

The Philosopher's Banquet

*Plutarch's Table Talk in the Intellectual
Culture of the Roman Empire*

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AND
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Peripatetic Knowledge in Plutarch's *Table Talk*

Katerina Oikonomopoulou

Peripateticism is a key intellectual strand within Plutarch's *Table Talk*, second only to the position Platonism holds in its intellectual universe. Its English title perhaps obfuscates what would have been immediately apparent to the ancient reader, namely, that the work, being a collection of inquiries conducted at the symposium (*συμποτικὰ ζητήματα*, as Plutarch himself titles it),¹ anchors itself in a literary and intellectual tradition (that of the *problems*) to which the Peripatetics made a distinctive contribution.² But the opening preface leaves no doubt about the role Peripatetic models played in the crafting of the work, as it counts several Peripatetic authors of *Symposia* (Aristotle, Prytanis, and Hieronymus) among its literary forefathers (1. *Praef.* 612d–e).³ As a result, the question what Peripateticism exactly signifies in the *Table Talk* as a whole, and what it contributes to its intellectual universe, acquires key significance for the text's interpretation.

Traditional *Quellenforschung* has been the standard approach scholars have adopted on the question of Plutarch's debts to the

The English translations of all quotes from Plutarch's *Table Talk* come from the Loeb. Where individual terms or phrases from the text are discussed, all translations are mine.

¹ 3. *Praef.* 645c and 4.1, 660d, respectively. On the question of the QC's Greek title, see Harrison (2000) 196–7.

² On the difference between *προβλήματα* and *ζητήματα* (and their equivalence in the imperial era), see Harrison (2000) 194–6. See more details on this in the Introduction, pp. 1–31. The French title, *Propos de Table*, obfuscates things equally. On Peripatetic problem-writing, see the brilliant analysis by Jacob (2004).

³ See Introduction to this volume for more details, pp. 13–18.

Peripatetic tradition, both in the *Table Talk* and elsewhere.⁴ And indeed there are unquestionable merits to this line of study: getting a sound grasp of the range of Peripatetic tenets that Plutarch chose to incorporate into his *Table Talk*, as well as the various uses to which he put them, is paramount for penetrating the work's philosophical texture,⁵ and for appraising its literary and intellectual sophistication more generally.⁶ A close look reveals that Plutarch further flags the *Table Talk*'s Peripatetic affiliations by drawing significant segments of its content (particularly in its naturalist and broader scientific aspect) from one particular Peripatetic work, known to us today as the pseudo-Aristotelian (for Plutarch and his contemporaries, genuinely Aristotelian) collection of *Problems*. In addition, factual observations, scientific theories, and arguments of Peripatetic origin have a steady presence in the *Table Talk*'s various chapters. Sometimes they are explicitly attributed to specific Peripatetic authors, or texts. Knowledge of plants, for example, derives principally from Theophrastus' botanical treatises (3.2, 5.8).⁷ We also hear about Hieronymus of Rhodes' theory of vision (1.8),⁸ and Aristoxenus' views on the moral implications of pleasure and entertainment (7.5, 7.8).⁹ Yet more may still feature as distant echoes from Plutarch and his friends' Peripatetic readings. We can, for example, make inferences about the men's familiarity with works such as Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption* even though the work is never explicitly acknowledged in the *Table Talk*.¹⁰

Yet that approach is also to a great extent misguided, for it fails to account for the *Table Talk*'s predominant mode of engagement with Peripatetic knowledge, which is through the medium of memory and

⁴ See Teodorsson (1999), and Santaniello (1999). See also Karamanolis (2006) 85–126. Teodorsson's commentary (1989–96) also meticulously tracks the QC's Peripatetic borrowings.

⁵ On this, see Kechagia in this volume.

⁶ New trends in classical scholarship, their focus on the dynamics of literary hybridity and intertextuality, have rehabilitated traditional *Quellenforschung*. This approach has been especially rewarding for the study of the Second Sophistic. See Whitmarsh (2001), esp. 16–130.

⁷ 648a and 683d–e, respectively. The Theophrastean works in question are probably the *History of Plants* and *Inquiry into Plants* (though not all of the references can be matched to the existing versions of either text).

⁸ 626a–b.

⁹ 704e and 711c, respectively.

¹⁰ Some echoes of GC I.6, 322^b 22ff. (on contact), 323^b 1ff. (on action and passion) may be found in QC 1.2 617eff. See detailed analysis of the concepts by Natali (2004) 195–217. Also Wildberg (2004) 219–42.

recollection, activated under conditions of oral communication at symposia.¹¹ The characters in the various dialogues recurrently cite, paraphrase, summarize, or simply acknowledge in passing Peripatetic passages, theories, arguments, or individual observations—all from memory, and always prompted by the situation at hand: that is, when they are invited to discourse on a scientific question, refute an interlocutor, or respond to an interlocutor's challenge on a point of factual detail; when they seek authoritative testimony in order to back up their arguments; and when their company asks them their opinion on what (Peripatetic) authorities have claimed on a given issue.

This chapter will concentrate precisely on such narratives within the *Table Talk*, which focus on the recollection of Peripatetic knowledge within an oral framework, primarily in the *scenarios* of oral reception and transmission of Peripatetic knowledge (the question of the scenes' historicity or fictionality/idealization cannot be settled in a definitive manner).¹² These matter for two reasons: first, they yield rich insights into the different ways in which communities of imperial *pepaideumenoí* (not just individual imperial authors, or texts) negotiated Peripateticism as cultural and intellectual capital,¹³ at times defending and at other times attacking its authority; and invoking its testimony to achieve a variety of ends, including social distinction, erudite display, pedagogy, and the promotion of a scientific outlook as a means of engaging with the world.

Secondly, these scenes raise intriguing questions about self-reflexivity. The *Table Talk*, as it has already become clear, is (as König recently remarked), cast 'as a version of Aristotle's projects of systematizing and advancing a great range of different areas of human knowledge'¹⁴—a fact that invites us to consider to what extent these narratives may act

¹¹ On the role orality plays in the QC as a whole (with a focus on poetic citation, however), see recent discussion by Bréchet (2007). See also König in this volume.

¹² I do not necessarily treat these scenarios as realistic, or 'historical'. Nor do I completely reject their historicity, however. Plutarch surely stages idealized, perhaps at times also excessively contrived, scenes of intellectual exchange. Yet his dialogues do share the same obsession with *paideia* that characterized the literature of the empire as a whole, and which could be displayed in oral as much as in written contexts. For the problem of historicity in the *Table Talk*, see the Introduction and Titchener in this volume.

¹³ The terms are borrowed from sociology (and the work of Pierre Bourdieu more specifically). For their application to the field of Second Sophistic studies, see Schmitz (1997), esp. 39–66, 97–135.

¹⁴ (2007) 53.

as prompts for the reader to envisage (and indeed also enact?) similar scenarios of transmission for the *Table Talk*'s own contents.¹⁵ I will discuss these questions in detail in what follows. But first, I wish to offer a set of reflections about why the *Table Talk* seems to privilege this particular style of engagement with Peripatetic knowledge.

PERIPATETIC-STYLE POLYMATHY, ORALITY, AND MEMORY IN THE *TABLE TALK*

The Peripatetic tradition was extremely fecund: it bequeathed to posterity an immensely rich and highly variegated field of inquiry which could be readily mined, but also flexibly re-adapted to new ends. It was the tradition that manifestly played the most instrumental role in the development of the imperial Graeco-Roman tradition of miscellanistic and encyclopaedic writing: Plutarch's collections of *Quaestiones*, and texts like Pliny's *Natural History*, Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*, and Aelian's *On the Nature of Animals*, all draw on Peripatetic sources¹⁶ for their

¹⁵ Theorists of literature generally designate as self-reflexivity literary discourse's 'metafictional awareness of its own constructedness and textuality'. See Huber et al. (eds.) (2005) 8. This awareness is signalled through a variety of techniques, which most commonly involve the violation of dramatic convention by the author, and (in the case of fictional writing) the inclusion of encased narratives, which often serve as interpretative keys to the frame narrative. As far as ancient literature is concerned, self-reflexivity has been systematically explored for epic (particularly in relation to representations of song within Homer's epics: see Segal (1994) 113–41), and historiography (marking the field of *meta-historiē*: see Luraghi (2007) 76–91). More recently, it has featured in studies of generic self-consciousness in the Greek and Roman novel (with a focus on the technique of *mise en abyme*: see Fusillo (2009) on the Greek novels).

¹⁶ The influence of Aristotle's *Probl.* is clear enough for large segments of the *QN*'s content, and for smaller ones of the *QG* and *QR*. See commentary by Pearson–Sandbach (1965), Halliday (1928), and Rose (1924), respectively, and, more generally, Teodorsson (1999) 665–74. On Pliny's Peripatetic sources, see detailed discussions in Beagon (1992) and (2005) *passim*. Athenaeus derives extensive information, especially on plants and animals, from Theophrastus and Aristotle; and he cites several Peripatetic authors of historical works. See also detailed discussion of his use of the Peripatetic corpus of *Constitutions* by Bollansée (2007). Aelian, finally, recurrently attributes material to Aristotle in his *De Nat. Anim.* 8.1, 12.6, 15.25, 17.7 (there are many other such references throughout the text). Aelian's primary source-texts (known in the original, or from anthologies/epitomes) were Aristotle's *History of Animals* and *On the Generation of Animals*. See Scholfield (1958) xv–xvi. To the list we may also add Favorinus' *Memorabilia* and *Miscellaneous History*, the fragments of both of which betray heavy reliance on Peripatetic knowledge. See Barigazzi, frs. 32–51, and 52–93, respectively, and the Introduction to this volume.

contents, but they also adopt from it a certain intellectual paradigm, that of polymathy (meaning ‘the learning of many things’), which encourages their spirit of knowledge-collecting. Fittingly, it is Athenaeus who offers us the clearest admission of the symbolic value the Peripatetic tradition enjoyed among these authors, in his recurrent presentation of Aristotle with the formula *ὁ πολυμαθέστατος Ἀριστοτέλης* (‘the most learned Aristotle’).¹⁷

Plutarch’s *Table Talk* evidently shares this Peripatetic-style ideal of polymathy, as its broad thematic scope speaks of an impressive project of knowledge accumulation. Its fictional scenes, however, put the stress on the value polymathy carries in contexts where people exchange knowledge orally. Paradoxically, this is most clearly articulated in the only place within the work, chapter 8.10, which depicts a character (Florus) as reader of a Peripatetic work, Aristotle’s *Naturalist* (or *Scientific*) *Problems* (*Προβλήματα Φυσικά*):

Προβλήμασιν Ἀριστοτέλους φυσικοῖς ἐντυγχάνων Φλώρος εἰς Θερμοπύλας κομισθεῖσιν αὐτός τε πολλῶν ἀποριῶν, ὅπερ εἰώθασιν πάσχειν ἐπιεικῶς αἱ φιλόσοφοι φύσεις, ὑπεπίμπατο καὶ τοῖς ἐταίροις μετεδίδου, μαρτυρῶν αὐτῷ τῷ Ἀριστοτέλει λέγοντι τὴν πολυμάθειαν πολλὰς ἀρχὰς ποιεῖν. τὰ μὲν οὖν ἄλλα μεθ’ ἡμέραν οὐκ ἄχαριν ἡμῖν ἐν τοῖς περιπάτοις διατριβὴν παρέσχεν·

Florus, who was engaged in reading a copy of Aristotle’s *Scientific Problems* that had been brought to Thermopylae, was himself full of questions, as is natural for a philosophical spirit, and shared them with his friends too, proving Aristotle’s own statement that ‘great learning gives many starting-points’. Most of the questions raised provided us with a pleasant pastime during our daytime walks. (734c–d)

Florus’ reading from the *Problems* is a key event in the narrative, as it triggers in him a particular intellectual response: ‘he was filled with many questions himself’ (*αὐτός τε πολλῶν ἀποριῶν . . . ὑπεπίμπατο*). Yet for all its significance, the event as such receives very little attention: we do not learn what sorts of information within the *Problems* served as inspiration for Florus’ own *aporiai*, nor indeed around what issues those *aporiai* revolved. The emphasis, rather, falls on the communal setting in which it all happens: Florus is in Thermopylae with friends; he encounters (*ἐντυγχάνων*) a copy of the

¹⁷ *Deipn.* 9.398e, 11.505c, 15.692b, 15.696a. Cf. Dion. Hal. *De Imitatione*, fr. 31.4.1, 1.8: *παρληπτέον δὲ καὶ Ἀριστοτέλην εἰς μίμησιν τῆς τε περὶ τὴν ἐρμηνείαν δεινότητος καὶ τῆς σαφηνείας, καὶ τοῦ ἡδέος καὶ πολυμαθοῦς* (Radermacher–Usener).

Problems that was brought there (*κομισθεισιν*) by someone else; and he returns, as it were, the loan of the written medium, in the form of queries which he communicates (*μετεδίδου*) to his friends. The act of solitary reading is quickly transformed into an occasion for social interaction that revolves around the sharing of knowledge between the members of a community.¹⁸

By way of comment, Plutarch approvingly notes that Florus' attitude confirms (*μαρτυρῶν*: a verb literally meaning 'to testify', its judicial connotations adding to its semantic force) Aristotle's saying that 'great learning provides many starting-points' (*τὴν πολυμάθειαν πολλὰς ἀρχὰς ποιεῖν*). By this he may simply be asserting that intellectual contemplation must rely on a constant input of new information: the importance of broadening and enriching one's stock of knowledge (as Florus did by deciding to read the *Problems* at Thermopylae) plays a key role in triggering new thought. But the comment may also (more narrowly) be referring to the Aristotelian text itself, as an accumulation of 'great learning' (*πολυμάθεια*).¹⁹ In the scene, its polymathy indeed provides 'many starting-points': for the formulation of new questions, for social interaction, for intellectual exchange; and, ultimately, for doing philosophy. Not accidentally, Florus' inquiring mind is praised as the mark of a genuine 'philosophical nature' (*φιλόσοφος φύσις*). And, elsewhere in the text (5.7), it is Florus again who most sharply articulates the link between inquiry and philosophy: 'Whenever the logical explanation for anything eludes us, we begin to be puzzled, and therefore to be philosophers' (*ὅπου γὰρ ὁ τῆς αἰτίας ἐπιλείπει λόγος, ἐκείθεν ἀρχεται τὸ ἀπορεῖν, τουτέστι τὸ φιλοσοφεῖν*, 680c–d). But in the end, it is not just Florus who partakes of this philosophical spirit: the entire company shares in his philosophical pursuits, their full immersion into Peripatetic-style inquiry alluded to by making a reference to their 'walks' (*ἐν τοῖς περιπάτοις*: the Greek *peripatos* was also used for the name of the Peripatetic School in Athens).

The *Table Talk* as a whole privileges encounters with Peripatetic knowledge (and with knowledge more generally) which, just like chapter 8.10, have the direct communication of ideas (note again

¹⁸ For a fascinating analysis of the 'system of interlocking social behaviours' that frames ancient reading practices, see Johnson (2000) and (2009) (quote from (2009) 321)

¹⁹ On the *Probl.* as a distillation of Peripatetic research (aimed at broader circulation), see Louis (1991) vii–xi, xviii–xxiii. Also Jacob (2004) 36–7, 40–8.

the verb *μετεδίδου* in 8.10) at their heart. 8.10 indicates why this is so: the immediacy of oral interaction ensures that the ‘many starting-points’ for new inquiry that Peripatetic polymathy provides can in fact multiply (and evolve, and branch out to new inquiries) according to the number of participants at the symposium (all of whom partake, as in 8.10, of the Peripatetic ‘spirit’).²⁰ The associative twists and turns of the *Table Talk*’s sympotic discussions, leading from one line of investigation on to another, illustrate precisely the workings of this mechanism, and its crucial significance for the pursuit of philosophy.

The *Table Talk* makes it clear that, for Peripatetic knowledge to play this role on such occasions, one does not necessarily always require direct consultation of Peripatetic texts (in this sense, Plutarch differs from Gellius, in whose *Attic Nights* texts as material presences take much more centre stage, even at symposia).²¹ What one does need, however, is a good memory—memory that is rooted in past experiences of reading.²² Time and again in the dialogues the characters refer to Peripatetic knowledge (usually just by the names of their Peripatetic authors; references to specific texts are much rarer) which they consulted at some point in the past:²³ ‘I remember (*μῆμνημαι*)’, Plutarch says in 3.5, 652a, ‘coming on Aristotle’s discussion also on this question [*sc.* whether wine is cold], not recently but a long enough time ago (*οὐ νεωστί . . . ἀλλ’ ἱκανῶς πάλαι*). And Epicurus in his *Symposium* has discussed the matter at great length. The sum of what he has to say, I think, is this: . . . (*ὄν τὸ κεφάλαιόν ἐστιν ὡς ἐγῶμαι τοιόνδε . . .*)’ (a paraphrase of Epicurus’ discussion follows).²⁴ Remembrance and recollection (denoted with verbs such as *μῆμνημαι*, or *μνημονεύω*)²⁵ have, of course, their shortcomings:

²⁰ This is similar to the impact Plutarch envisages for philosophy at the symposium more generally: see 1.1, 613d–614a.

²¹ See Johnson (2009) 320–30. I have also greatly benefited from reading a chapter of Joe Howley’s Ph.D. thesis (University of St Andrews) on reading scenes in Gellius.

²² On the ancients’ techniques of remembering things read (and the vital role they played in literary composition), see Small (1997), esp. 181–201.

²³ They do not refer to knowledge acquired through teaching or other social interactions, for example, though this could be surmised for at least some of the instances where Aristotle and other Peripatetics are quoted.

²⁴ Cf. 3.6, 653e–654b, where Zopyrus summarizes Epicurus’ views on the effects of wine on sexual intercourse.

²⁵ *Μῆμνημαι*—*μνημόσκομαι*: 612e, 629e, 632a, 646e, 652a, 653b, 676d, 677e, 686c–d, 706e, 745e. *Μνημονεύω* (and compounds): 612d, 635b, 653f, 690d–f, 704b, 724a, 744b.

Plutarch stresses that a considerable lapse of time has intervened since he read Aristotle's discussion of wine's coldness (*οὐ νεωστὶ . . . ἀλλ' ἱκανῶς πάλαι*). He may by now have forgotten it, which is presumably why he does not actually quote Aristotle's opinion on the matter. He does quote Epicurus, albeit without much certainty: he cites the gist (*τὸ κεφάλαιον*) of what he thinks (*ὡς ἐγὼμαι*) Epicurus has said. Knowledge that is recalled from memory is always subject to the risks of irretrievable loss, fragmentation, and distortion.²⁶

This is the paradox of the *Table Talk* as a whole. Memory, as it asserts, is the key to the learning process, because it can often be tantamount to learning anew: 'if the getting of knowledge does not insure that one remembers it, frequently the same end is attained by recollection as by learning' (*καὶ γὰρ ἂν αἱ μαθήσεις ἀναμνήσεις μὴ ποιῶσιν, πολλάκις εἰς ταὐτὸ τῷ μανθάνειν τὸ ἀναμνησθεσθαι καθίστησιν*, 2. *Praef.* 629e).²⁷ Yet at the same time, as we have seen, one has to accept its main limitation, namely, that it is by default selective. Or, as the opening preface to book 1 makes clear, one might judiciously exploit its selectivity: 'one should remember either none of the improprieties committed over cups or only those which call for an altogether light and playful reproof' (*ἢ μηδενὸς δέον μνημονεύειν τῶν ἐν οἴνῳ πλημμεληθέντων ἢ παντελῶς ἐλαφρᾶς καὶ παιδικῆς νοθεσίας δεομένων*, 612d). Looking at the *Table Talk* as a whole, these different workings and uses of memory are crucial for our understanding of how Peripatetic knowledge is shared and transmitted in the dialogues. In what follows, I shall look closely at some case studies.

GOOD MEMORY IN ACTION: RECALLING PERIPATETIC KNOWLEDGE IN THE *TABLE TALK*

The *Table Talk*'s dialogues make it clear that a good recollection of what Aristotle and his Peripatetic successors have stated on various scientific questions is a key asset when engaging in interaction with others at the symposium. A space whose intimate atmosphere often entails the guests' subjection to particularly intense peer scrutiny, the

²⁶ See Small's discussion of this in (1997) 188–96.

²⁷ On the Platonic sub-text to this statement, see detailed discussion by Kechagia, pp. 81–83 in this volume.

symposium puts pressure for the successful display of one's command of Greek *paideia* before others, thus creating the right conditions for intellectual performance. Chapter 6.4 allows us a glimpse of the kind of social dynamic that is prevalent in such situations. There, a sympotic guest (*ξένος*) who is introduced as 'a fairly well-read man' (*ἦν δ' ὁ ξένος φιλόλογος ἐπιεικῶς*, 690c) informs the group that he had derived his idea to cool water by storing it in a suspended vessel all night from 'the writings of Aristotle, where the reason was explained' (*καὶ τοῦτ' ἔφη λαβεῖν ἐκ τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους μετὰ λόγου κείμενον*, 690c). We do not learn which writings these actually were, though it seems plausible that the guest would have Aristotle's *Problems* in mind. At any rate, the guest's knowledge of Aristotle's scientific observation enables him to try it out himself, and this is a vivid illustration both of Peripatetic science's relevance to real-life praxis,²⁸ and his own scientific-minded way of life. It is also a point about the guest's familiarity with the Aristotelian writings in question—such that he can closely replicate the scientific observations that they cite.²⁹ This familiarity is further confirmed when, next, he quotes (perhaps verbatim?) Aristotle's explanation (690d–e). The accuracy of his citation, which looks all the more impressive because of the extensiveness of his Aristotelian quote, serves to consolidate the esteem in which he is held by his peers.³⁰ They, indeed, react by applauding him 'for his valiant feat of memory' (*ἐπηνέσαμεν ὡς ἀνδρικῶς καταμνημονεύσαντα*, *ibid.*). The adverb *ἀνδρικῶς* (literally: 'in a manly style'), deriving its force and connotations from the world of sophistic display,³¹ leaves no doubt that the guest offered his friends a *performance* of the accuracy and precision of his Peripatetic knowledge—a skill that is highly valorized precisely because it is so exceptional in contexts of oral transmission.

Sympotic dialogue can often lead to moments of heightened tension, when the speakers engage in debate with one another. The *Table Talk* tends to underscore the playful, and above all civilized style of these debates; but it also draws attention to the intellectual alertness and agility that is called for when the speakers seek to refute their

²⁸ On this practice-orientated dimension of the *Probl.*, see Louis (1991) vii–xi; Jacob (2004), esp. 40–2.

²⁹ The urge for empirical verification seems strikingly modern to us, yet it was well established in ancient scientific practice. See esp. Hankinson (1995) 60–83.

³⁰ Fr. 216 Rose.

³¹ See Gleason (1995).

interlocutors and defend their own positions. Good memory and flexible use of one's intellectual arsenal are both vital on such occasions. When the debate concerns scientific questions, accurate recollection of Peripatetic scientific arguments especially proves particularly handy. When in chapter 1.9 Plutarch and the grammarian Theon seek to establish why it is that in the *Odyssey* Nausicaa washes her clothes in the river rather than in the sea,³² they resort to different explanations of the constitution and properties of fresh water and sea water by Aristotle (both drawing, in all likelihood, from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*).³³ Theon begins by citing Aristotle on the view that sea water contains earthy elements (πολὸν γὰρ τῆ θαλάττῃ τὸ τραχὺ καὶ γεῶδες ἐνδιέσπαρται).³⁴ Fresh water, by contrast, is pure and light (ἄμικτον καὶ καθαρὸν), and for this reason more easily penetrates into the fabric and dissolves stains (627a–b). Plutarch counters with an empirical observation that solid additives to water such as soda or ash in fact increase its cleansing powers (627b–c). Rather, he argues, it is the sea's oily consistency (λιπαρά) that makes it less suitable for cleaning clothes. This fact, besides, is attested by Aristotle himself (627c–d).³⁵ As for sea water's earthiness, this may indeed be causing it to be less effective in cleaning fabrics, but for a different reason: it causes it to evaporate much more slowly than fresh water, as its earthy elements make it cling to the cloth's texture (627d).³⁶ Theon, in reply, immediately refutes Plutarch by arguing that Aristotle, 'in the same book' (ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ βιβλίῳ), claims that those who have bathed in the sea dry faster than those who have washed themselves in fresh water (ibid.).³⁷

In this scene, both Plutarch and Theon playfully pit alternative Aristotelian explanations of the same fundamental scientific question (sea water's physical properties, and how they differ from those of fresh water) against each other. All these explanations, notably, derive from the same textual source (this is indicated by Theon's phrase ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ βιβλίῳ), most likely the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*, which, as we know, devotes an entire book (23) to questions

³² *Od.* 6.59.

³³ Book 23 of the current version of the collection.

³⁴ Cf. ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 23.932^b 6–7 and 25–8; 935^a 6–7.

³⁵ Cf. ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 23.932^b 4–6; 933^a 17–20; 935^a 7–8; 935^b 17–27.

³⁶ Cf. 6.3, 688f–689a (on using detergents in order to clean clothes prior to dyeing); and 6.9, 696d, where the cleansing powers of water are compared with those of oil.

³⁷ Cf. ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 23.932^b 25–8.

pertaining to sea water. Their debate operates as a display of good memory in the same ways as the guest's long citation of Aristotle in 6.4 does. What is at stake here is the ability effectively to recall select items of knowledge from the *Problems* (in the form of isolated arguments, theories, or observations) in order flexibly to adapt them to the needs of one's own argument, and in order successfully to issue counter-arguments and refutation. Being capable of engaging with Peripatetic material so freely, even irreverently (and this is a skill in which the characters prove particularly deft throughout the work), presupposes deep familiarity with a wide range of knowledge contained within large-scale Peripatetic collections such as the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*—which suggests that imperial readers such as Plutarch and his friends read at least this work (perhaps other Peripatetic works too) with the purpose of internalizing and subsequently reusing its contents.³⁸ It also relies upon the facility quickly and effectively to scan one's memory of this material for the purpose of locating knowledge that can be reused and recontextualized for new ends—a matter of good memory training. But triggering this process of mental reconstruction (or retrieval) is also of paramount cultural significance in itself, because it provides intellectual exercise for the speakers' memory, honing and refreshing it. Thus, it ensures that it remains active as their 'virtual' archive.³⁹

Thirdly, a sound command of Peripatetic science is a necessary precondition for issuing criticism on and correcting or supplementing the earlier scientific tradition. Just what this means is illustrated by chapter 3.3. Florus there expresses amazement (*ἐθαύμαζε*) that Aristotle, in his *On Drunkenness* (*Περὶ Μέθης*) did not work out the causation (*τὴν αἰτίαν οὐκ ἐξείργασατο*, 650a) for his assertion that old men are most susceptible to drunkenness, while women least susceptible.⁴⁰ Florus' desire for a satisfactory explanation urges him to

³⁸ This style of reading can also be inferred from the way the QN especially synthesizes arguments from the ps.-Arist. *Probl.* See especially 1–2, 4, 7–12, all of which recycle a core set of tenets (that sea water is heavy and earthy, oily, bitter, warm, and has a drying effect; and that fresh or rain water, by contrast, is light, full of *pneuma*, and sweet) culled from various parts of *Probl.* 23 (see e.g. 931^b 39 ff.).

³⁹ On ancient conceptions of memory as an archive, see detailed discussion by Small (1997) 3–11, 81–137, 224–39.

⁴⁰ On Aristotle's *Περὶ Μέθης* (not necessarily the same work as his *Symposium*; see Tecuşan (1993) 94 ff.), see Rose, frs. 99–111. This is the only explicit reference to the work in the QC.

encourage the company to examine the issue independently. Sulla, who undertakes the challenge, establishes the conceptual grounds on which the answer should rely: since women and old men are diametrically opposed natures (the former moist, smooth, and soft; the latter dry, rough, and hard), establishing the cause for just one of the two categories will be sufficient for understanding the opposing forces at work in the other (650a–b). Accordingly, Sulla focuses his explanation mostly on women, listing three possible explanations for their resistance to intoxication (that they have a watery constitution (τὴν κρᾶσιν ὑγρὰν ἔχουσιν), which causes wine to become diluted; that they tend to drink in one gulp; that they possess an especially porous body (πολύπορον), which causes the wine to disseminate, 650b–c). By setting these particular conceptual premisses, though, he unmistakably aims to answer the question in the Peripatetic ‘spirit’: the theory of opposing pairs of qualities recurs in the Peripatetic corpus of *Problems*, and is a fundamental working principle in the Peripatetic scientific tradition.⁴¹ In addition, Sulla makes an attempt to supplement part of the causation Aristotle might have plausibly offered from Aristotle himself: ‘one can get some hint of the causation even from Aristotle himself (ἔστι δέ τι καὶ παρ’ αὐτοῦ λαβεῖν Ἀριστοτέλους), as he says. He then goes on to provide a summary of a pertinent Aristotelian opinion (its precise source unknown) that connects drunkenness with the style of one’s drinking: ‘he [sc. Aristotle] says that people who drink all in one gulp, without drawing a breath (ἄθροον καὶ ἀπνευστί)—a manner of drinking the ancients called ‘tossing it off’ (ἀμυστίζειν)—are the people least apt to fall into a state of intoxication, since the wine does not linger in them, but proceeds through the body and is pushed out by the force of the draught. And we usually see women drinking in this fashion’ (650b–c).

Similar observations concerning insufficiencies or faults in Aristotelian causation recurrently provide an incentive for new inquiries in the *Table Talk*’s sympotic dialogues.⁴² Time and again when such deficiencies are noted, the characters directly instigate the group to issue independent investigation: ‘It is up to us’, says a guest in 6.5, ‘to

⁴¹ Düring (1966) 374–80. Cf. *Probl.* 1 (the section on medicine). For the medical provenance of the theory, and its popularity in the Lyceum, see Longrigg (1995) 433–45. See also Kechagia, pp. 97–99 in this volume.

⁴² Esp. 3.8, 656cf.; 6.5, 690f; 6.8, 694dff. Cf. 7.2, 700d (criticizing Theophrastus for his inadequate provision of cause).

try to explain the cause [sc. of why pebbles and metal objects, if thrown into water, cause it to cool], which is extremely hard to discover' (690f). Once again, they underline the instrumental role the ability to engage closely with Peripatetic source-material (which, in turn, relies on good memory for its factual details) plays in issuing critical discourse on scientific arguments at the symposium, and, subsequently, in making one's own independent contribution to scientific inquiry, by pursuing its missing, or inadequately developed, lines. Sulla's 'Aristotelian' reply in our chapter further suggests that the conceptual and factual 'starting-points' for independent reflection on such topics are in fact offered by the Peripatetic tradition itself (a further testimony to the trust the *Table Talk* places in its scope and comprehensiveness), so long as one is able to locate and creatively synthesize the relevant knowledge and arguments. The importance of this creative approach becomes evident in the following chapter (3.4), which adds a further line of exploration to the topic of women's constitution, thus refining the original inquiry. Establishing a symmetrical start to that of 3.3, it shows Apollonides the tactician noting a deficiency in Sulla's own causation: Apollonides accepts 'the statement about old men (τὸν μὲν περὶ τῶν γερόντων ἀποδέχεσθαι λόγον); but in regard to women, it seemed to him that we had failed to take account of the quality of coldness in their constitution (ἐν δὲ ταῖς γυναιξὶν αὐτῶν δοκεῖν παραλελείφθαι τὸ τῆς ψυχρότητος) and that by means of this they nullify the effect of the hottest wine and remove its kick and fire' (ἡ θερμότατον ἄκρατον ἀποσβέννυσθαι καὶ ἀποβάλλειν τὸ πλήττον καὶ πυρώδες).⁴³ The company accepts the validity of the observation, and decides to launch a wider inquiry into whether women are actually cold or hot in their constitution, with arguments offered in support of either possibility (651a.aff.).

REMEMBERING IN ORDER TO FORGET

Precisely because Peripatetic knowledge in the *Table Talk* is recalled from memory, it can sometimes be subject to memory's whims and limitations. Fragmented, or incomplete recollection of Peripatetic learning is what most commonly results from instances where the

⁴³ 650f–651a.

interlocutors' memories seem to fail them. These dynamics of forgetting prove to be as important as those of remembering within the *Table Talk*, and this is because the dialogues are intent on stressing the opportunities for independent inquiry that insufficient memory for what Aristotle and his successors have actually argued on a given scientific problem or observation provides. Let us focus on a characteristic example, 2.2.

Chapter 2.2 narrates the occasion of an intellectual inquiry into why men feel hungrier in autumn. Peripatetic knowledge provides a key 'starting-point' for the investigation, even though its actual recollection occupies but a fleeting moment in the dialogue. Let us pay close attention to the opening:

Ἐν Ἐλευσίῃ μετὰ τὰ μυστήρια τῆς πανηγύρεως ἀκμαζούσης εἰσιτώμεθα παρὰ Γλαυκίᾳ τῷ ῥήτορι. πεπανμένων δὲ δειπνεῖν τῶν ἄλλων, Ξενοκλῆς ὁ Δελφὸς ὥσπερ εἴθιμι τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἡμῶν Λαμπρίαν εἰς ἀδηφαγίαν Βοιωτίῳ ἐπέσκωπτεν. ἐγὼ δ' ἀμυνομένοις ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ τὸν Ξενοκλέα τοῖς Ἐπικούρου λόγοις χρώμενος 'οὐ γὰρ ἅπαντες', εἶπον, 'ὠβέλτιστε, ποιοῦνται τὴν τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος ὑπεξείρεσιν ὄρον ἡδονῆς καὶ πέρας· Λαμπρία δὲ καὶ ἀνάγκη, πρὸ τοῦ κήπου κυδαίνονται τὸν περίπατον καὶ τὸ Λύκειον, ἔργῳ μαρτυρεῖν Ἀριστοτέλει· φησὶ γὰρ ὁ ἀνὴρ βρωτικώτατον ἕκαστον αὐτὸν αὐτοῦ περὶ τὸ φθινόπωρον εἶναι, καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἐπεῖρηκεν· ἐγὼ δ' οὐ μνημονεύω.' βέλτιον', εἶπεν ὁ Γλαυκίας· 'αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἐπιχειρήσομεν ζητεῖν, ὅταν παυσώμεθα δειπνοῦντες.'

At Eleusis after the mysteries, the climax of the festival, we were dining at the house of Glaucias the professor of Public-Speaking. After the others had finished dinner, Xenocles of Delphi, as usual, began to tease my brother Lamprias about his 'Boeotian gluttony'. In defence of my brother I launched an attack upon Xenocles, follower of the teachings of Epicurus, by saying, 'Not all men, Sir, make the removal of the painful the limit and perfection of pleasure. Lamprias honours The Walk and The Lyceum before The Garden and so must bear active witness to Aristotle, for this gentleman says that each man is hungriest in the fall of the year. And he has given the reason, but I do not remember it.'

'It is better so,' said Glaucias, 'for we ourselves shall undertake the search for it when we finish dining.' (635a-b)

The season (autumn), Xenocles' playful mockery of Lamprias for his 'Boeotian gluttony', Lamprias' Peripateticism, and Plutarch's half-serious and half-joking attempt to defend his brother all trigger recollection of a claim made by Aristotle that men in general (not just Lamprias!) tend to become hungrier in autumn. But Aristotle's

name in this scene appears only in order quickly to disappear, as Plutarch fails to recall the philosopher's explanation for the phenomenon (*οὐ μνημονεύω*, he says). For us this is frustrating, for we would like to know what Aristotle actually thought about the matter of autumnal increase in appetite (and where and in what context he articulated this observation). And yet we see that Plutarch and his friends, far from being disconcerted, see this as an excellent opportunity to launch an inquiry of their own. At the most crucial moment in the narrative, Glaucias shows his intellectual adventurousness, proposing an independent investigation of the topic, and allowing the scientific exploration of the problem finally to be initiated. In effect, Aristotle's authority on the observation about the seasonal increase in the appetite for food acts as a stimulus for independent philosophical reflection on the causes of the phenomenon. Notably, just like Sulla in 3.3, here too the characters seem to attempt to reconstruct, as it were, what Aristotle might plausibly have said on the matter, by offering answers in the Peripatetic 'style'. Glaucias and Xenocles attribute the cause of bulimia to autumn fruit, which stimulates the appetite either due to its extreme cathartic power or because of its taste (described with the adjectives *εὐστομος* and *δηκτικός*); Lamprias, in turn, attributes it to the body's innate heat (*σύμφυτον θερμόν*—an Aristotelian concept),⁴⁴ which gathers new strength in autumn (and thus presumably consumes nutrition faster); Plutarch, finally, locates the reason in the fact that the body is driven to hunger for solid food as a counterbalance to its excessive consumption of liquids in the summer (a process of change (*μεταβολή*): another Aristotelian concept).⁴⁵ Changes in the type of seasonal diet, he adds, may also have something to do with the phenomenon.

Attempting to address the problem of autumnal hunger, then, takes the form of a creative intellectual exercise (a training in *zētēsis*) for the characters in this dialogue. The narrative's emphasis falls on their ability to approximate Aristotle's lost scientific explanation, by constructing arguments that rely on their solid command of key Peripatetic scientific principles. Original and creative explanations

⁴⁴ The body's innate heat is integral to the process of concoction (*πέψις*), and for this reason a cardinal element that must be preserved and nourished: See Düring (1966) 342–5; Teodorsson (1989) 208. Cf. ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 860^a 33–34, and QC 6.1, 686e–f.

⁴⁵ Cf. ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 861^a 1–9.

are valorized as long as they can match up to the authority of the lost one; and for them to do so, the narrative seems to suggest, they ought to be guided by a principle of ‘clarifying Aristotle from Aristotle’, which requires the ‘reconstruction’, as it were, of the spirit and theoretical premisses of the lost Aristotelian explanation through the activation of other relevant Peripatetic knowledge.⁴⁶ Effectively, the speakers are openly called to pose as Peripatetic-style thinkers themselves, whose insights on scientific questions matter as much as those of Aristotle—and which can, in fact, even stand for Aristotle’s. After all, in 2.2 it is their explanations that we as readers of the chapter have to settle for, since, as it happens, Aristotle’s views are forever lost to us.

CHOOSING NOT TO REMEMBER: THE DYNAMICS OF *εὐρησιλογία*

The drive towards pursuing scientific inquiry independently sometimes leads to the suppression of Peripatetic explanations for scientific questions altogether, even when these are clearly available and there is no mention of their content, or causation, being unsatisfactory. As Plutarch openly tells us in chapter 6.8, its topic the causes of bulimia, this attitude is in fact the marker of true philosophical minds:

Γενομένης δὲ σιωπῆς, ἐγὼ συννοῶν ὅτι τὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἐπιχειρήματα τοὺς μὲν ἀργοὺς καὶ ἀφνεῖς οἶον ἀναπαύει καὶ ἀναπίμπλησι, τοῖς δὲ φιλοτίμοις καὶ φιλολόγοις ἀρχὴν ἐνδίδωσιν οἰκείαν καὶ τόλμαν ἐπὶ τὸ ζητεῖν καὶ ἀνιχνεύειν τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

There was a silence during which I reflected that to the idle and dull the solutions of their predecessors to such questions provide only a chance to imbibe and be content; to an eager scholar, however, they present an opening and incentive for boldly seeking and tracking down the truth, on his own. (694d)

Philosophical inquiry ought for Plutarch to be a dynamic and ongoing process, but for this to be achieved one must never be content with the opinions of earlier philosophical authorities, but always pursue their

⁴⁶ This exegetical method was widely applied in Homeric criticism (going back to Aristarchus). See Pfeiffer (1968) 4. It was later taken up by commentators of Plato and Aristotle. See e.g. Elias, *In Arist. Cat.* CAG 18.1 (1900) 122.25–123.11.

investigations afresh. Fittingly, Plutarch cites an Aristotelian explanation from the *Problems* (which attributes bulimia to the body's internal liquefaction), opening the ground for the other guests to attack or defend its premisses (694d–e). Elsewhere in the work, this persistent quest for a fresh outlook on familiar topics is termed *εὐρησιλογία*—‘the discovery of (new) things to say’.⁴⁷ The term is emblematic of the *Table Talk*'s overall emphasis on independent intellectual endeavour, which actively engages with tradition, but with a view to decisively enrich and further it. But it is also fraught with the pressures of sympotic performance, which recurrently puts one's powers of extemporization to the test, in a manner that is analogous (if not quite identical) to the conditions of sophistic performance.⁴⁸ Chapter 3.7 highlights particularly its pedagogical advantages. In this chapter, Hagias and Aristaenetus, both ‘young men of philosophical temperament’ (*φιλοσοφοῦσι μειρακίοις*, 655f), are prompted by Plutarch's father to offer alternative explanations on the question why sweet new wine is the least intoxicating.⁴⁹ Hagias attributes the cause to the excessive sweetness of the drink, which makes it unpalatable and therefore prevents the consumption of the quantity needed to cause drunkenness. Aristaenetus also attributes the cause to the wine's sweetness, citing ‘a certain number of writings’ (in all likelihood, the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*), in which it is said that sweet new wine, when mixed with other wine, stops intoxication. Intriguingly though, he passes over the details of the cause that those writings provide (extant in the current version of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*),⁵⁰ and concludes by additionally invoking the physicians' practice of administering sweet substances (such as honey) to those who are drunk.

In response, the sympotic group praises the young men's answers for their originality: ‘Now we heartily approved the ingenuity of the young men because they did not fall upon the obvious arguments, but had a good supply of their own attempts at a solution’ (*Σφόδρ' οὖν ἀπεδέξαμεθα τὴν εὐρησιλογίαν τῶν νεανίσκων, ὅτι τοῖς ἐμποδῶν οὐκ*

⁴⁷ 3.7, 656a, 5.7, 682b.

⁴⁸ For references to speakers' extemporization skills (and the praise that they receive), see esp. QC 639d, 643e, 648b, 648f–649a, 652b, 656d (note phrase *ἴδιόν τι κινεῖν*, stressing the creativity required), 665e–f, 667a, 684e, 702f, 714a–b, 719c; e–f. Note also Caphisias' comment on the rhetorical qualities of Praxiteles' speech in 8.4, 724d (*ἐκ μέσων ἀνεσπασμένα τῶν Περιπατητικῶν τόπων εἰς τὸ πιθανὸν ἐπικεχείρηται*).

⁴⁹ On pedagogy in the QC, see Klotz (2007), and her chapter in this volume.

⁵⁰ See ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 872^b 32ff.

ἐπιπεσόντες ἰδίῳν ἠϋπόρησαν ἐπιχειρημάτων, 656a). Plutarch then provides a summary of the arguments in question (he characterizes them as *πρόχειρα* ('lying at hand'), and *ράδια λαβεῖν* ('easy to comprehend'), which, we are told, bear Aristotle's stamp of authority (656b): that sweet new wine is heavy and contains large amounts of gaseous and watery substances, which blunt its intoxicating effect. We as readers can thus judge the case for ourselves. The comparison is indeed revealing: we can certainly side with the sympotic group's approval of the young men's originality, as they replicate none of the Aristotelian arguments. But we can also see that, in comparison with Aristotle's, the young men's answers are lacking in systematic rigour (both speakers heavily rely on the opinion of authorities, poetic and scientific). The juxtaposition, typical of Plutarch's technique of parallelism, thus helps us understand what it takes to construct explanations that can match up to the standard that Aristotle and his successors set, and how important a paradigm of investigation the Peripatetics have set with their scientific legacy.

The *Table Talk's* chapters draw an extraordinarily rich picture of the various uses to which Peripatetic texts, and knowledge that derives from them, may be put: they may be read and discussed; scanned and freely mined for specific information (which points to their value as reference-texts); they may be cited verbatim; or invoked by summary, paraphrase, even as distant recollection; they can be emulated, and creatively imitated; and they can be criticized and corrected, or supplemented. All these different styles of use and consultation relate, as we have seen, to specific intellectual and social operations, all of which are characteristic of the culture of the Second Sophistic: the performative display of *paideia*, intellectual competition, and the drive to carve one's own intellectual space alongside the great authorities of the past. Equally significant is the space for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary encounters that Peripateticism provides in the work. We have seen Greeks and non-Greeks (Florus is a Roman; Sulla is a Carthaginian; and in 8.10, we see Favorinus, a bilingual Gaul, depicted as a follower of Aristotle),⁵¹ and specialists in philosophy and mere dabblers in philosophical method (such as Theon in 1.9, whose interest in philosophical speculation is considered

⁵¹ 734 ff. On Favorinus' Peripateticism, see Bowie (1997), Opsomer (1997), Karamanolis (2006) 86–7.

unusual, given his profession as a grammarian)⁵² find common ground in the joint exploration of texts such as Aristotle's *Problems*, and through the practice of Peripatetic-style scientific inquiry more generally. Last but not least, we have observed young participants in symposia honing their intellectual skills before their teachers, friends, parents, and relatives with the help of such texts and knowledge. For them especially, Peripatetic knowledge plays a key role in their training as philosophers and scientific inquirers, and also contributes to their socialization. All these different elements point to the extraordinary dynamism, appeal, and fecundity of the Peripatetic scientific legacy, whose textual monuments, far from being static textual accumulations of learning, are repositories of knowledge open to a wealth of productive encounters.

THE TABLE-TALK'S 'STARTING-POINTS'

προβλημάτων... καὶ λόγων φιλοσόφων ὑποθέσεις αὐτοῦς τε τοὺς μεμνημένους εὐφραίνουσιν, αἰὲν πρόσφατοι παρούσαι, καὶ τοὺς ἀπολειφθέντας οὐχ ἦττον ἐστιᾶν παρέχουσι τοῖς αὐτοῖς, ἀκούοντας καὶ μεταλαμβάνοντας· ὅπου καὶ νῦν τῶν Σωκρατικῶν συμποσίων μετουσία καὶ ἀπόλαυσις ἐστι τοῖς φιλολόγοις, ὥσπερ αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις τοῖς τότε δειπνοῦσι.

[T]he topics of philosophical inquiry and discussion not only give pleasure by remaining ever present and fresh to those who actually recall them, but they also provide just as good a feast on the same food to those who, having been left out, partake of them through oral report. In this way, it is even to-day open to men of literary taste to enjoy and share in the Socratic banquets as much as did the original diners. (*Table Talk* 6. *Praef.* 686c)

At the beginning of this chapter I suggested that there might be a self-reflexive element in the *Table Talk's* preoccupation with staging settings of oral sharing and transmission for Peripatetic knowledge. I would here like to explore this proposition in more detail, by examining how far it would be plausible for us to envisage similar scenarios of transmission for the *Table Talk's* own contents. The

⁵² Note Plutarch's sarcastic comment in 627a: εἰ γὰρ ἡμῖν αἰτίων ζητητικὸς καὶ θεωρητικὸς γέγονας...

passage that I have quoted, taken from the preface of *Table Talk's* sixth book, offers grounds for some initial speculation on how Plutarch might be envisioning the reception of the various *quaestiones* that comprise his text. Plutarch there says that the subjects (*ὑποθέσεις*)⁵³ of philosophical problems (*προβλημάτων*) and philosophical discourse more generally (*λόγων φιλοσόφων*) give pleasure not only to those who initially explored them through discussion and recall them at a subsequent stage, but also to others, who were not present at the original conversations, but by hearing about them (*ἀκούοντας*) are enabled to feel part of them (*μεταλαμβάνοντας*). Socratic *symposia* are, for him, prime examples of this long reach of philosophical discourse (he undoubtedly means Plato's and Xenophon's *Symposia*, though we cannot preclude that he might be referring to a wider tradition of symposiastic writing by philosophers).⁵⁴ Plutarch's use of the participle *ἀκούοντας* suggests that the prevalent scenario of transmission that he has in mind concerns specifically *oral* transmission—an intriguing suggestion, to say the least.⁵⁵ His rather specialized reference to *προβλημάτων . . . ὑποθέσεις* ('the subjects of (philosophical) problems'), moreover, suggests that philosophical problems as a distinct category of philosophical discourse are themselves also subject to this mode of reception.

This raises interesting possibilities for the contents of the *Table Talk* itself as a collection of symposiastic problems (*quaestiones*). Might Plutarch be envisaging an oral avenue of transmission for the individual *quaestiones* that are contained within his own text? Goldhill, in a recent article, seems to think so,⁵⁶ and construes the text specifically as 'a guide and handbook to social discourse, which can be used and reused by selective performance'.⁵⁷ Goldhill is surely right to stress the importance of the Second Sophistic scene of oral performance for the reception of miscellanistic texts such as Plutarch's *Table Talk*. However, his assessment of the *Table Talk* as a handbook to social discourse seems far too sweeping. There is no doubt that Plutarch would have been concerned about the social applicability of the knowledge contained within his text (as he clearly is about that of

⁵³ Cf. LSJ s.v.: 'subject proposed (to oneself or another) for discussion'.

⁵⁴ Cf. Hermogenes (*Περὶ Μεθ. Δευ.* 36), who speaks of *Συμπόσια Σωκρατικά*, probably in reference to a literary genre (of which Plato and Xenophon are clearly considered the fathers): see Martin (1931) 2–3.

⁵⁵ See Bréchet (2007) 102–5. Cf. König, pp. 196–7 in this volume.

⁵⁶ See more extensive discussion of this in the Introduction to this volume.

⁵⁷ (2009) 110.

his entire corpus of *Lives* and *Moralia*).⁵⁸ But the *Table Talk* comes with an impressive socio-cultural, philosophical, and pedagogical agenda, whose outreach and objectives go well beyond those of a handbook of social behaviour. As I have already suggested, it is the micro-histories of reception that the *Table Talk* embeds, particularly those concerning its key intellectual paradigm, Peripatetic-style inquiry, to which we ought to turn if we wish to attain to a fuller understanding of what these objectives might have been, and what they would have entailed.

I would here like to underline the three main respects in which the *Table Talk* might plausibly be anticipating scenarios of reception similar to those I have sketched for Peripatetic knowledge in the main body of this chapter. The first concerns the groundwork it does with memory. Reading the *Table Talk* consecutively (a possibility that seems more plausible than the selective reading Goldhill envisages)⁵⁹ makes one quickly observe regular repetitions of information, recurrences of themes, and 'fresh' applications of a finite set of theories to diverse contexts. All these features seem geared towards ensuring that the reader retains as much information as possible, gradually assimilating concepts, theories, explanatory principles, even whole argumentative strategy patterns as he or she reads the text. These could then easily be recalled from memory at a later stage, as theories and observations which could be used in new contexts, and with new argumentative ends in view.

To take but a brief look at the first three books (which, together, constitute the first instalment of the *Table Talk* that Plutarch sent to Sossius Senecio, according to the opening preface, 612e), we can immediately observe first of all how symmetries assist the reader in retaining information: all three begin with lengthy disquisitions on organizational aspects of the symposium as a social and intellectual space (the kind of topics Plutarch designates as *συμποτικά*, that is, narrowly pertaining to the symposium itself),⁶⁰ problematizing the

⁵⁸ On the *Lives*' practical orientation (as guides into virtue) see esp. Duff (1999), esp. 52–71; and Stadter (2000). On the *Moralia*'s 'practical ethics', see Van Hoof (2010).

⁵⁹ On consecutive reading as the most likely style in which most ancient miscellanies were read, see Morgan (2007a) 257–73.

⁶⁰ 2. *Praef.* 629c–d: he contrasts them with topics that he calls *συμποσιακά*, a term which designates other kinds of learned sympotic conversation, more loosely linked with the sympotic occasion at hand.

relationship between its pleasurable and edificatory aspects: whether philosophy is a fitting topic of discussion at symposia (1.1), on which subjects the symposiasts are more likely to enjoy being questioned or playfully teased (2.1), whether the symposiasts should crown themselves with flowers during the symposium (3.1). And all three then gradually lead into more variegated topics, blending in scientific questions with literary and cultural criticism, and anecdotal lore. Symmetries exist between their subsequent cluster of topics as well: the discussion of elderly men's fondness of wine in book 1, associatively leading to a discussion of their vision-problems (7 and 8), recurs in book 3 in the form of why old men are especially prone to getting drunk by contrast with women, who are least likely to do so. This second discussion too (as we have already seen) associatively branches out to a comparison of the constitutions of women and men in terms of their respective coldness (3 and 4).⁶¹

The strategy of enhancing and stimulating the reader's memory also entails a care cumulatively to introduce the reader to key scientific concepts, and the fields of their possible application, thus providing a good inkling of how flexibly they can be used in different contexts of inquiry. We see, for example, that the fundamental concept of hot or cold temperaments first appears in 1.6, with reference to Alexander's excessive drinking (the text remarks that Alexander possessed 'a hot-natured body', nevertheless excessive drinking of wine, which is regarded as cold, resulted in his lack of sexual appetite), and is further explored in the following chapter, dealing with old men's fondness for wine (625a-c) (the answers are either that they are cold, therefore their nature is compatible with that of wine (according to the principle that like seeks like, first introduced here), or that their innate heat subsides, and therefore needs a strong stimulant like wine in order to be revived (which implies that wine here is regarded as hot). The discussion of a (animate or inanimate) body's heat then recurs in the second and third books in relation to summer weather (2.2), plants (3.2), women and men again (3.3 and 3.4), and wine (3.5), thus further broadening the field of the discussion, and consolidating the reader's understanding of the concept.⁶²

⁶¹ Such symmetries occur elsewhere too. See e.g. the discussion of the optimal number of sympotic guests in the middle of books 4 and 5 (4.3 and 5.5-5.6, respectively, both looking back to 1.2).

⁶² Cf. 2.2, 635c-d; 4.1, 663f; 6.1-3; 6.8.

Secondly, the *Table Talk* itself offers ‘many starting-points’ for new inquiries, which can then be taken up for further investigation. The open-endedness of the question-and-answer technique of course plays an instrumental role in this.⁶³ Looking at the text overall, none of the answers that are provided for each *quaestio* can be said to be the final word on the topic (in most cases, we cannot even tell which one is the most satisfactory). This practically entails that all *quaestiones* that are explored within the work leave the ground open to further investigation, provided that one is creative enough to search for alternative avenues to explanation. In some instances though, this uncertainty is additionally flagged (and thus acts as an instigation for further investigation) by the speakers’ express statements of uncertainty about the possibility of reaching a satisfactory solution for the matter at hand. Such is the case of 6.5, for example, where, as we have already seen, Plutarch and a guest undertake to supplement a missing Aristotelian causation: why some people add pebbles or pieces of metal into water in order to cool it. ‘It is up to us to try to explain the cause’ (εἰς δὲ τὴν αἰτίαν ἐπιχειρήσομεν ἡμεῖς), the guest suggests, ‘which is extremely hard to discover’ (ἔστι γὰρ μάλιστα δυσθεώρητος). ‘Quite so’ (πάνυ μὲν οὖν), Plutarch agrees, ‘I should really be surprised if it did not elude us; but look into it, anyway’ (καὶ θαυμάσαιμ’ ἄν, εἰ μὴ διαφύγοι ὁ λόγος ἡμᾶς· ὅρα δ’ ὅμως, 690f).⁶⁴ The uncertainty acts as an invitation for the reader to take a critical view of the answer that is offered, and, if possible, to correct it with a more plausible one.⁶⁵

In other cases, the work’s abrupt transitions into new topics, characteristic of the meandering form of sympotic conversation, often interrupt threads of inquiry that could otherwise have been pursued more systematically. This too whets the reader’s appetite for fuller investigation. For example, the discussion of whether it is appropriate to use aulos-players at symposia in 7.7 is suspended,

⁶³ On the importance of this open-endedness for didactic praxis, see Jacob (2004) 28–37, and the Introduction to this volume.

⁶⁴ Plutarch indeed attempts to answer, by attributing the cause to the density of the objects inserted into the water: either they detain the cold air that invades water from the outside and cause it to pervade the water throughout (and thus cool it more effectively); or they detain the earthy substances within the water, thus rendering it thinner and more susceptible to cooling; or they are cold themselves, due to their very density (690f–691b).

⁶⁵ Cf. 4.2, 664c; 7.2, 700c–e; 7.3.

because Philip of Prusa's arguments in defence of the practice (710b–711a) are never refuted: Plutarch diverts the discussion to the more general topic of what sorts of entertainments are most appropriate at symposia (7.8), deliberately hindering (*διακρουόμενος*) the sophist of Stoic disposition who introduced the objection in the first place from offering his counter-argument to Philip's speech (711a–b). What might the Stoic's counter-position on the matter have been? The issue is ultimately left open to readers with Stoic leanings, or perhaps readers keen to delve into Stoic perspectives on the question of sympotic entertainment.⁶⁶

Lastly, the *Table Talk* contains the seeds of new questions in observations the causes of which are never (or insufficiently) explored, and which thus invite readers to adduce them themselves.⁶⁷ A particularly illustrative case is its elegant discussion of the palm's use as a crown in athletic contests (8.4). The investigation concludes with a tantalizingly inviting remark by Plutarch: 'The thing I am going to mention next is unique beyond anything we have spoken of, and is true of no other tree (*ἴδιον δὲ παρὰ ταῦτα πάντα καὶ μηδενὶ συμβεβηκὸς ἔτέρῳ τὸ μέλλον λέγεσθαι*). If you impose weight on a piece of palm-wood, it does not bend down and give way, but curves up in the opposite direction, as though resisting him who would force it' (724e–f). The tree's resilience, Plutarch concludes, resembles that of the athletes at the contests, hence the use of its foliage in order to make crowns for the games (724f). But of course he has provided no causation for the remarkable fact that he records (a true *παράδοξον*). For this, the reader will have to work towards a causation himself—as indeed Plutarch himself does elsewhere, and more specifically in his *Natural Questions* 32 (extant only from a sixteenth-century Latin translation),⁶⁸ which suggests three distinct causes for the phenomenon. As it happens, we know of one imperial reader of this chapter, namely, the Latin author Aulus Gellius and writer of the *Attic Nights*, who, however, opted for an approach that Plutarch would have emphatically disapproved of: in chapter 3.6 of his miscellanistic work, Gellius is content with merely replicating Plutarch's

⁶⁶ Cf. 714d, 739b.

⁶⁷ See e.g. 1.1, 615b–c (incomplete discussion of scolia), 3.10, 659a–b (summary list of bodies affected by the moon), 4.4, 667d–e (the comparison between the products of land and sea is imbalanced: sea products receive most of the attention).

⁶⁸ By the Dutch scholar Gybertus Longolius. See Pearson–Sandbach (1965) 142–4, and 214–16.

observation about the palm tree, rendering it in Latin translation. He makes no attempt to supplement the missing causation.⁶⁹ Gellius' case allows us to understand that Plutarch's material teems with potential, but for this potential to be realized the reader has to be critically engaged at all times. In the long history of readers' responses to the *Table Talk's quaestiones*, Gellius' in this particular instance stands for a thoroughly missed opportunity.

CONCLUSION

I have argued in favour of adopting a broad socio-cultural perspective on the role Peripatetic knowledge plays in the *Table Talk*. A broad interpretative lens ensures that we gain a fuller understanding of its value as culturally-valORIZED knowledge within the text. For this reason, I explored key scenes within the *Table Talk*, which draw attention to the intellectual and social processes that control the sharing of Peripatetic knowledge. These narratives speak of a fascinating scene of oral transmission, in which memory interacts with social and intellectual pressures in a way that renders Peripatetic knowledge the common property of a highly complex and diverse network of intellectual communities. They also, I have suggested, ultimately reflect back on the *Table Talk* itself, as a text whose problematic form and multi-disciplinary content cast it in a Peripatetic mould. However realistic, or fictional and idealized they are, these scenes do underline an important (and, as we know well, salient) feature of ancient knowledge transmission. In the majority of cases, it involved not entire texts, but fragments and tidbits of knowledge that were culled from texts, and subsequently reused in completely new contexts. The *Table Talk* is unique in that it offers us an unusually vivid glimpse of the role key cultural institutions such as the symposium, and the oral trajectories of transmission that operated in them, played in this process.

⁶⁹ *Per hercle rem mirandam Aristoteles in septimo Problematorum et Plutarchus in octavo Symposiacorum dicit. 'Si super palmae' inquit 'arboris lignum magna pondera inponas ac tam graviter urgeas oneresque, ut magnitudo oneris sustineri non queat, non deorsum palma cedit nec intra flectitur, sed adversus pondus resurgit et sursum nititur recurvaturque'; 'propterea' inquit Plutarchus 'in certaminibus palmam signum esse placuit victoriae, quoniam ingenium ligni eiusmodi est, ut urgentibus opprimentibusque non cedat'* (NA 3.6).

Under the Roman empire, symposia were events that encouraged the display of *paideia* in the form of learned citations extracted from authoritative sources. But symposia also served as loci where *paideia* could be dynamically revitalized. For those keen to display it did not simply replicate it blindly, but, operating under constant peer scrutiny, effectively transformed it into new knowledge, by embellishing it with new detail, enriching it with new insights, sometimes also exploring it from new angles. The remarkable susceptibility of Peripatetic polymathy to such transmission throughout the *Table Talk* thus creates a paradigm for the dynamic reappropriation of *paideia*.