Bakhtin's Socrates
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No one in the history of philosophy and the history of rhetoric, not even the sophists, has been more abused than Socrates.¹ The sophists were merely scorned and maligned.² Socrates was quite eliminated, his voice appropriated by another.³ As a consequence, Socrates has traditionally been read as a mere point of origination of Platonic/Aristotelian philosophy and rhetoric, and both he and the so-called "Socratic method" have been sharply dismissed from contemporary rhetoric and composition studies. Vitanza, for example, characterizes Socratic dialogue as a search for generic concepts—concepts that can be "transferred to and acquired by another human being"—and describes Socratic pedagogy as "a series of questions [from a teacher] that force an interlocutor [a student] to always give the desired answers, thereby leading the interlocutor to arrive at the predetermined conclusion to the inquiry" (162, 166). Sosnoski, deploring the teacher/student relationship implied by such a pedagogy, says simply "Socrates Begone!" from the rhetoric and composition classroom (198). Nonetheless, Socrates has enjoyed a revival in contemporary scholarship, most strikingly in the works of Jacques Derrida and Mikhail Bakhtin but also in the works of numerous contemporary historians and philosophers.⁴ This revival has potential interest for rhetoric and composition studies, for it reveals a Socrates different from the one handed down through the Western tradition: a Socrates who speaks and listens to many voices, not just one; who is more concerned with living than he is with knowing; whose "rhetoric" is a means of testing people and ideas rather than a means of imposing his ideas upon others.⁵

Derrida's dramatic portrait of Socrates writing is at once a characterization of the traditional way of reading Socrates and an invitation to imagine a different Socrates. Bakhtin's Socrates is a more detailed sketch of what such a different Socrates might be. This different Socrates is a figure with many voices, a central figure in Bakhtin's dialogism, which has brought these many voices to contemporary rhetoric and composition studies.⁶ This Socrates is also the less familiar figure who lives in Bakhtin's carnivalesque world of everyday experience. Finally, he is a figure with links to the rhetorical tradition, the figure who appears in the early Platonic dialogues, whose rhetoric is a means of testing people and ideas, not a means of persuading others to accept his ideas, thus imposing his ideas upon them. This Socrates has potential interest as an
approach to issues of multiplicity and diversity, issues that have become increasingly pressing in rhetoric and composition studies.

In this paper I describe the problem of reconstructing the historical Socrates, the Socratic method as presented in traditional scholarship, Bakhtin's reconstruction of Socrates, and the Bakhtinian Socrates who appears in the early Platonic dialogues. I conclude by suggesting some implications of Bakhtin's Socrates for teachers of rhetoric and composition.

The Socratic Problem

The problem of reconstructing the historical Socrates—the so-called "Socratic problem"—arises because Socrates left no writings of his own and because the reports that do survive are a curious mixture: the personal and apologetic reminiscences of Xenophon, the biting satire of Aristophanes, the literary/philosophical dialogues of Plato, and the retrospective philosophical judgment of Aristotle. Given the nature of the evidence, any strict historical reconstruction of Socrates is not, and probably never will be, possible, and the best that we can hope for is some kind of rational reconstruction. In the case of Socrates, however, given the mix of personal, literary, and philosophical perspectives that have come down to us, even our best efforts at rational reconstruction might have to be, as in the case of Derrida and perhaps also Bakhtin, as much imaginative as they are rational.

Traditional scholarship has approached the Socratic problem by assuming that Plato and Aristotle are the best judges of Socrates' philosophical significance and by assessing Socrates accordingly (Evans 17-30; Gulley; Guthrie 321-507; Robinson 1-60; Santas). Guthrie is particularly explicit, but by no means alone, in this approach. Guthrie writes:

For the personal appearance, character and habits of Socrates we may go with confidence to both Plato and Xenophon, and we find indeed a general agreement in their accounts of these matters. But for our chief concern, the contribution of Socrates to philosophical, and in particular ethical, inquiry, I believe it is best to rely primarily on those who were themselves philosophers and so best capable of understanding him. That means in the first place Plato, but also Aristotle in so far as he was a student and associate of Plato and had learned from him the relation of his own thought to the unwritten teaching of his master. (349)

Given this preference for Plato and Aristotle, these scholars read Socrates teleologically, following Aristotle's assessment of Socrates' relationship to Plato in the Metaphysics (1078b18-33) and attributing to Socrates and his
method—the *elenchus* or refutation—two of the foundations of scientific thought: inductive arguments and the search for universal definitions—generic concepts that answer the question "What is X?" (Evans 17-30; Gulley 1-74; Guthrie 355-59, 425-42; Robinson 7-60; Santas 57-179). From this perspective they view Socratic method either as deficient because it lacks the rigor of science or as a significant contribution to its development. Robinson, on the one hand, claims that the *elenchus* "is inferior to the impersonal and universal and rational march of a science axiomatized according to Aristotle's prescription" (16). Gulley, on the other hand, affirms Aristotle's claim for Socrates' originality in the use of inductive arguments and the search for universal definitions, which influenced the development of both Plato's Forms and Aristotle's own logical theory, and he shares Aristotle's conviction "that Socrates' method was a scientific method, designed to yield certainty in ethics" (11-12, 17-18, 74). Even scholars who do not find Socrates' use of inductive arguments to be efficacious and who doubt the power of the *elenchus* to achieve certainty nonetheless assert the centrality of the search for universal definitions to Socrates' philosophical quest. Seeskin writes: "The fundamental quest of Socratic philosophy is to answer the question `What is it?'" (26).

More recent scholarship has approached the Socratic problem differently, seeking to identify a Socrates who has significance aside from his possible influence upon Plato, Aristotle, and the mainstream of the Western tradition. Derrida's portrait of Socrates writing challenges the traditional teleology according to which Socrates always says what Plato wants him to say and invites us to imagine a Socrates different from the one handed down to us in the Western tradition (Neel 14-19; Norris 185-93; Ulmer 141-46). In *The Post Card*, Derrida presents a postcard reproduction that shows Socrates seated and writing as Plato stands behind him apparently dictating what Socrates writes (9-10; Neel 15-17; Norris 187). Derrida calls this Plato "authoritarian, masterly, imperious," perhaps even "wicked," because he seeks "to kill," "to eliminate," "to neutralize" Socrates by putting his own words into Socrates' mouth and, as the postcard suggests, into his pen as well (10, 146). Derrida claims that the postcard represents the traditional teleology that views Socrates only from the perspective of Plato and hints at the possibility of reversing the "historical teleology" by which a letter (or a postcard) always arrives at its destination and the "common sense of the chronology" according to which Socrates always says only what Plato wants him to say (144, 146; Norris 187; Ulmer 141-42).

Bakhtin's Socrates is just such a different Socrates as Derrida invites us to imagine. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin approaches Socrates by way of the early, oral stage of Socratic dialogue, which he places within a carnivalesque line of development that leads to Dostoevsky and which he sets in contrast to traditional rhetoric, thus suggesting what a Socratic "rhetoric"
Bakhtin's Socrates might be (109-12). Other recent scholarship similarly approaches Socrates by way of the oral stage of Socratic dialogue presumed to be best represented by Plato's early dialogues (Brickhouse and Smith; Kennedy 41-42; Meyer; Vlastos). Vlastos provides a detailed contrast between the early and middle dialogues, concluding, among other of his findings, that whereas the Socrates of the middle dialogues seeks demonstrative knowledge and is confident that he finds it, the Socrates of the early dialogues, "seeking knowledge elenctically, keeps avowing that he has none" (46-49). Meyer contrasts the Socrates who asks questions in the early dialogues to the Plato of the middle dialogues who only gives answers (282-87). Brickhouse and Smith find in the Socrates of the early dialogues a figure similar to Bakhtin's Socrates and a rhetoric compatible with such a figure (3-72). Recent scholarship thus offers an alternative teleology and a Socrates different from the one handed down to us in the Western tradition.

Socratic Method in Traditional Scholarship

The Socrates handed down in the Western tradition via Plato and Aristotle sought universal definitions by way of inductive arguments and was certain that he could find them. This Socrates appears in the early Platonic dialogues, which include *Gorgias*, one of the two dialogues concerned with rhetoric and writing, the other, *Phaedrus*, belonging to the middle period (Dodds 18-19; Vlastos 46-47). But even *Gorgias* is usually placed late in the early period (Dodds 18-30; Vlastos 46, n. 4), and scholars are increasingly inclined to read this dialogue as transitional between the early and middle periods, the Socrates who converses with Gorgias being more characteristic of the early period, the Socrates who directs long speeches at Polus and then Callicles being more characteristic of the middle and later periods.9 In several dialogues more wholly characteristic of the early period, Socrates explores the possible identity or unity of the virtues (*Protogoras*) and several of the individual virtues—temperance (*Charmides*), courage (*Laches*), justice (*Republic*, Book 1), and holiness (*Euthyphro*) (Friedländer 2: 5-91).10 His method of exploring the virtues, the *elenchus* or refutation, as characterized in traditional scholarship, is both a method of discovery and a method of persuasion (Benson; Gulley 8-74; Guthrie 425-42; Rossetti; Santas 66-72, 115-26; Seeskin 23-53).11 As a method of discovery, the *elenchus* employs inductive arguments to refute, clarify, or support a universal definition (Gulley 14), usually for the purpose of demonstrating to the one who proffers the definition that he does not know what a particular virtue is and therefore cannot know how to live in accordance with it.12 The inductive arguments are not inferences from particulars to a generalization, as they are in contemporary usage, but inferences from one proposition or a set of coordinate propositions to a more universal proposition,
to another coordinate proposition, or through a more universal proposition to another coordinate proposition (Robinson 33, 42). The search for universal definitions is an attempt to answer the question "What is X?"—that is, "What is temperance, courage, etc." This search is justified in traditional scholarship upon the principle of the priority of definitions, according to which "If A fails to know what F-ness is, then A fails to know anything about F-ness"—a principle that Socrates is presumed to hold (Benson 19). The search for universal definitions is, quite simply, a search for that certain knowledge without which no other knowledge is possible.

As an example of Socrates' use of inductive arguments in his search for universal definitions, Gulley (39-41) cites a passage from *Laches* (192B-193D) in which Socrates and Laches are attempting to find a universal definition of courage. Laches suggests that the quality common to all instances of courage is "a certain endurance of the soul" (a universal proposition). Socrates convinces Laches through a deductive argument that courage is noble, that endurance combined with wisdom is also noble, but that endurance combined with folly is hurtful (and so not noble) and therefore cannot be courageous (several universal propositions). He then offers an inductive argument in the form of several instances (a set of coordinate propositions) that illustrate how endurance combined with foolishness might be considered courageous: A man who is well prepared for battle and has advantages of superior force and position requires less courage than the man who stands against him and endures; a cavalryman with knowledge of horsemanship requires less courage than one who endures without it; a man who dives into a well with greater knowledge of diving requires less courage than one without such knowledge. He concludes that foolish endurance is courageous (a universal proposition that refutes the conclusion to the deductive argument to which Laches has given his assent).

As the traditional reading of this passage suggests, the *elenchus* is not only a method of discovering the truth or falsity of universal definitions via inductive arguments but also a method of persuasion, the purpose of which is to refute an opponent. Seeskin maintains that the *elenchus* is persuasive in the sense that it "is not aimed at a general audience but at the individual respondent: its purpose is to get him to change his mind" (24-25). Rossetti claims, more cynically, that Socrates' method of persuasion is an attempt to prevail over opponents "not by argument, but by clever devices," including "allusive communication" such as "irony or dissimulation" and even "insinuation," "persuasive definitions," "extensive use of examples and analogies" that are "selective and biased," and "a pseudo-analogical inferential formula" that appears to lead to a conclusion but in fact shows just how misleading analogies can be (231-32, 236). Gulley cites a passage from *Protagoras* (349B-350C) that illustrates Socrates' habit of making inductive inferences by analogy from propositions about the crafts and the professions to
a conclusion about a moral quality (18-20). In this passage Socrates is trying to demonstrate to Protagoras the unity of courage and wisdom. He maintains that courageous men are bold and that their superior knowledge of their respective crafts is the reason for their boldness. In support of this argument, he draws upon the same examples that he used in *Laches* to refute Laches' definition of courage: the knowledgeable diver, the practiced horseman, the buckler or infantryman with light shield—each of whom, he claims, is bold because of his superior knowledge (a set of coordinate propositions). He concludes that "so with all other cases . . . those who have knowledge are bolder than those who lack it, and individually they are bolder when they have learnt than before learning" (a universal proposition that includes, for example, knowledge of good and evil and thus makes an inference by analogy from the military arts or crafts to a moral quality). Such an inference is at best questionable—Gulley calls it a "hasty generalisation" (19)—and at worst, as Rossetti claims, "undesirable," "worrisome," and "dangerous" (226, 235). The Socrates depicted in traditional scholarship thus seems not only confident that he can discover the truth for himself but also eager to persuade others to accept that truth—by clever and devious means if necessary. This is the Socrates of whom Sosnoski might rightly say "Socrates Begone!" (198).

**Socrates and Bakhtin's Dialogism**

Bakhtin's Socrates is different. He is a figure who speaks and listens to many voices, none of them certain; who is more concerned with living than he is with knowing; and who practices something that we might call "rhetoric" only if rhetoric is a means of testing people and ideas, including our own ideas and ourselves, rather than a means of persuading others to accept our ideas, whether deviously or legitimately. The Socrates of many voices is a central figure in Bakhtin's dialogism (Hirschkop 6-12; Holquist 14-18; Kristeva 67-72), the figure whom Bakhtin credits in "Epic and Novel" as the originator of "a new artistic-prose model for the novel"—the Socratic dialogue (24).14 In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin explains that this many-voiced model or genre is dialogic in its notions both of truth and of human thinking about the truth. On the one hand, as a kind of truth, Socratic dialogue "is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth" (110). On the other hand, as a kind of human thinking about the truth, it "is also counterposed to the naive self-confidence of those people who think that they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths" (110). Bakhtin claims that Socratic dialogue is best represented by the early and to some extent the middle rather than the later Platonic dialogues. In the later dialogues, Socratic dialogue has already "entered the service of the established, dogmatic worldviews of various philosophical schools and religious doctrines"
and has become "transformed into a simple form for expounding already found, ready-made irrefutable truth" (110). In the earlier dialogues, in contrast, it still retains its commitment to the dialogic nature of truth as a truth that "is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person" but rather "is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110). Socratic dialogue therefore exhibits many voices, including the many voices of Socrates himself and those of the other parties to the dialogue. It generates these many voices by means of its two principal stylistic devices, syncrisis and anacrisis (Kristeva 80-81). By syncrisis, it effects "the juxtaposition of various points of view on a specific object"; by anacrisis, it elicits and provokes the words of the other parties to the dialogue, forcing them "to speak, to clothe in discourse their dim but stubbornly preconceived opinions, to illuminate them by the word and in this way to expose their falseness or incompleteness" (Bakhtin, Problems 110-11).

In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin identifies the sources of the many voices of Socratic dialogue and the many perspectives they represent. These many voices resonate within each and every word, for each word is born in dialogic interaction and is therefore charged with multiple meanings. The word is born in dialogic interaction not only with "an alien word that is already in the object" but also with the answer toward which it is directed and by which it is profoundly influenced (279-80). The word is therefore "heteroglot," that is, socially and ideologically charged with multiple meanings and multiple points of view (271-72; Hirschkop 17-21; Holquist 69-70):

All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 293)

Socratic dialogue exhibits these many voices both in the person of Socrates himself and in the person of the other parties to the dialogues, whose perspectives, from Bakhtin's point of view, are just as important as Socrates' own.

The Socrates who is more concerned with living than he is with knowing is the less familiar figure who inhabits Bakhtin's carnivalesque world of everyday experience (Hirschkop 33-35; Holquist 89-90; Kristeva 78-80). Scholars who have introduced Bakhtin to rhetoric and composition studies have recognized the importance of the many voices of Bakhtin's dialogism in the generation of "social knowledge" (Clark 8-9), the choices among "diverse knowledge
communities" (Bialostosky, "Liberal Education" 21-22), and the intertextual understanding of knowledge inscribed in traditional texts (Farmer 314-18). The Socrates who engages in dialogic interaction in the collective search for truth shares this concern for knowledge-making. But the Socrates who lives in the carnivalesque world of everyday life resists any claim to permanence or closure in this search:

The carnivalistic base of the Socratic dialogue, despite its very complicated form and philosophical depth, is beyond any doubt. Folk-carnival "debates" between life and death, darkness and light, winter and summer, etc., permeated with the pathos of change and the joyful relativity of all things, debates which did not permit thought to stop and congeal in one-sided seriousness or in a stupid fetish for definition or singleness of meaning—all this lay at the base of the original core of the genre. (Bakhtin, Problems 132)

Moreover, the Socrates who lives in this carnivalesque world is always more concerned with living than he is with knowing. The world of the carnival is the world of everyday life: "In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a carnivalesque life" (122). The Socrates who lives in this world speaks its many voices, his countless comparisons and analogies representing not so much a strict logical system of thought as a multiplicity of perspectives on the world:

[In Socratic dialogue] we have laughter, Socratic irony, the entire system of Socratic degradations combined with a serious, lofty and for the first time truly free investigation of the world, of man and of human thought. Socratic laughter (reduced to irony) and Socratic degradations (an entire system of metaphors and comparisons borrowed from the lower spheres of life—from tradespeople, from everyday life, etc.) bring the world closer and familiarize it in order to investigate it fearlessly and freely. (Bakhtin, "Epic" 25)

The Socrates who speaks many voices is also this Socrates of everyday life. Finally, the Socrates whose "rhetoric" is a means of testing his own and others' ideas and selves is the figure who stands in contrast to traditional modes of persuasion and traditional ways of thinking about rhetoric. Brickhouse and Smith recognize a Socrates similar to Bakhtin's who disclaims any wisdom of his own, who examines lives rather than knowledge or beliefs, and whose rhetoric is a means of testing proposed courses of action and exhorting others to
live rightly (10-38). The similarities notwithstanding, Bakhtin's Socrates is more interested in testing ideas and people than he is in exhorting and persuading them toward right action. Socratic dialogue is in its essential action and outcome "the purely ideological event of seeking and testing truth" (Bakhtin, Problems 111). As a world of lived experience, Socratic dialogue is a testing of the person as well as the idea—and a testing not only of the various parties to the dialogue by Socrates but also a testing of Socrates himself—against a background of other ideas and other persons:

The dialogic testing of the idea is simultaneously also the testing of the person who represents it. We may therefore speak here of an embryonic image of an idea. We should also note that this image is treated freely and creatively. The ideas of Socrates, of the leading Sophists and other historical figures are not quoted here, not paraphrased, but are presented in their free and creative development against a dialogizing background of other ideas. (111-12)

Socratic dialogue is not, therefore, Bakhtin insists, a rhetorical genre but a carnivalesque genre (109, 132). If it is or if it illustrates some kind of "rhetoric," then it is a rhetoric for testing our own and others' ideas and selves, not a means of persuading others to accept our ideas and ourselves.

**Bakhtin's Socrates and the Early Platonic Dialogues**

Such is the figure of Socrates whom Bakhtin and other contemporary scholars find in the early Platonic dialogues. This figure helps to explain some of the problems in traditional scholarship. Whereas traditional scholarship has difficulty explaining Socrates' frequent professions of ignorance—Robinson (7-10) and Rossetti (231) read them as deliberate deceptions—scholars such as Brickhouse and Smith (38-45) and Vlastos (31-32) note that Socrates never disclaims ordinary human knowledge, only that certain knowledge that constitutes wisdom—a position consistent with Bakhtin's portrait of a many-voiced Socrates who engages in dialogic interaction in a collective search for truth. Again, whereas traditional scholarship has difficulty explaining obvious fallacies in Socrates' use of the elenchus, as in Protagoras—Gulley (1921) maintains that they are not representative of Socrates' views, Rossetti (226-27) that they are representative but reprehensible—contemporary scholars are less inclined to demand of Socrates a strict adherence to the rules of formal logic. Brickhouse and Smith's Socrates is more interested in living than he is in knowing—"Socrates does not say that untested propositions are not worth believing or that unexamined beliefs are not worth holding; he says that the
unexamined life is not worth living" (13). Their Socrates therefore engages the elenchus not as a method of formal logic, either inductive or deductive, but as a method of testing his own and others' ideas frequently enough and with a sufficient variety of people to feel confident that he has achieved that measure of human knowledge required for ordinary living, not that certain knowledge of definitions that constitutes wisdom (20-21).

This Socrates is a different person in different dialogues, of course. He seems to know more than Euthyphro (Euthyphro), less than Laches or Nicias (Laches), Charmides or Critias (Charmides). He vigorously opposes Thrasymachus (Republic, Book 1) but defers respectfully to Protagoras (Protagoras). But he is always the Socrates of many voices, living in the carnivalesque world of everyday life, repeatedly testing his own and others' ideas and selves in search of responses to the practical problems of life. In Laches, for example, Socrates tests Laches and Nicias, asking them to define courage to determine whether they have sufficient knowledge of this particular virtue to offer advice on the pressing practical problem of the proper education of their own and others' children. Thus he elicits (anacrisis) and juxtaposes (syncrisis) their voices both to each other and to the many voices of everyday life—voices from different cultures, professions, age groups, and the like—testing each of these voices (including his own) against the others and apparently inviting his observers (and Plato's readers) to add their voices to the dialogue as well. O'Brien's reading of Laches explains the significance of the dramatic juxtaposition of the voices of Laches and Nicias—their words and their deeds (304-07), their ideas and their persons (Bakhtin, Problems 111-12). According to O'Brien, Laches and Nicias together provide what appears to be an acceptable definition of courage, which does not otherwise appear in the dialogue (307-08). Laches defines courage as "a certain endurance of the soul" (Laches 192B). Nicias defines it as "the knowledge of what is to be dreaded or dared, either in war or in anything else" (194E-195A), a definition that Socrates changes (with Nicias's concurrence) to "a knowledge concerning all goods and evils at every stage," whether past, present, or future (199C-D). Both men have personal reputations that match their definitions, Laches as a courageous man of action who would die in battle, Nicias as a thoughtful and reflective strategist whose hesitance would lead to Athens' disastrous military defeat at Syracuse (O'Brien 308-11). Though each is inadequate by itself, together their definitions and their personal characters—their words and their deeds—suggest an acceptable definition of courage, each supplying what the other lacks (311-12). But that definition—courage construed as wise endurance or endurance combined with a knowledge of good and evil—is not to be found in the dialogue. Though O'Brien does not say so, observers (and readers) are left to supply that definition, or perhaps some other definition, and perhaps proposed courses of action as well, thereby adding their voices to the dialogue.
In the process of testing Laches' and Nicias's definitions of courage, Socrates juxtaposes their voices to the many voices of everyday life. These many voices—these "Socratic degradations" (Bakhtin, "Epic" 25)—are no strict system of formal logic but a multiplicity of perspectives on the world: cultural, professional, biological. When Laches initially defines the courageous person as "anyone who is willing to stay at his post and face the enemy, and does not run away" (Laches 190E), Socrates tests his definition against a broader cultural perspective. He observes that "the Scythians are said to fight, as much fleeing as pursuing" (191A). Laches responds that Socrates is talking about Scythian horseman, who fight in the accustomed manner of cavalrymen (191B). Again, Socrates provides a broader cultural perspective: "Except, perhaps, Laches, in the case of the Spartans. For they say that at Plataea, when the Spartans came up to the men with wicker shields, they were not willing to stand and fight against these, but fled; when, however, the Persian ranks were broken, the Spartans kept turning round and fighting like cavalry, and so won that great battle" (191B-C). Later, when Laches defines courage as endurance of the soul, Socrates challenges his definition from the perspective of several different crafts and professions: Neither the man who endures in investing money wisely nor the doctor who endures in properly treating a patient would be considered courageous; nor is the knowledgeable man of war, or horseman, or diver more courageous than the one who foolishly endures in ignorance (192E193C). Again, when Nicias defines courage as a knowledge of what is to be dreaded or dared, Socrates shifts his perspective to the world of animals: "Why, he who subscribes to your account of courage must needs agree that a lion, a stag, a bull, and a monkey have all an equal share of courage in their nature" (196E). Nicias refuses to ascribe courage to either animals or children, but he does not distinguish the knowledge that adults are presumed to have from the knowledge that animals and children lack (197A-C). Neither Laches' nor Nicias's definition of courage survives Socrates' tests, and the dialogue ends in aporia or uncertainty, an acceptable definition of courage to be inferred, if at all, only by the observer.

Beyond these tests of Laches' and Nicias's definitions, Socrates does not seek to introduce his own definition of courage or to persuade others to accept his definition. Nor does he, as traditional scholarship suggests, simply introduce counterinstances that challenge the proffered universal definitions. Rather, he introduces a multiplicity of perspectives on the world that challenge the other parties to the dialogue, and no doubt also their observers, to continuously test their ideas and themselves against the ideas and the persons of their many others. At the same time, he offers these others the opportunity to test his own ideas and himself as well.
Bakhtin’s Socrates in the Rhetoric and Composition Classroom

Bakhtin's Socrates thus speaks usefully to teachers of rhetoric and composition, especially at a time when our classrooms are increasingly being filled with the many voices and the multiple perspectives that gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and, not the least, differences of academic interest and professional affiliation, bring to them. This Socrates is not the traditional Socrates who seeks universal definitions, confident that he will find them, and attempts to impose these definitions upon others by clever and devious means of persuasion. Rather, Bakhtin's Socrates is the now familiar figure in Bakhtin's dialogism, the figure who speaks and listens to many voices, and the genre to which he gives his name is the open forum that Bialostosky "Liberal Education" (20) recommends and Sosnoski (211) approves as appropriate to the composition classroom:

Bakhtin's open forum that excludes no prior or contemporary voices is the ultimate forum in which the voices we learn in our disciplinary and pedagogical communities get their hearings and find their meanings. Its manners are rough-and-tumble, its genres are mixed, its commonplaces are always getting appropriated, and its only convention is the taking of turns by all the voices it has convened, though there is no guarantee they will not interrupt one another. (Bialostosky, "Liberal Education" 20)

Bakhtin's Socrates, however, is also something more. He is also the Socrates who is concerned with testing not only what we know but how we live, not only what we think but who we are.

Bakhtin's account of Socratic dialogue suggests what this Socrates might bring to the rhetoric and composition classroom. Specifically, it suggests that the two characteristic stylistic devices of Socratic dialogue, syncrisis and anacrisis, might be useful ways of thinking about rhetoric and writing as means of testing people and ideas. Bakhtin links syncrisis, the juxtaposing of various points of view, and anacrisis, the eliciting of another person's words, because the testing of the person as well as the idea is essential to his notion of the dialogic nature of truth: "Syncrisis and anacrisis dialogize thought, they carry it into the open, turn it into a rejoinder, attach it to dialogic intercourse among people. Both of these devices have their origin in the notion of the dialogic nature of truth, which lies at the base of the Socratic dialogue" (Problems 111). Kristeva explains that Socrates' search for definitions was of necessity a test of the person as well as the idea because the notion of the idea as separate from
the person, thought from action, writing from speech, was not yet fully developed in Western thought:

Bakhtin reminds us that the "event" of Socratic dialogue is of the nature of discourse: a questioning and testing, through speech, of a definition. This speech practice is therefore organically linked to the man who created it (Socrates and his students), or better, speech is man and his activity. Here, one can speak of a practice possessing a synthetic character; the process separating the word as act, as apodeictic practice, as articulation of difference from the image as representation, as knowledge, and as idea was not yet complete when Socratic dialogue took form. (81)

As rhetorical practices, syncrisis and anacrisis can provide means of eliciting and juxtaposing our students'—and our own—persons and ideas and engaging and testing them on issues not only of knowing but also of living.

Scholars who have brought Bakhtin to rhetoric and composition studies recommend practices that elicit students' ideas and juxtapose their ideas to the ideas of others—practices such as objectifying students' words by "inventing characters who speak a particular social-ideological idiom," having students retell others' words in their own (Bialostosky 17-18), and answering or revoicing other voices, for example, by redefining a technical term for a different audience (Farmer 315-16). Such practices engage and perhaps even test students' ideas but do not necessarily require that students engage and test themselves and others as persons, especially as persons who differ by gender, race, class, professional affiliation, and the like. Other practices that engage and test students' ideas might also engage and test them as persons, especially if these practices are directed toward tasks such as writing a definition of a controversial term or concept, a policy statement (which may depend upon a definition, for example, of justice or equity), or perhaps a new-product proposal or a business plan—tasks that provoke and often require a diversity of social perspectives and professional competencies. Such practices might include collaborative writing, oral presentations of writing, or peer reviews, practices well known to teachers of rhetoric and composition. They might also include use of new electronic communication technologies, for example, the design of hypertext documents or participation in online conversations, practices only recently becoming familiar to many of us (Faigley 163-99; Lanham 2-96).16

By itself, a definition, especially a definition of a technical term, might be little more than an articulation, or a rearticulation, of the meaning of the term, as in Farmer's suggestion that students "explain their newly acquired knowledge [of the term prosopagnosia] to uninformed peers" (316). As a collaborative effort, however, a definition or a policy statement on a
controversial issue more likely will test not only students' ideas but also their persons, not only their knowledge but their courage and their sense of justice as well. Such a controversial issue might be the kind of issue that we hear and read about in the news media, but for most of my students it is usually something more mundane, something from their own carnivalesque world of everyday experience—problems with access to parking space, computing resources, or recreational facilities; policies restricting students' social activities (or not restricting social activities that offend or demean other students); or special programs for women or minority students (which some of my students, including some of my women students, find objectionable—unjust, inequitable—just because they are "special" programs). As teachers of rhetoric and composition, we want to introduce our students to intellectual and social worlds that are important to us. For most of our students, however, our intellectual and social worlds make sense only in relationship to their own.

Online conversations can further intensify students' engagement in these issues. New technologies that enable real-time online conversation, such as MUD's, MOO's, and IRC, have received considerable attention as places for games, play, and even sexual encounters (Turkle 177-254). But these technologies can also support collaborative tasks of the kind that I have described. NCSA Collage software, for example, which my students have used to develop new-product ideas and business plans, enables both online conversation and simultaneous collaborative editing. These technologies seem to encourage intense interactions on issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, partly because they allow participants to remain anonymous though they do not require nor need we permit our student participants to do so (Faigley 168-80, 185-99). At the same time, these technologies diminish the authority of any one participant, including the teacher, and so permit all participants more or less equal opportunity to engage in conversation, including students—some women students, for example—who may not otherwise speak frequently in class (Faigley 180-82; Lanham 79).

As rhetorical practices, syncrisis and anacrisis will challenge the teacher of rhetoric and composition to become a facilitator—a Socratic "midwife" who helps to give birth to other people's ideas and their persons (Bakhtin, Problems 110, 132)—and at times also a participant who, professing his or her own ignorance, steps into the carnivalesque world of the collaborative writing group or the online conversation. Bakhtin's Socrates tells us to speak and listen to many voices, not to be and to speak the one voice of authority in our classrooms. He also tells us to test not only our ideas but also our persons, not only what we think but who we are, against the ideas and the persons of others and to ask our students to do so as well. Such a Socrates, I believe, should be welcome in the rhetoric and composition classroom.
Notes

1 I am grateful to Susan C. Jarratt, Arabella Lyon, and Roxanne D. Mountford for their comments on various drafts of this manuscript and to Richard Leo Enos and Jasper Neel for their thoughtful and supportive reviews for Rhetoric Review.

2 Enos 91-101, 117-20; Jarratt 1-10; Kerferd 4-14; and Schiappa, Protagoras 3-12 explain the reasons for Plato's and Aristotle's rejection of the sophists and the revival of interest in the sophists that began in the nineteenth century.

3 Neel 14-19 and Norris 183-93 note Derrida's 9-10, 144-47 condemnation of Plato for thus making Socrates the voice of his philosophy. But some contemporary scholars, such as Meyer and Vlastos 4580, have attempted to distinguish Socrates' voice from Plato's.

4 Bakhtin's discussions of Socrates appear throughout his work, most importantly in Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics 109-12, 132-33 but also in "Epic and Novel" 24-26 and Rabelais and His World 168-69. Among numerous recent studies of Socrates, the most supportive of Bakhtin's reading of Socrates are Brickhouse and Smith; Meyer; and Vlastos.

5 Bialostosky, "Bakhtin"; Bialostosky, "Dialogics" 788-92; and Halasek explain Bakhtin's ambivalent but mostly negative attitude toward traditional rhetoric. Schiappa, "Rhêtorikê" 1-2 notes that the word rhetoric does not appear until Plato's Gorgias, which scholars, including Dodds 18-24 and Vlastos 46, n. 4 believe to be among the last of the early Platonic dialogues. I nonetheless use the word rhetoric with reference to Bakhtin's Socrates because I believe that Bakhtin's reading of Socrates, situated within the rhetorical tradition, has potential to enlarge and enrich that tradition.

6 Bialostosky, "Bakhtin"; Bialostosky, "Liberal Education"; Clark 818; Farmer; and Halasek propose applications of Bakhtin's dialogism to rhetoric and composition pedagogy.

7 Gulley 1-8; Guthrie 325-77; Kennedy 41-42; Santas 3-9; and Vlastos 45-106 review and assess these sources.

8 Schiappa, Protagoras 66 explains that historical reconstruction seeks "to recapture the past insofar as possible on its own terms" and requires strict adherence to historical and philological methods and that rational reconstruction seeks "to provide critical insight to contemporary theorists" and requires more creativity in interpretation.

9 Dodds 16 believes that the Socrates who converses with Gorgias "is the man we know, questioning a specialist about his speciality . . . , insisting in his usual way on an exact definition, and arriving in his usual way at no conclusion." But Dodds also finds that a new, more-assured Socrates develops in the course of the dialogue. The Socrates who addresses Polus "asserts a positive doctrine with a certitude about its truth," and likewise the Socrates who addresses Callicles is confident that whatever he and Callicles agree upon "will be nothing less than the final truth." Enos 100-01 believes that Socrates' questions early in the dialogue are a rhetorical device intended to reveal a consensus about the reality of certain crucial terms and that his long speeches later in the dialogue are propositional statements about the nature of rhetoric as practiced by the sophists: "In this sense, Plato's initial use of question-and-answer in the Gorgias evolved into an argument that would eventually be composed in a propositional mode. Because this heuristic presupposes a view of reality, and is initiated from Plato's desire to think of things in such a manner, it is best understood as rhetorical in nature and dialectical in appearance."

10 In one of the later dialogues, Theaetetus, he explores wisdom, the last of the five virtues (Friedländer 3: 145-89).

11 Robinson 7-19, however, describes the purpose of the elenchus in the early dialogues as entirely destructive.

12 Brickhouse and Smith 13 claim that traditional scholarship, Seeskin 35-37 excepted, has given scant attention to the application of the elenchus to how people live. But Guthrie 430-37 and Robinson 10-15 also recognize this application.

13 Traditional scholarship is divided on whether or not Socrates' method of induction is sound. Santas 138-55 distinguishes inductive analogies from inductive generalizations and finds strengths in both. Seeskin finds credibility in neither. Seeskin 27 objects that induction cannot assist in the search for universal definitions because it begs the question: "if X is a disputed term, and you do not know what it is, you cannot know whether a specific description [of things that are courageous, just, etc.] qualifies as X or not."
Bakhtin's Socrates

14 Holquist 15 points out that Bakhtin himself never uses the word dialogism. Holquist 14-106; Hirschkop; and Kristeva 64-91 explain Bakhtinian concepts such as dialogism, syncretism and anacrisis, heteroglossia, and the carnivalesque.

15 Lanham 72-73 argues that the electronic word restores the "volatile and interactive" world of oral rhetoric. Lanham 98-119 attributes this restoration to the extraordinary convergence of the democratization of higher education, as white, middle-class, native speakers are increasingly being joined in the classroom by a diversity of others; the rapid development of electronic communication technologies that encompass visual, auditory, hypertextual, and conversational modes of presentation and interaction, often in combination; and the development of rhetorical theory itself. Lanham's 138-53 curricular proposals take us back to rhetoric as a formal system, to a rehearsal pedagogy, to the rhetorical figures and the topics of argument, to Plato and Aristotle rather than Socrates. Yet the volatile and interactive rhetoric that he describes is closer to oral dialogue than printed speech, closer to the early Platonic dialogues than the later, closer to Socrates than to Plato and Aristotle.

17 Portions of NCSA Collage were developed at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Works Cited


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