually outside the domain of "real" knowledge? To attempt an answer, the discussion will focus on: a) some specific ways of producing *sophia*; b) the relevance among them of a particular rhetorical instrument, the fable, and of its asserted inventor, Aesop; c) a cultural role which was played until Late Antiquity, that of the Mad Wise Man. Eventually, some possible inferences on the separation of play from knowledge in Ancient culture will be tentatively offered.

## 2. *The play dimension of sophia.*

What is, first of all, the meaning of "play" with reference to *sophia*? All along in *Homo ludens*, Huizinga features play as an alternative to "ordinary" life. Contrary to any other human activity, play is pursued merely for its own sake. It is however recognized as a socially relevant activity, providing pleasure to the community and often introducing constructive competition in it. A temporary secession from normal existence, it produces the fundamental contrast between seriousness, the mark of the constriction of the outside reality, and jest, the expression of the player's freedom. Play thus provides some patterns for experiment, innovation and creation.

Starting from Huizinga's general discussion, and keeping within the field of human communication, the following attitudes can thus be considered as forms of play:

1. Paradox: the deliberate distortion of current formulations. Questioning accepted views of reality, paradox also betrays a playful intellectual disposition, in so far as it accepts the risk of failing to alter the established order of ideas, of remaining a mere individual joke which achieves nothing else than the pleasure of being performed<sup>4</sup>.
2. Irony: the mode of speech where the verbal media contradicts the conceptual message, in the attempt to produce new meanings by negating seriousness to the given reality.

3. As attempted, for instance, by R. CAILLOIS, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Paris 1967<sup>(2)</sup>.

4. This is the Presocratic "tradition of bold conjectures and of free criticism" which has been sketched by Sir J. POPPER, "Back to the Presocratics", in *Conjectures and Refutations*, London and Henley, 1972<sup>(4)</sup>, 136-55.

3. Parody: the attempt to modify a previous utterance by partially repeating it while introducing some modifications which affect the authority of the model and stimulate new thinking on the subject.

4. Utopia: the representation of an alternative world.

Huizinga was well aware of the fact that, since Presocratic times, the *sophos* is somebody mastering verbal and conceptual techniques. To state views apparently conflicting with reality (it can be added) is the *sophos*' privilege and duty (nothing could be more directly opposed to common experience than the opening declaration of Greek science, Thales' utterance that all things are made of water<sup>5</sup>) and this capability may lead him to express a radical and self-conscious denial of the value of given representations and of current procedures of thought. "Of all those whose words I heard" says Heraclitus "no one came to understand that real knowledge (*sophon*) lies separate from all other things"<sup>6</sup>.

Moving from Burckhardt's description of the agonistic temper in Greek civilization, Huizinga also pointed to the play dimension inherent to the wisdom-diffusing process. Although his wording was different, and made no specific reference to the notion and operating modalities of the still largely oral archaic Greek culture, Huizinga was aware of the double original requirement of *sophia*: an agonistic mode of elaboration and an hedonistic mode of reception by the public.

These two play elements are strictly linked. Pleasure is a main vehicle of persuasion: Gorgias and Plato knew very well the spell-casting modalities of poetic and dramatic performances<sup>7</sup>. Gratifying its audience in order to instruct them, the message provides an alternative to practical, daily-life communication: in other words, it opens up a play dimension. But this play must be competitive. Truth is nobody's monopoly: it emerges from the comparative performance of the various *sophoi*. The final assessment is normally rendered by the audience (directly or through a jury). From the contest between Homer and Hesiod down to the dramatic *agones* staged in the Athenian theatre of Dionysos in V Century B.C., competing messages of wisdom are thus performed in front of an audience who are there to compare, weigh and give final arbitration on the relative value of each of them.

The "sophistic" competition for "theoretical" *sophia*, which Huizinga took as typical of "play-knowledge" in V Century B.C., obeys those same principles. The competitors engage in an *agon* of spoken words: listeners are meant to become engrossed in the argument in order to declare their conviction and their support to one of them; truth and knowledge are the prize of the dialectical winner. Formally sound deductions as well as paralogisms, enigmas, amphibologies, all are used as speech acts in order to assert the opposers'

5. Thales, frag. 11 B 1, 3 Diels-Kranz.

6. Heraclitus, frag. B 108 Diels-Kranz.

7. Gorgias, frag. 82 B 11, 9 and 23 Diels-Kranz. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245 a ff.; *Republic*, 595 a ff., 605 c ff. The play-dimension of Attic theatre is aptly described in *Homo Ludens*, 144-45.

ignorance, and the wildest paradoxes are thus easily produced. Plato's *Euthydemus* attests how this display of verbal tricks delights at least some specific audiences.

Plato's own capability to further exploit play-elements is proved by his *Symposium*. The Greek drinking-party of Classical times takes place in a ritually consecrated room, which has been separated from "ordinary" life and thus designed, among other things, to create a "ludic space". Here "symposial fight" erupts: often mere drinking-competitions, but also plays of physical skill (such as the *kottabos* performed with drinking-vessels), singing of *skolia*, verbal games, amusing enigmas (the *griphoi*)<sup>8</sup>, and conversation on all subjects. This agonistic, playful setting is chosen by Plato to have Socrates describing what could well have impressed most contemporaries as a truly uncommon, almost unreal, experience: the teaching of wisdom to him, a man, by Diotima, a woman...<sup>9</sup>

Plato, however, condemns the sophists' orgiastic use of paradox. The eristic disposition of these *sophoi* attests an "almost quixotic indifference"<sup>10</sup> to even basic constraints of common sense: how could the sophistic style of word-playing foster theoretical knowledge? playing, *paizein*, is one thing; searching in earnest for the truth is another<sup>11</sup>. Against the principle of play, Plato intends to set the principle of seriousness in intellectual research.

But how does Plato carry on his project? Precisely by calling onto the stage another sophist, the shrewdest of them all, Socrates. The style of argument used by Socrates in an essential passage of *Meno*<sup>12</sup> is fully eristic and the foundation of *sophia* proposed in this dialogue pushes paradox to an apparent point of self-contradiction. Having no use for the currently accepted representations and (mis) conceptions, the sage claims to know nothing. The Platonic philosophical quest starts from a traditional assumption: that *sophia* requires a paradoxical mood of expression.

Indeed, Socratic ignorance fits into pre-existing patterns. Heraclitus, again, "was quite astonishing (*thaumasios*) from his very childhood, since, as a young man, he used to say that he knew nothing, and he claimed that he had grasped everything when he had grown up"<sup>13</sup>. The idea that supreme wisdom might be owned by the most unexpected (that is, supposedly ignorant) person is an old one: within the Seven Sages, Myson, declared by the

8. The drinking party, formally dedicated to Dionysos, is a ritually self-contained society, a *thiasos*, (P. von der MÜHLL, "Das griechische Symposion" = *Kleine Schriften*, Basel 1976, 489-90). The notion of "symposial fight" is due to E. PELLIZER, "Della zuffa simpotica", in M. VETTA (ed.), *Poesia e simposio nella Grecia antica*, Roma-Bari, 1983, 31-41.

9. See M. HALPERIN, "Why is Diotima a Woman? Platonic *Eros* and the Figuration of Gender", in *Before Sexuality. The Construction of Erotic Experience in Ancient Greek World*. Princeton U.P., 1990, 257-308.

10. R.B. BRANHAM, *Unruly Eloquence. Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions*, Harvard U.P., 1989, 77.

11. Plato, *Euthydemus*, 283 a.

12. Plato, *Meno*, 80 e.

13. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, IX 5.

Delphic oracle to be the wisest of all men, was a poor peasant in an obscure village<sup>14</sup>. Socrates too, even before he had begun his investigation, had been identified in the same oracular way as the wisest among the Greeks<sup>15</sup>. At the moment, he could hardly believe it; but at the end of his life he had become more self-conscious and told his judges that, instead of being punished for having undermined traditional beliefs, he was entitled to lifelong public maintenance for having devoted himself to instructing the *polis*<sup>16</sup>. By uttering this ironical paradox, possibly the sharpest heard so far in Athens, Socrates added a new version to the existing models of the *sophos*: the Mad Wise Man.

In playing this variation to an old role, Socrates was also in tune with his own times. For even representations of a world turned upside-down had now become institutionalized into the collective capital of knowledge. Athenian classical culture made systematic use of the literary form of the theatre play, wonderfully suited to an oral communication system, and in it comedy was certainly no less important than tragedy. The periodical dramatic *agones* provided each time fresh messages of wisdom to the whole *polis*. Tragedy achieved this by inspiring pity and fear, comedy by eliciting laughter; both aimed at rendering the community wiser. Through tragic myth or comic parody, this specific form of play pointed to a "different" reality, and thus added a new dimension to the audience's experience of life. Collective knowledge was then fostered by performed fictions; play opened the way to seriousness; lies introduced truth. The hero of the Socratic dialogues, identified by Bakhtin as the first serio-comic character in Western tradition, is akin to some of Aristophanes' heroes, those burlesque *sophoi* whose methodical madness finally triumphs over the wisdom of their opponents.

### 3. *Aesop and play-knowledge.*

This is the cultural framework where another bizarre Wise Man joins the game of play-knowledge: the story-teller Aesop, first mentioned in Herodotus' *Stories*<sup>17</sup>.

Aesop's popularity in Athens in the second half of V Century B.C. is attested by Aristophanes' comedies<sup>18</sup>. His name is from now on linked to the traditional strange little stories which, since Hesiod's days, had been used to enforce an argument in discussion. The Aesopic fables are, broadly speaking, tales where non-human agents (usually animals are enlisted) act as if they possessed human capabilities, but, at the same time, obey their "natural" attribu-

14. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives...*, I 106-8.

15. Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 20e - 23c.

16. Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 36 b-e.

17. II 134-5.

18. Aristophanes, *Birds*, 471 ff., 651-53 ff.; *Peace*, 129-30; *Wasps*, 566, 1399-1405, 1446-48.

tions<sup>19</sup>: the effect is an ironical reference to human reality. Aristophanes associates these fables to the comic brand of *sophia*; and Socrates connects some paradoxical modes of enquiry to the Aesopic way of representing reality. In that most utopian of comedies, the *Birds*, a fable provides the relevant piece of evidence in a discussion. The Hoopoe is suggesting an alliance between birds and men; Peisthetairos objects, stating, on Aesop's authority, that any partnership between wingless and winged beings is contrary to nature and cannot hold: at first the fox and the eagle established a very human relation, friendship (*koinonia*), but ended up by wildly devouring each other's babies<sup>20</sup>. Always in the *Birds*, the fable of the lark has the same rhetorical function (a "factual" proof): the birds *are* the most ancient beings in the whole world, since, when his father died, the lark could not entomb him on Earth, which did not yet exist, and had to bury him in his own head. According to Aristophanes, Aesop is once again the author of this little piece of aetiological nonsense<sup>21</sup>. He can also be invested with the full authority of play-wisdom: as a character of the *Birds* says, the fact of not being much acquainted with him is a proof of being "ignorant and stupid"<sup>22</sup>. In I Century A.D., Babrius again describes Aesop as the specialist of utopian wisdom, the recorder of events which took place in the Golden Age when men, animals and plants spoke one and the same language<sup>23</sup>.

But Aesopic story-telling as a support for *sophia* is by no means restricted to comic contexts. One of Socrates' verbal improvisations is a fable "as Aesop could have told, had he thought of it"<sup>24</sup>. In order to point out the relationship between two opposite entities, Pleasure and Pain, Socrates tells that, since the two went on quarrelling all the time, Divinity, unable to separate them, bound their heads together, the result being that whoever wants to get one is compelled to take the other as well<sup>25</sup>. Socrates is making use of this fantasy to describe a very paradoxical, but also real, personal experience (he is in jail and, while massaging his leg which has just been taken out of the chains, he feels physical pleasure taking the place of the previous pain: how strange, *hos atopon*, he exclaims). Here is the starting point of a philosophical discussion of the connection between opposites: how can one avoid saying that Simmias is both tall and small, and so on...<sup>26</sup>. The Aesopic fable, here a small piece of humorous aetiological research, is the first of a series of questions on the real world.

This could leave the impression that the play-element has, after all, only an

19. See M. NØJGAARD, *La Fable antique*, København 1964, 68 ff.; and my *Sapere e Paradosso nell'Antichità: Esopo e la favola*, Roma 1989, 224 ff.

20. Aristophanes, *Birds*, vv. 651-53.

21. Aristophanes, *Birds*, vv. 472-77.

22. Aristophanes, *Birds*, v. 471.

23. Babrius, *Mythiambs*, *Prolog.* I, vv. 1-16.

24. Plato, *Phaedo*, 60 c, 1-2.

25. Plato, *Phaedo*, 60 b-c.

26. Plato, *Phaedo*, 102 b and ff.

auxiliary function. But this would not be supported by the wording through which Plato describes the Socratic activity of inventing a fable: extemporary story-telling in Aesop's style is denoted here by the verb *enenoesen*, which belongs to the semantic field of intellectual production, of "thought" in its full and weighty meaning<sup>27</sup>. A bizarre paradox, then, has led to authentic knowledge; play has produced *sophia*<sup>28</sup>.

But the play-wisdom traditionally possessed by Aesop can only look whimsical to Aristotle. For the latter, knowledge must proceed from intellectual discipline and systematical research; logically formal procedures in philosophy have no need of a fable as a scientific auxiliary. This attitude is all the more evident since Aristotle can reproduce fragments of Aesopic narrative even in works devoted to natural science. In the *Meteorology*, for instance, he quotes in full one of Aesop's aetiologies, the tale of how Earth gradually emerged from the primeval waters. By telling it, Aesop had gained the upper hand against some shipyard workers who were laughing at him, possibly because of his traditional deformity. Here the tale is reproduced to jeer at Democritus' assertions about changes in the mass of the sea: a theory which, according to Aristotle, is just as laughable as Aesop's story means to be<sup>29</sup>.

So much for science, this Aristotelian creature; but what about practical *sophia*? Aristotle is aware of the way an oral communication system works, and how valuable allegorical devices can be in it. The fable, in this context, takes the rank of a formal rhetorical instrument, belonging to the class of fictional paradigms. No doubt, it is an instrument of practical persuasion, not of theoretical demonstration, but it can be remarkably effective if the speaker needs to address the common people, the *demos* (still the formal sovereign of *polis* in IV Century B.C.)<sup>30</sup>. To this effect, there is the need for the capacity to introduce some tale suitable to the actual context; that is, to build analogies between illusion and reality, "which is easier if one thinks as a philosopher"<sup>31</sup>. One whole chapter of the *Rhetorics* consequently depicts Aesop and Stesichorus (a name emerging from the wisdom-poetry tradition) engaged in rhetorical action and using the fable as a weapon. Both are taking sides in a political decision-making process. They are putting their good advice at the disposal of the community on a current question, an advice offered against the predominant trends of public opinion which it tries to influence by means of a deliberate use of paradox. In fact, with his tale of the fox and the hedgehog, Aesop demonstrates that the very decision the *Ekklesia* of the

27. See the relevant discussion by D. SABBATUCCI, *Il mito, il rito e la storia*, Roma 1978, 199-201.

28. As in many other Platonic pages: *Homo Ludens*, 149-150 provides a first approximation to the seriocomic in Plato's thought.

29. Aristotle, *Meteorology*, II, 365 b 10 ff. (the point is perhaps that all sea water would be sucked in by Earth at the end of the process, and then shipbuilders would prove as useless as lame Aesop, but still not as wise).

30. Aristotle, *Rhetorics*, II 20, 1393 b 8 - 1394 a 2.

31. Aristotle, *Rhetorics*, 1394 a 5.

Samians was on the verge of adopting would actually backfire against the true interests of the *demos*.

An as apparently frivolous utterance as the fable can thus leave its mark on the most serious part of reality, the realm of politics: even for scientifically-minded Aristotle, play and paradox can still, for practical purposes, and in specific circumstances, open an exclusive way to truth.

#### 4. *From Mad Socrates to Aesop once again.*

Starting from IV Century B.C., the Socratic model of enquiry has a large number of followers. Among these, the Cynics in particular carry on the tradition of a "critical" research, which opposes current beliefs and exhibits a *sophia* well equipped with paradoxes. These particular Socratics appreciate the analogical effectiveness of the Aesopic fables. They exploit their ironical propensities and are fond of their characters, these animals which reflect human nature at its deepest and act as human beings would if taken away from civilisation to the sphere of *theria*, the non-human nature.

"Socrates has turned mad", is Plato's comment at seeing *sophia* falling into the hands of Diogenes the Cynic<sup>32</sup>. The Mad Wise Man is back again: this time, he plays havoc with traditional values and communal beliefs. He negates the status of the *polis* as the highest structure of civilization, and declares the very notion of social hierarchy to be valueless (no revolutionary implication: no social system will ever be better or worse than any other one<sup>33</sup>). On this basis Diogenes, sold as a slave after he had been captured by pirates, can advertise himself as a master to the prospective buyers<sup>34</sup>. The real superiority is the superiority of mind, that is the Cynic way of viewing the world (and living in it), which scorns or inverts established values.

From the Hellenistic age to the times of the Graeco-latin *koine* civilization of the Empire, generations of these special "Socratics" will play again and again, with some rather unsubstantial variations, the role of Mad Wise Men pouring scorn and abuse on all other practitioners of knowledge. Those members of the sect who show a milder attitude, along the tradition initiated in II century B.C. by Bion of Boristhenes or Menippus of Gadara, will also make use of fables in order to impress some truths on the audience, by means of little stories which convey their message in a pleasant and convincing form. But in general a humourless harshness penetrates the fables used in the Cynic perorations<sup>35</sup> to such an extent, that, in I Century A.D., Babrius has to introduce his own elegantly versified Aesopic collection with the assuran-

32. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives...* VI 54.

33. See M.I. FINLEY, *Aspects of Antiquity*, Harmondsworth 1977, 87-88.

34. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VI 29-30.

35. See F.R. ADRADOS, *Historia de la Fábula greco-latina*, I, Editorial de la Universidad Complutense (Madrid), 1979, 551 ff., 619 ff.



ce that he has "softened the hard chords" of these reputedly "stinging verses"<sup>36</sup>.

The fact is that the Cynics are not so different from their rivals. As all other "lovers of *sophia*", by now, they take themselves very seriously<sup>37</sup>. Competition for wisdom is carried on by whole philosophical schools: Academics, Stoics, Epicureans, and many more, and always with the Cynics as perennial outsiders. But each sect is engaged in a perpetual fight in order to assert the authority of its Founding Father and has no time for joking or playing. The most Socratic of all traits, the perpetually ironical turn of mind of the Athenian *sophos*, is now mainly a source of embarrassment. The Stoics for instance are ready to pay reverence to the archetypal Martyr of Philosophy<sup>38</sup>, but turn away from the paradoxical elements in his thought and indeed from any flash of madness in the Wise Man<sup>39</sup>. Socrates' irony is unacceptable to Epicurus<sup>40</sup> and his later followers; Cicero remembers how his philosophy teacher, the Epicurean Zeno of Sidon, one of the most learned men of the time, stated his repulsion for the very idea of play-wisdom by means of an insulting definition of Socrates: *scurra Atticus*, the Athenian buffoon<sup>41</sup>.

Cicero admits jokes as a rhetorical device, but of course only in order to convey serious messages to the audience on very specific occasions (the example he gives refers typically to symposial conversation)<sup>42</sup>. In fact, general lack of a sense of humour prevails among men of science of all schools. One has to wait until the II Century A.D. for Lucian, a rhetor, to poke fun at all of them. Rhetors can also be very serious, as befits pillars of the existing educational and social order, the best practitioners of culture entrusted with the education of "élites". They call themselves "sophists", claiming that they are in charge of the extant patrimony of words, of the whole *sophia* preserved in writing since Homeric times; in this capacity, they are also entitled to practice the seriocomic genres. In I Century A.D., Dio of Prusa writes "little plays", *paignia* (the Sophist Thrasymachus, in V Century B.C., had used the same label for his collection of aporias), praising the Hair, the Parrot or the Fly (the latter, a subject for Lucian too). These "second Sophists" are once more practising knowledge in its most verbal dimension, which again means, unfortunately, its most self-satisfied and unproductive. The still existing creative possibilities of play-wisdom are exploited only by Lucian. He is masterly however, and in his jocular style he attempts a wholesome reshaping of tradition, systematically parodying it. His renovation of the seriocomic genre is in-

36. Babrius, *Mythiambos*, *Prolog.* I, 19; transl. B.E. Perry.

37. See L. JERPHAGNON, "Le philosophe et son image dans l'Empire d'Auguste à la Tétrarchie", *Bull. Ass. G. Budé*, 1981, 167-82.

38. See A. RONCONI, "Exitus illustrium virorum", in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. VI, 1966, I.258-60.

39. See A.A. LONG, "Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy", *CQ* 88, 1988, 151-2.

40. Cicero, *Brutus* 292 = Epicurus, frag. 231 Usener.

41. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I 91.

42. Cicero, *The Orator*, II 250.

deed an effort to produce new meanings by playing with the old ones<sup>43</sup>. The solemn, often pompous, wisdom of so many professional Wise Men, both philosophers and rhetors, has then called for a new flash of philosophic folly. Lucian follows the learned tradition; but a similar reaction appears at lower level as well. And the Mad Wise Man comes once more onto the stage as the hero of a rough, vulgar but nevertheless philosophical tale, which takes Aesop as its protagonist.

Aesop's features now take their final shape in a formal biography, the so-called *Life of Aesop*, whose different anonymous versions seem to have been worked out between the I and the IV Century A.D., crystallizing mainly in the II Century<sup>44</sup>. This is definitely a "popular" tale. Neither in form nor in content (particularly in version G) does it match the requirements of "high" literature<sup>45</sup>. Vulgarisms in word and action prove that this book did not intend to fulfill the expectations of an educated audience. In the period of the Second Sophistic, Graeco-Latin fiction is normally written according to the taste of the *pepaideumenos*, the cultivated if not thoroughly learned gentleman: the *Life of Aesop* has been recognized as the only exception in taking the opposite view<sup>46</sup>.

Still, remnants of a learned tradition lurk behind the plebeian coarseness. The biography faithfully relates the tale of Aesop's death in Delphi, a feature already well known to Herodotus and Aristophanes<sup>47</sup>. It includes anecdotes and utterances typical of traditional *sophia* and even his contamination with the old Oriental *Romance of Abigar* (a courtly literary production, by the way, no popular piece of oral narrative) could betray Classical influences<sup>48</sup>; finally, Aesop, an expert in play-wisdom, is here the supreme sage. The man is given to rhetorical *agones*, verbal jousts fought mainly against his philosopher-master Xanthos. He is skilled at resolving enigmas and at playing with words, and always ready to strike at his dialectic opponent with an unexpected *pointe*, which will put the laughing audience on his side.

This character can also be considered as an outcome of the deliberate vulgarization of the Socratic tradition by generations of Cynic street-preachers<sup>49</sup>. True to this philosophical bent, he keeps an outsider's view on contemporary culture and education (this fits well with the tradition making him a non-Greek by birth). A second Socrates, he is spiritually attractive despite his

43. BRANHAM, *Unruly Eloquence*, 211-15.

44. J.J. WINKLER, *Auctor and Actor. A narratological Reading of Apuleius's Golden Ass*, University of California Press, 1985, 279.

45. See A. LA PENNA, "Il Romanzo d'Esopo", *Athenaeum* N.S. 40, 1962, 265-66; and also WINKLER, *Auctor and Actor*, 280-82.

46. G. ANDERSON, *The Novel in the Graeco-Roman World*, London-Sydney-Totowa, 1984, 50-51 and 101.

47. Herodotus, *Stories*, II 134-5; Aristophanes *Wasps*, vv. 1446-48.

48. The relevance of Ahiqar in V Century B.C. Greek Culture is highlighted by M.J. LUZZATTO, "Grecia e vicino Oriente: tracce della «Storia di Ahiqar» nella cultura greca tra VI e V secolo a.C.", *Quaderni di Storia* XVIII-36, 1992, 5-84.

49. *Sapere e Paradosso...*, 205-12.

ugliness, and has the ability to bring out the ignorance of so-called learned people; a second Diogenes, he is sold as a slave on a market-place, where he warns his prospective acquirers that he "knows nothing" (another Socratic trait) and causes his buyer, Xanthos, a professor of philosophy, to burst out: "I bought myself a master!"<sup>50</sup>. Both ancestors have endowed him with an essentially ambiguous outlook: "the jug is modest, the wine is good"<sup>51</sup>.

This living paradox plays all the time; with words and sentences, with riddles and enigmas, and with his master as a cat with the mouse. Any triumph of Aesop's spontaneous wisdom over the ostentatious knowledge of the professional philosopher is greeted with applause and laughter by Xanthos' paying disciples, who forget any social and cultural solidarity with their teacher<sup>52</sup> (they are all members of the same affluent class<sup>53</sup>) and demand that Aesop be admitted in their symposion<sup>54</sup>: the superiority of play-*sophia* is then fully vindicated:

"This slave will drive me crazy!"<sup>55</sup>. Xanthos is right. The Mad Wise Man is fulfilling his mission once more: exploding sham *sophia*, asserting the true one. *Sophia* is to be taken here in its archaic, totalitarian meaning. Aesop's *exploits* are not limited to showing the vacuity of the professional assertions or bringing to light substantial ignorance; they are also directly relevant on the level of morality and politics. Aesop's behaviour unmasks the ugly aspects of Xanthos' personality (nastiness, revengefulness, lack of self-control and of inner dignity), all inadmissible in a true philosopher. Contradicting the old tradition of *sophia* as well as current expectations in Roman times<sup>56</sup>, Xanthos, the representative of the social and intellectual elite, proves to be good for nothing as a foreign invasion threatens the city (Samos). Shrewd advice and public safety come only from Aesop, who, after being initially greeted in the Assembly by an outburst of laughter, gains the status of a saviour of the community by the end. For a moment, the image of the independent *polis* of Classical times, the echo of Aristotle's appreciation of the political relevance of Aesop's wisdom, has come back to life<sup>57</sup>.

50. Aesop is sold and bought at market: *Life*, chap. 23; becomes the master of his master: 28 (both are Diogenic features: see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives...*, VI 29-30); is an expert in guess-play: 47-48; plays on double-meanings: 38, 39, 40, 44-50, 65, 68-73. For the strong Cynic features of this character, see also H. ZEITZ, "Der Aesoproman und seine Geschichte", *Aegyptus* 14, 1936, 230 ff.; A. LA PENNA, "Il Romanzo d'Esopo" (Aesop's wisdom is here - p. 291 - explicitly linked with Huzinga's idea of a ludic knowledge: this is the starting-point of this essay); F.R. ADRADOS, *Historia...*, 680-96; *Sapere e Paradosso...*, 116-27.

51. *Life*, chap. 27. WINKLER, *Auctor and Actor*, 277 ff. sees Aesop's comic ugliness as a specific "provocation to thought".

52. *Life G*, chapp. 26, 48, 52, 53.

53. *Life W*, chap. 20.

54. *Life G*, chap. 47.

55. *Life*, chap. 43.

56. See in gen. G.W. BOWERSOCK, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, Oxford 1969.

57. *Life*, chap. 81-100. Aristotle's appreciation is expressed, not only in the *Rhetorics*, but also in his *Constitution of the Samians* (Aristotle, fragg. 611, 33 and 473 ROSE).

### 5. One final assessment of play-wisdom.

Plutarch knows too that Aesop could occasionally be a political orator<sup>58</sup>. And at first sight, his *Dinner of the Seven Sages*, where Aesop is a relevant character, looks like an additional confirmation of the reappraisal of play-wisdom apparently made on different cultural levels in I-II centuries A.D. But in fact this dialogue makes an ambiguous evaluation of the play dimension in knowledge and of his representative.

Aesop comes to grips here with the great representatives of Presocratic wisdom, Thales, Bias, Pittakos, Solon, Chilon, Kleoboulos and Anacharsis, in a flow of relaxed yet lively discussion where, in the noblest symposial tradition, humour, jokes and laughter intermingle with seriousness and erudition. In this circle Aesop holds his place quite honorably; he knows how to take part in the exchange of views in good old eristic style<sup>59</sup> and displays the required amount of polemical wittiness, which amuses the whole company (everybody laughs, while he laughs too, jests, and is amiably laughed at<sup>60</sup>). If he could be considered as wise as he is funny, he would truly embody once again the tradition of play-wisdom.

But in Plutarch's *Dinner* there is in fact more play than wisdom on Aesop's side. What is his personal status in the symposion? He is certainly not one of the Seven; he is placed in a definitely diminutive position, since he does not lie on a bed, as everybody else, but sits down on "a very low stool" at Solon's feet (so that Solon is able to lay his hand on Aesop's head)<sup>61</sup>. This is a second-class place reserved for waiters, children or women (Kleoboulos' daughter, Kleobouline, sits down in the same way)<sup>62</sup>. And what is the weight of Aesop's own wisdom in the general context? The *sophia* expressed in the fables is praised as being "multicoloured and poliphonic"<sup>63</sup>; but it is clearly stated that Aesop did not invent it: he learned it from Hesiod. Moreover, Aesop is blamed by Anacharsis (apparently as wise a Barbarian as he is himself), for concentrating only on quick witticisms and thus being unable to understand constructively "true wisdom"<sup>64</sup>; he has little to say about, and seems to have quite an inadequate idea of, the political wisdom which is put forward by the Seven<sup>65</sup>; he has nothing to add, to the definitions given by all participants in their typical short sentences (*gnomai*)<sup>66</sup>. True, as a final show

58. Plutarch, *Old Men in Public Affairs*, 790 c-d.

59. Plutarch, *Dinner of the Seven Sages*, 7, 152 b: Aesop can speak *elegtikos*.

60. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 5, 152 c; 8, 152 e; 10, 154 c; 11, 154 f; 12, 155 b; 21, 164 b.

61. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 4, 150 a-b and 7, 152 c.

62. To sit down at a dinner-party (instead of lying on a bed) is a sign of social inferiority since the Classical times in the Greek world: see J.H. DENTZER, *Le motif du Dîner couché dans le proche Orient et le monde grec*, Roma 1982, 426 and 432.

63. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 14, 158 b.

64. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 12, 155 a-b.

65. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 7, 152 a-e.

66. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 8, 153 a; 9, 153 c-d; 12, 155 d-e.

of sympathy towards play-wisdom, Plutarch gives the fabulist the task of closing the symposion. Aesop aptly quotes Homeric verses in order to illustrate some of the Seven's sayings, but he calls the statement, made by another participant, that his own fables might exert the same authority, "a joke". In other words, Plutarch has Aesop admitting that his own brand of wisdom cannot hold the same status as Homeric poetry<sup>67-68</sup>.

Plutarch evidently enjoys quoting Aesop's tales and utterances, but he seems to consider them more as a passive object than as an active instrument of "scientific" research (the same attitude might have inspired all the erudite or educational fable-collecting activity, which went on till the end of Antiquity after the first *Aesopica* edited, around the turn of IV Century B.C., by Demetrius of Phaleron). Plutarch is, too, a man of his times: times where an increasingly academic and formalized knowledge set down in books can be acquired only by members of a social elite using an institutional system of education: the one which, in the *Life of Aesop*, Xanthos' disciples are possibly paying for. But, according to the views of the non-Plutarchian Aesop, those people might just be wasting their money. This Aesop cares for *sophia*, not for social prestige and wealth. Xanthos' academic, elitist learning ("I have been schooled in Athens by philosophers, rhetors, grammarians!" he boasts<sup>69</sup>) is something to be disposed of.

In his still Socratic approach, Aesop might have a point. From Hellenistic times onwards, culture is increasingly made up of a mass of theories, of a *polymathia* heaped up through centuries. This is an era of compilations, and of compilations of compilations. What about old Heraclitus's warning, that *polymathia*, "knowing a lot of things", does not give understanding by itself?<sup>70</sup> In II Century A.D. Aulus Gellius remembers these words so well, that he quotes them... in the first pages of his own encyclopaedia, the *Attic Nights*. Such a knowledge can still be a kind of game, a *lusus*: Gellius has been working, as he declares, mainly for his own and his readers' pleasure, and in fact he is aiming at collection erudite curiosities<sup>71</sup>. But this playful disposition coexists quite well with the prevailing idea of knowledge: less a vocation investing the whole of the personality and way of life of the *philosophos*, the knowledgelover, than the daily exploitation of a bookishly prefabricated list of statements, a prerequisite for a career, and a living for the largest crowd of professors ever seen in the Ancient world. Only the very best of them, like Lucian, have the courage to adopt the view that culture is something one should play with, not only for pleasure but also in order to preserve its vitality<sup>72</sup>.

67-68. Plutarch, *Dinner...*, 21, 164 b-c.

69. *Life G*, chap. 36.

70. Heraclitus, frag. 22 B 12, 40 Diels-Kranz.

71. Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, Introduction, 12-13.

72. Within Latin narrative of I-II centuries A.D., this consciousness might also have been shared by highly learned authors such as Petronius and Apuleius (see WINKLER, *Auctor and Actor*,

Could then Lucian be in the position to appreciate the full value of Aesop as the representative of a ludic wisdom tradition? No. It is Gellius, who, coherently with his own hedonistic notion of culture (more fun than wisdom, once again), sees Aesop's fables as the easy and pleasant way to "truth", by which he means, however, nothing more than some philosophical truism<sup>73</sup>. But Lucian is even more patronizing than Plutarch. In the imaginary symposium in the Isle of the Blest, Aesop is nothing else than a *gelotopoios*, a professional jester of low social level, whose function is to make people laugh, and not think<sup>74</sup>. Why is he given such a diminutive treatment?

Even for Lucian "culture" is tantamount to the literate and literary tradition, access to which must necessarily be restricted to a selected public. In some cases, this public may duly appreciate Aesopic fables as a specific allegorical device. But the kind of "alternative culture" which is offered by the anti-academic Aesop of the *Life* is of a different kind. It is unfortunately made up only of fragments of what was once knowledge; a repertory of more or less amusing curiosities or sheer trivia; puns, witticisms, some worn-out bouts of antifeminist satire, dialectical tricks (the remnants of an old tradition of antilogies or verbal jokes, such as the riddle of "the best and worse thing", the tongue, or the paradox of "drinking out the sea", which are common both to the *Life* and to Plutarch's *Dinner*<sup>75</sup>). All these can mean *sophia* only to people having been excluded from the formal educational process which is now required to form cultivated gentlemen, *pepaideumenoï* or *virī civiliter eruditi*, persons like Lucian, Gellius, and their intended audiences. A mere survivor of the old oral communication system of Classical times, this "wisdom" now finds its agonistic accomplishment in the almost clownish performances of street-philosophers of the Cynic tribe (the ones ridiculed by Lucian). This is the maximum which can be bestowed to the masses by the "Popularphilosophie", that form of third or fourth-hand acculturation which, to quote for a last time Huizinga's words echoing Dio of Prusa, "turned the heads of slaves and sailors with (an) hodge-podge of aphorisms, wisecracks and idle-chatter not devoid of seditious propaganda"<sup>76</sup>. But that can hardly provide any real alternative to high culture; and no "civilized" person will take it seriously. Aesop's biography is then effective only in repeating that learning is a kind of imposture, solely designed to reinforce social predominance, and that by itself it provides neither the right "ideas" nor the control of facts (Xanthos is as bad a man of science as he is of action)<sup>77</sup>.

283 ff., for the latter's deliberate use in his *Golden Ass* of popular materials akin to those of the *Life*). Neither of them, however, seem to have exerted a direct influence on the image of the Late Antiquity *sophos*.

73. Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, II 29.

74. Lucian, *A true Story* II 15.

75. The tongue: *Life* chap. 51-55 and Plutarch, *Dinner* 146 f. To drink out the sea: *Life* chap. 68-73 and Plutarch, *Dinner* 151 b-d.

76. *Homo Ludens*, 153.

77. See WINKLER, *Auctor and Actor*, 288 ff.

We are now facing an unbridgeable gap between two different realms of wisdom; but we are also coming to the point of understanding one possible reason why play-knowledge should have been marginalised, after having kept a propelling role in the culture of V Century B.C. Athens. This culture, both a development of Presocratic modes of thinking, teaching and performing and the jumping-board of Socratic and Platonic search for truth, had in drama one of its main instruments of conception and expression. It was then largely constructed on that interaction of "serious" and "playful" dynamics which was fundamental in dramatic production (any tragic trilogy had originally to be completed by a satiric drama; tragedy became later the constant reference of the comic parody; comedy itself mixed laughter and seriousness). Here wisdom could be enjoyable, popular, serious and creative all at the same time. This interaction diffused a permanent intellectual stimulation into the whole of the "political" body. The aim of the institutionalized mass-media system centered on the Attic theatre could be shared also by Socrates: both Xenophon and Plato agree in depicting this *sophos* as a quite ordinary Athenian citizen, who had a particular talent of exploiting the possibilities of the communication network typical of his *polis* for speculative and didactic purposes, and could talk to anyone and be listened to by anybody willing to do so<sup>78</sup>; Plutarch still remembers that he took no offense for being satirized by comedy, since for him theatre was "like a great symposion"<sup>79</sup>. No wonder that in this Athens Aesop (the author of stories whose messages could be understood universally, even by women<sup>80</sup>) was a paradigm of playful but equally authoritative wisdom. And not only on the comic scene: Socrates, while waiting to be put to death, still practised *sophia* by versifying Aesopic fables<sup>81</sup> and improvising apologues on the Aesopic mode.

This fluidity between intellectual play and creation was suited to a comparatively homogeneous, predominantly oral cultural circuit, where the "intellectuals" kept in mind that their own audience was the whole *polis*. Cultural production was elaborated through playforms and diffused through a play-structure; the whole *polis* acted as a play-community. Culture could then be a serious matter to (potentially) anybody, because the overall playful mood of its creation guaranteed free, universal access to it. The impulse to compete on a general seriocomic mode must have been provided by the prospect of addressing a large, socially and culturally stratified, yet deeply attentive and motivated public; the very audience which, with an unprecedented degree of "enthusiasm and partisanship", closely watched the duels for preeminence taking place in the arena of Athenian politics<sup>82</sup>.

78. Xen. *Memoirs of Socrates* I 1.1; Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 30a.

79. Plutarch, *The Education of Children*, 14, 10 d.

80. See Socrates' use of a fable, as described by Xenophon, *Memoirs of Socrates*, II 8, 13-14.

81. Plato, *Phaedo* 60 d. Socrates had presumably learned Aesopic fables thanks to their widespread oral diffusion.

82. J.J. WINKLER, "Laying down the Lawn: the Oversight of Men's Sexual Behaviour in Classical Athens", in *Before Sexuality...*, 197.

The political community of Classical Athens provided a culturally homogeneous environment. But in I Century A.D. (and almost certainly since the Hellenistic period) the possibility of such a universal audience was definitely lost: even the Promethean efforts of Lucianic parody could be effective only on a small, cultivated minority. From now on, there would be not one, but two worlds of wisdom: “high”, learned, mainly bookish culture on one side, the side of prevailing seriousness and authentic science, and “popular”, mainly oral tradition on the other, the side of both laughter and ignorance. Education stands in opposition to what must be called from now on “folklore”; culture is an elitist notion; knowledge can always be a source of pleasure, but no longer be produced by play; philosophy, the activity of theoretical contemplation, is restricted to the happy few.

One of Aristophanes’ characters could assert that to ignore Aesop’s wisdom was to be “ignorant and stupid”. The later scholiast’s comment proves how remote this evaluation sounds in Late Antiquity: “at that time, they took the story-teller Aesop seriously”<sup>83</sup>. Seen from the upper side, by now, Aesop has become at best the representative of an old, but definitely “minor” tradition of wisdom, and at worst a clown; seen from the lower, his old ludic and “Socratic” features have turned him into the hero of anti-culture. The fable, once a universal means of thought, has been demoted to a “popular” genre. Play-wisdom has become a contradiction in terms, and Huizinga will struggle to reconstruct its broken unity. So Aesop, the master of play-knowledge, must remain the last Mad Wise Man of Antiquity.

83. Aristophanes, *Birds*, v. 471 and *schol. vet.*: *ton logopoion Aisopon dia spoudes eichon.*