Yann Le Bras , Yan Marchand

Socrates for President! [Socrate Président !]

France (2017)

TAGS: Democracy Minos Philosophy Plato Political Thought Rhetoric / Oratory Socrates Tartarus

Courtesy of the Publisher.

General information	
Title of the work	Socrates for President! [Socrate Président !]
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Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
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Target Audience	Crossover
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Creators

Yann Le Bras (Illustrator)

Yann Le Bras is an illustrator based in Strasbourg, France. He studied visual arts at Rennes II University. He now works as an illustrator with the educational department of the Tomi Ungerer Museum. The first book illustrated by Yann Le Bras was *La Mort du Divin Socrate* (*The Death of Divine Socrates*, 2010). Among his later works are *Le roi Midas et ses oreilles d'âne* (*Midas the King and His Donkey Ears*, 2012), *Socrate sort de l'Ombre* (*Socrates steps out of the Shadow*, 2012), and *Socrate Président !* (*Socrates the President !,* 2017).

Source:

Official website (accessed: December 2, 2021).

lespetitsplatons.com (accessed: December 2, 2021).

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk and Angelina Gerus, University of Warsaw, angelina.gerus@gmail.com

Yan Marchand , b. 1978 (Author)

Yan Marchand, born in 1978, is a writer of books for young adults, based in Brest. Holding a PhD in philosophy from the Université de Rennes 1, he offers philosophy workshops for children and teenagers from 5 up to 17 years. He also runs trainings and lectures for teachers and childcare professionals wishing to incorporate philosophy into their practices. In cooperation with the Paris-based publishing house, "Les

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Courtesy of the Author.

petits Platons", Yan Marchand authored several children's books including *Diogène l'homme chien* (*Diogenes the Dog-Man*, 2011), *Le rire d'Épicure* (*The Laughter of Epicurus*, 2012), *Socrate sort de l'ombre* (*Socrates Comes out of the Shadows*, 2012), *La révolte d'Épictète* (*The Revolt of Epictetus*, 2014), *Les mystères d'Héraclite* (*The Mysteries of Heraclitus*, 2015), *Socrate président !* (*Socrates the President !*, 2017).

Sources:

Personal webpage (Accessed: October 13, 2021).

lespetitsplatons.com (Accessed: October 13, 2021).

catalogue.bnf.fr (Accessed: October 13, 2021).

idref.fr (Accessed: October 13, 2021).

Bio prepared by Angelina Gerus, University of Warsaw, angelina.gerus@gmail.com

Questionnaire

1. What drew you to working with Greek and Roman philosophy?

— The encounter with Antiquity occurred, as it does for many children, through mythology. Digging to the right, to the left I ran into a book of Sophocles. It fascinated me, and, mixing up pretty much everything at the time, I put all the Ancients in the same basket; so I began to read Aeschylus, Horace, but also Seneca, Lucretius, Epictetus, Plato, not knowing yet that it was philosophy. And that captivated me: finally, books that did not tell stories but proposed ways of living in connection with a better understanding of the world and our finitude.

2. As you have a background in philosophical education holding a PhD in philosophy from the Université de Rennes 1, may you

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point out any particular books that made an impact on your writings?

— My writings interact with Heraclitus, the pre-Socratics in general and the philosophies of asceticism: cynicism, epicureanism, stoicism mainly. It's hard to point out any books. But more recent authors have influenced my writing, I believe. Heidegger and Levinas. But unfortunately, I cannot suggest a specific title.

3. I have an impression that in your stories the ancient texts are interwoven so closely with new authorial elements that it is sometimes difficult to separate them from each other. What sources are you using? How concerned are you with 'accuracy' or 'fidelity' to the original?

— There is always the lie of art! Indeed, in writing for the youth there are two often incompatible issues: the exposition of an often complex thought, and the proposal of a motivating narration. Sometimes it is necessary to adjust either the narrative or the exposition of concepts, so that there may arise some inventions which serve the story rather than the history of philosophy, and moments when the story weighs a bit more as it becomes more philosophical. But as far as possible, I create a plausible framework. I work on the biography, the historical and psychological context of the epoch and I try to see in what way the concepts of this or that author could make sense at that time, in that particular context. This gives ideas for plot twists. Therefore I try to be faithful to the century and to the spirit of the philosopher, but sometimes in order to give a bit of energy I can modify a fact without ever inventing it from scratch. It's a bit like a puzzle with a missing piece: I cut a new one but to make it fit, I have to tap on it with a fist.

4. What challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular texts or ideas?

— The challenges are often the same: to open a complex world to a reader without boring him. I therefore choose authors who often have a life on which I can base my concepts and who provide images, models and amusing examples that I steal without remorse. The other challenge concerns the length: it is not possible to produce a thousand

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pages, and yet our author has said many things. It is therefore necessary to reread everything and to make an important summary while remaining silent about other elements. For Heraclitus it is still fine, but for Heidegger it becomes a complex task. And the biggest challenge is this one: on the one hand you want to produce arguments and leave the fiction, or else you get caught up by the fiction and the text becomes weakly philosophical.

5. You have written children's books about different philosophers of Antiquity: who was the hardest and easiest to tell the story about?

— In general, these short books demand a huge amount of time from me. There is something of poetic writing, because it is necessary to contain the author, to write the text ten or twenty times before finding the fulgurance which will hold on a few dozens of pages. All the writings I proposed to “Les Petits Platons” were reworked several times. They were all difficult to write. The one that seemed to me the most obvious to work on was *Diogène l’homme chien* (Eng. *Diogenes the Dog-Man*, 2011), because I had been maturing it for a long time, and he’s a very visual philosopher. I really struggled to draft *Thalès et le trône de la sagesse* (Eng. *Thales and the Throne of Wisdom*, 2021), because I wanted to talk about Thales but at the same time about the birth of a new way of thinking about things. So there was a greater philosophical intention.

6. Why do you think Classics continue to resonate with young audiences?

— The Ancients speak about thought that discovers a way of looking at things, and I believe that this touches on something of childhood, which also awakens to a way of thinking that becomes capable of grasping the relationship that exists between things. Aristotle said that in order to undo a knot, one must understand how it is made. Ancient thought patiently unties knots, it manipulates, it sees the areas of friction, the points of contact, plays at that. Children too, perhaps. I also think that ancient thought is not just a thought, it proposes a life, or rather a powerful feeling of existence. Children often say that these lives are too risky, but at the same time they admire these incarnations

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of freedom.

7. Would it be a coincidence that the protagonists of your books in the “Les Petits Platons” series are characters coming-of-age? If it is not by chance, why do these situations become the core of the story?

— Pindar said: become who you are. Indeed my characters are in search of who they have to be and often this new life is not far away, but right there, in a decision, an act, a taking of freedom, right now and not tomorrow. I didn't realise this recurrence in my texts, and you are not the first to point it out to me. But isn't philosophy the proposal of another way of living, freer, more lucid. I therefore like to imagine stories in which the minds undergo a kind of metamorphosis; moreover, I think that young readers rather enjoy this dimension, since isn't their task to grow up?

8. Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers, especially in France?

— I don't know in what sense we should consider the word translation. But if we have to pass on an ancient text, there are passages that can attract young readers, especially those stories about freedom, openness, independence; in a word: autarkeia. And for young people who are in search of emancipation this makes sense. However, something also disturbs me in this ancient thought, because I don't want children to be nourished by this very male vision, which explains to a large extent the hypnotic relationship we have with power, with mastery and the negation of those who need to be accompanied. This freedom as a synonym for autonomy is very pronounced in France, so to think about how we got there is also to recast the concept in order to make it more open to the idea of interdependencies. So in my way of presenting the Ancients, I also try not to caricature them, as a great white-bearded sage and autonomous, but to present complex individuals, sometimes uncomfortable with the concepts of their time, which I think they were, most of them having lived through exile and being put to death or to exile.

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9. You offer philosophy workshops and also run different philosophical trainings and lectures. Do you turn to Antiquity in this practice? If so, how often does it happen and how are these references particularly useful and valuable to you as part of your educational activities?

— I plunge my roots in Antiquity. I always have an eye in the antique rear-view mirror, whether with children, adults in training or with expert colleagues. I must have been born in the wrong century, but this is certainly a fantasised Antiquity; however, I borrow a lot of techniques and concepts from Greece especially. I watch over friendship in a permanent conversation. I also insist on the gratuity of the exercise and on the thrill of a thought that divides itself to think what it thinks, let's call it a dialogic function. The knowledge of the Ancients is also precious to accompany philosophical conversations, because it offers elements to think about the genesis of concepts, their evolution in history and therefore their mortality, when we often think that the words of our time are immutable mountains, but which for a long time have not meant very much. They are mutations of the past that only require a retrospective glance to make flesh alive again.

10. Do you have a favourite book by an ancient author?

— Hard to say, but I remember the one that, when I was still a child, made me say: I want to become like that: the Handbook of Epictetus.

11. And a favourite ancient philosopher?

— I hesitate between Heraclitus and Diogenes, am I allowed to merge the two persons into one and invent a Dioclitus? Or a Heragenes?

Prepared and translated from French by Angelina Gerus, University of Warsaw, angelina.gerus@gmail.com

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Additional information

Translation

Russian: *Сократ — президент* [Sokrat — prezident], trans. Aleksandra Sokolinskaya, Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2018, 64 pp.

Turkish: *Başkan Sokrates!*, trans. Orçun Türkay, İstanbul: Metis Yayınları, 2019, 64 pp.

Summary

Long ago, in this story, people were aware of the day of their death and appeared before the judgment of the gods in their best form and brought generous gifts. Even the immortals found it difficult to resist accepting such bounty, so more and more often, the rich were sent to the Isles of the Blessed, while the poor, even if they lived justly, could not lavish gifts on the gods and, so, made their way to Tartarus. When the gods realised that humans could hide an evil soul under a pleasant shell, they began to judge people after their death in their naked state, and the role of the judge was entrusted to the inflexible King Minos. But today, Minos feels deeply concerned: fair souls have now become extremely rare, and Tartarus is overcrowded. Eureka! The King goes to Socrates to ask if he would agree to come back to life and take up a presidential post to help people improve thanks to wise and just laws.

Since Socrates never wanted to please the public, Minos also brings back to life the orator Gorgias (who in the illustrations has features reminiscent of Donald Trump), able to gain the public's favour and convince them of anything. Modernity is unfamiliar to ancient Greeks and, to get the attention of those with headphones and smartphones, they usually head for the agora, or in this case – the supermarket. Because Socrates only makes his listeners angry, Gorgias decides to tutor him in rhetoric. However, instead of writing a campaign speech for the philosopher, Gorgias broadcasts his own discourse on the screens, immediately making him popular with the crowds. With the slogan "Libérons nos envies !" ("Let's free our cravings!"), a real Gorgiamania begins. The rhetorician becomes the head of the state. However, since he does not fulfill any of his promises, people lose confidence in him and not only refuse to elect him for a second mandate but are eager to replace him. In a desperate attempt to defend himself, Gorgias pins the blame on Socrates, who reappears before Minos, once again condemned to death. His unblemished soul returns to the Isles of the Blessed: even if he has not succeeded in

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making people more righteous, he has done nothing to make them even more unjust. What has become of Gorgias? His democracy ended with him becoming a tyrant governing a mad crowd. And Minos, since a soul can save itself and not another soul, hires workers to enlarge Tartarus so that its borders disappear from view.

Analysis

According to the book's subtitle "d'après *Gorgias* de Platon", the story is based on the ancient dialogue, particularly on Socrates' account of the Judgement of Naked Souls (523a–526e). Thus, it forms the story's frame either as the beginning of the narrative with scenes of the afterlife, setting up its reversal leading to the denouement of the intrigue.

The characters in the short story are King Minos (Aeacus and Rhadamanthus, mentioned by Plato, do not appear in Marchand's book), the philosopher Socrates and the orator Gorgias. Each of them has an explicit personality: Minos is distinguished by intransigence and justice (p. 9), Socrates' soul is described as the wisest, the most honest and the best (p. 10), so that readers gain confidence in him, sharing his opinion of Gorgias as a horrible flatterer and a fraud (p. 12). Furthermore, it is Socrates whom Minos brings back to life, specifically, to make people better, which corresponds to Plato's dialogue between Socrates and Callicles about whether a sophist can make anyone better if his protégé, after completing his studies, remains unjust? (519c–e). As to Gorgias, both the participants in Plato's dialogue and the characters in Marchand's book recognise his persuasive skill. The language describing his portrait becomes ironically rhetorical, including many figures of speech, such as epithets, metaphors, palindromes etc. (cf. p. 14). The very behaviour of the main characters becomes a metaphor, as immediately on his return to life, Gorgias wants to go to the tavern because he feels thirsty and hungry. At the same time, Socrates observes new surroundings and tries to practise philosophy with passers-by.

The book begins with a typical fairy tale phrase, "il y a bien longtemps" ("a very long time ago"), which seems to divide the action into two worlds: the mythical in the afterlife and the modern in real life where the Greeks appear by Minos' order. The narrative is full of quotes from Plato's dialogue, reordered and transformed to a greater or lesser extent: mathematicians are also skilled in the art of persuasion (cf. p. 12 and Plat. *Gorg*. 450d), rhetoricians may seem like experts only to

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the ignorant (cf. p. 12 and Plat. *Gorg*. 459a), a doctor can inflict pain despite his best intentions (cf. p. 13 and Plat. *Gorg*. 480c, 521e–522a), fragments about pleasure and suffering (cf. p. 22 and Plat. *Gorg*. 494e, 497d) or the law of nature (cf. p. 40–43 and Plat. *Gorg*. 482e–484b, 492a–d) etc.

In addition, the adventurous plot and expressive imagery serve to introduce facts from the philosopher's biography and therefore present him as a historical figure: e.g., the fact that he convinces people one by one in the course of a conversation, a dialogue (from Ancient Greek διαλέγομαι – "hold converse", "discuss"), and not with speeches (p. 14) and that he often exclaims "By the dog!" (p. 10), and some specific information is given about his appearance (p. 29). Plato's other concepts are also woven into the narrative, discussed in more detail in another book by Yan Marchand, *Socrate sort de l'Ombre (Socrates Steps Out of the Shadow)*: the Sun as the Good, the immortality of the soul (since Socrates says that he was condemned to death in each (sic!) of his lives) or the allegory of the Cave. However, the reference to these ideas is closely linked to modernity: Socrates worries that this time, he might end up in the electric chair, and instead of shadows on the cave walls, people in the story only see images on their iCave smartphone screens.

Perhaps the greatest connection with modern reality is created by illustrations depicting Gorgias looking like Donald Trump, with his characteristic hairdo and facial features. At the same time, the plot also includes a presidential campaign and its consequences. This allows readers of all ages to appreciate the philosophical value of the Platonic dialogue and points to its relevance at the present moment.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Democracy Minos Philosophy Plato Political Thought Rhetoric / Oratory Socrates Tartarus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Conflict Death Desires Freedom Historical figures Intellect Knowledge Philosophy Political changes Propaganda Values

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Further Reading

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