

## The Rhetoric of Apology

It seems to have been assumed in the early fourth century that the essence of the Socratic teaching was in danger of disappearing, and so in need of preservation. The *Recollections* of Xenophon, the works of the Socratics preserved only in fragments, and the Platonic dialogues all bear witness to this memorializing spirit. Whether their anxiety was justified or not, the effort was successful.

The same sort of impulse seems to have been present in Plato's own response to the death of Socrates. This is most clear in the *Apology* itself, but it has often been observed that the entire Platonic corpus, in addition to whatever philosophical work it might have been intended to perform, is a species of hagiographic biography memorializing the life of Socrates and, more generally, the Socratic life.

While I am largely sympathetic to this broad view of the dialogues, what concerns me in this paper is not the preservation of Socratic wisdom, nor the canonization of Socrates as philosophy's first saint. Instead, I would like to focus on the nature of *apologia* itself, beginning with the *Apology of Socrates*, but extending the idea to look at the multiple allusions to that text that occur regularly throughout the Platonic corpus, and show that in some sense Plato's entire career is a series of encounters and re-encounters with this justly-famous attempt to explain the meaning of his mentor's life and death. In the course of these many returns to this text, Plato creates a series of new *Apologies*, as he continues, refines, supplements, and verifies the form and content of the first.

So understood, these references to the *Apology* attest to the power of the work, the intensity and the timelessness of its message. In another sense, however, they speak to the failure of apology—not Socrates' but Plato's. They betray the feeling that he just couldn't get it right, couldn't say enough, had to re-work once more the tropes he had laid down in the *Apology*. According to this model, however brilliant Plato's creations, his *Charmides*, his *Meno*, his *Gorgias*, to name but a few, they could never fully capture the ghost of Socrates, who like Homer's Patroclus, slips insubstantially from the hands of the friend who would embrace him.