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THE TRAGIC AND COMIC POET OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Diskin Clay

For Bernard Knox

PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM BREAKS UP only at dawn. For some, his celebration of Eros lasts longer than it should. At its end not only have Phaedrus, Eryximachus, and still others escaped into the night, but Plato's commentators have fallen asleep—like all but three or four of those still present in Agathon's banquet room. Ficino composed no *Oratio octava* to represent or comment upon Socrates' conversation with Agathon and Aristophanes. As for Louis Le Roi, whose *Le Sympose de Platon* (1558) was the first French translation of the *Symposium* and at the same time a sort of marriage manual for the newly married dauphin (pp. 71–72), not only does he fail to translate and comment upon the last scene of the dialogue, but he ends his *Sympose* with Diotima's last words.¹ Of modern commentaries, only one treats the last scene of the *Symposium* as an integral and essential part of the dialogue rather than an "epilogue."²

Plato's *Symposium* does not conclude with the last speech in praise of Eros—Alcibiades' praise of Socrates. Rather his celebration continues a discussion which survives the epiphany of new revellers just at the end of Alcibiades' Dionysian speech. *Thorybos* invades the banquet room. Vast quantities of wine are consumed. And Phaedrus escapes into the night. He had been the "father" of the argument of the *Symposium*: the praise of Eros. That praise seems to have been fittingly offered with Alcibiades' encomium of Socrates. But a very different conversation continues the action of the dialogue to day-break.

Just at the point where Agathon's victory celebration begins to break up, our knowledge of what was said and done hangs on a slender thread. Aristodemus is our only link to what went on when both the character and theme of the banquet radically change their course. And he fell asleep. And so there remain dark edges surrounding the most brilliant portrait Plato ever drew of Socrates. When Aristodemus awakens he opens his eyes upon a scene that has been transformed:

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He said that he woke up near daybreak, when the cocks were already crowing, and he saw that the others were asleep or had departed. Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates were the only ones still awake, and they were drinking from a large cup which they were passing from left to right. And Socrates was having a discussion with them. Aristodemus said that he could not remember all of what was said for he hadn't been on hand to hear the beginning and was drowsing off. But the main point was that Socrates was forcing them to agree that it is possible for one and the same man to know how to create comedy and tragedy, and that the man who has the skill of a tragic poet is also a comic poet. Compelled to these conclusions and not entirely following the line of argument, they began to nod off. Aristophanes was the first to fall asleep, and then, when it was already daylight, Agathon followed suit. And once he had seen them asleep, Socrates got up, and went away.

And after Socrates had spent his day as usual and returned home at nightfall to get some sleep, the dialogue between Plato and his reader begins. For we are brought to ask what comedy and tragedy have to do with one another; and what the last argument of the *Symposium* has to do with its central argument: the praise of Eros.

I

The answer to the Platonic riddle propounded at the end of the *Symposium* does not lie in the history of Greek literature. In the early spring of 416 there was no Greek or Athenian dramatist who wrote both comedy and tragedy. Only in Hellenistic times do we discover a poet who wrote both tragedies and comedies: sixty of one and thirty of the other.³ Shakespeare arrived on the scene of the Globe twenty centuries after Socrates argued his paradox. If it is to be found anywhere, the answer to our riddle lies submerged in the dialogue itself.

The *Symposium* is a drama narrated within the frame of a dramatic dialogue. It begins with the dramatic recital which leads to the narrative of what was said and done at Agathon's victory celebration. It confuses the ancient categories invented to describe the Platonic dialogues, or rather it belongs to that category which mixes both narrative and speech, for it is both narrative and dramatic.⁴ Within the frame dialogue supported by the syntactical reminders of accusatives and infinitives and the string of "he says," the heart of Plato's *Symposium* is made up of direct discourse. Some of the most telling indications we have for the staging of the drama of the banquet hall come from the narrative links which Aristodemus carefully provided Apollodorus as he moved from speech to speech. The dramatic action of the *Symposium* requires a cast of seven speakers. There are others present who do not speak in Plato's dialogue, but who did speak in praise of Eros (180 C). By this detail we come to realize that there is a difference between Plato's *Symposium* and Agathon's banquet. There are also a number of drunken intruders who say nothing, but are anything but *κωφὰ πρόσωπα*.

When Socrates finally appears in the middle of the feast, he discovers Phaedrus reclining on the first of the banqueting benches. Between Phaedrus and Pausanias he could see some other guests, but we never learn who they were or what they said (180 C). Then came Aristophanes, and next to him Eryximachus (185 C). Aristodemus came

next, but he is forgotten from the moment Agathon invited him to take his place (175 A). Our momentary expectation that Aristodemus will speak in turn after Eryximachus is disappointed. The effect of this gap is to throw into the sharpest focus the final arrangement which brings Aristophanes and Agathon together. The same technique brings into contact the *logoi* of Phaedrus and Pausanias. At Agathon's banquet they were spoken at an interval. In Plato's *Symposium* they come one after another.⁵

It is *by chance* that Socrates found Agathon alone (175 C). Taking the place next to his host, Socrates becomes ἔσχατος and least honoured. It is an accident too that Aristophanes is prevented from speaking after Pausanias by a sudden and severe bout of hiccoughs (185 CD). He should have spoken after Pausanias and *before* Eryximachus. But Aristophanes' hiccough is no more an accident than Socrates' position in the banquet. Aristophanes might have had too much to eat, but Aristodemus can imagine "some other cause" for his hiccough (185 C). Unable to carry on, or indeed to speak coherently, Aristophanes asks Eryximachus to either cure him or to speak in his place. Unwisely, the learned Eryximachus offers to do both. As it turns out, Aristophanes is suffering from an acute attack of hiccoughs and requires all of the therapeutic measures the doctor prescribes. He holds his breath—but must gasp when he comes up for air. He gargles, and when this remedy too proves ineffective, he teases his nose to produce a sneeze.

What all this means is that as Eryximachus is delivering himself of his pompous and profound description of Eros, his unfortunate neighbor is hiccoughing, gasping, gargling, wheezing, snorting and sneezing. If Aristophanes has any cue for these eruptions it must be Eryximachus' repetition of the word *kosmion* (cf. 189 C). This is rare comedy. But Aristophanes' hiccough must also have a more serious and philosophical explanation. Ancient and late references to it have a simple explanation for the hiccough: Plato is making fun of the comic Aristophanes.⁶ Why they do not say. Victor Brochard discovered an ex-

planation only seventy years ago: in inflicting a seizure of hiccoughs on Aristophanes, Plato is taking his revenge for Aristophanes' comic treatment of Socrates in two versions of the *Clouds*.⁷ Yet if it is revenge Plato wanted, he chose an odd way to take it, for he gave Aristophanes one of the most important speeches in the *Symposium*—a speech so important that Diotima refers to it (205 D) and Aristophanes recognizes himself in what Diotima says (212 C).

Φθόνος is not a philosophical emotion and it is not Plato's reason for inflicting a hiccough on Aristophanes. Opinions are many on the cause of hiccoughs,⁸ but why Plato made Aristophanes hiccough begins to become visible in the larger plan of the dialogue. Karl Reinhardt noticed the obvious when he saw that Plato could only play with a plan once he had one.⁹ On the most serious plane of the dialogue, what is effected by the accident of Aristophanes' hiccough is that unexpectedly a comic and a tragic poet are brought together. Plato planned his party with great care. His apparent arrangement is to separate Aristophanes and Agathon by Eryximachus and Aristodemus. But when the sequence of praise that moves toward Socrates from left to right is dislocated by Aristophanes' hiccough, the underlying plan of the dialogue is revealed. Comic and tragic poet are brought together.

There are other disruptions in what might have been an orderly and unusually sober banquet, and they point to the riddle of the end of the *Symposium*. Once Socrates has reported to the company his conversations with Diotima, Alcibiades breaks into the scene σφόδρα μεθύοντος (212 D). He is so drunk that he has to be led to his host. His head is festooned with a garland of violets, ivy, and ribbons (a perfect crown for the author of the *Antheus*) which he proposes to transfer to the head of Agathon. As he puts it—to the head of the most skillful and fairest (τοῦ σοφωτάτου καὶ καλλίστου, 212 E). The ribbons of the garland he holds out before him prevent him from catching sight of Socrates as he takes a place next to Agathon. When he sees that his neighbor is Socrates, he springs up and asks him why he is not sitting next to Aristophanes or

someone else who thinks he's a clown (οὐ παρὰ Ἀριστοφάνει οὐδε εἴ τις ἄλλος γελοῖος ἔστι, 213 C). By implication, his name for Aristophanes is *geloios*. His name for Agathon was *kallistos*. And Socrates is caught between these poles. If Socrates is *geloios*, he belongs next to the comic Aristophanes. But Plato carefully arranged for the accident that places him last and next to Agathon. He has created a tension between the comic and the tragic, as he understood comic and tragic, and Socrates is caught between the levels suggested by the words *geloios* and *kallistos*. By a dramatic detail that will become philosophical, Plato has reminded us that Socrates seems to belong in the company of the clownish characters he resembles. But Socrates also belongs next to the fair, or contrives to get next to them.¹⁰ This was the philosophical motivation of Socrates' elegance that memorable evening. The fact that he was bathed and shod reminds us that he seldom washed and usually went barefoot.¹¹

In Plato ἄτοπος and γελοῖος are *the* Socratic epithets.¹² The word, laughable, ridiculous, is first used in the *Symposium* to describe the awkward situation of Aristodemus who had arrived at Agathon's party at Socrates' invitation, but without Socrates.¹³ It then describes the kind of talk Eryximachus fears Aristophanes will produce (189 B) and is accompanied by the laughter of the comic poet and Aristophanes' protests that Eryximachus will make fun of what he has said.¹⁴ With the eruption of Alcibiades on the scene, laughter returns to the dialogue. *Geloios* describes both Aristophanes and Socrates. Alcibiades repeats the word when he launches into his Dionysian praise of Socrates by means of "likenesses": "Possibly this character will think that I am trying to make sport of him, but my purpose will be truth, not comedy" (215 A). The grotesque similes of Socrates as Marsyas, a silene, and satyr, also convey an image of what his *logoi* are like. These are utterly ridiculous (παγγέλοιοι): "He is forever talking of pack asses, and tinkers, and cobblers, and tanners" (221 E).

Paradoxically, Alcibiades asks Agathon to surrender some strands from the victory garland he has just placed

on his wise and fair head and give them over to their companion—to “this amazing head” (213 D). Agathon won his victory only yesterday, but Socrates triumphs in words over all men every day (213 E). Alcibiades has done what Plato set out to do.¹⁵ Under the influence of Dionysos he has placed a crown on the head of the κάλλιστος and σοφώτατος—σοφώτατος not in the sense of poetic skill, but in another sense of this word which describes the wisest and most eloquent of all men.¹⁶

Inevitably, we are brought back to the beginning of the banquet and the exchange of compliments between a poet and philosopher. Agathon embellishes his invitation to Socrates to join him on his couch. He wants to enjoy the piece of wisdom which came to Socrates as he stood in the neighboring doorway. Agathon’s choice of the word *sophon* brings Socrates to contrast his *sophia* with that of Agathon: “Mine is a thing of little significance, dubious and disputable, like a dream. But yours is brilliant and holds great promise” (175 E).

When Alcibiades had finished his speech in praise of Socrates, and Plato had paid a great part of his tribute to a Socratic Eros and erotic Socrates, Agathon gets up to put himself “below” Socrates. For just a moment it seems that Socrates will praise Agathon. But what Socrates would have said in praise of Agathon is left unspoken as Agathon gets up to cope with a new band of intruders. For a moment, the needle veers from the center of all that has been said and done in the dialogue in order to return to it. At the end of the dialogue Socrates remains on center stage, with a comic and a tragic poet. As Aristophanes and then Agathon fall asleep, we are subtly brought back to the contest proposed by Agathon at the very beginning of the dialogue. And we realize that Agathon’s theatrical language was not a fugitive metaphor: “A little later we will settle our claims to *sophia* with Dionysos as our arbitrator” (175 E). As Agathon falls asleep at daybreak we have the final judgement of the same god who had inspired Alcibiades to crown Socrates. No one had ever seen Socrates drunk (220 A).

II

Socrates who was “last” in Agathon’s banquet is at the center of Plato’s *Symposium*. Around him center the major themes of the dialogue. He is at the center of the tensions and antitheses of the seven speeches, and he mediates the final paradox at the end of the dialogue. To state this much is to open the door to the distant unity underlying the diversity and multiplicity of what was said and done at Agathon’s gathering, and to watch the project of a proper praise of Eros recede into the distance. But from even a résumé which is no more than a cartoon of the dialogue, it can be seen that the Socratic paradox of a tragic and comic poet continues and deepens the major themes of the dialogue.

Growing out of the dialectic of what is said and done in the *Symposium*, there is a tension between apparent antitheses: high and low, divine and human, noble and base, wisdom and ignorance, fair and ugly. These seemingly contrary themes are part and parcel of the paradox that arises so unexpectedly at the end of the dialogue. In the tacit exchange between the *logoi* of the *Symposium*, the terms which underlie the diverse conceptions of *Eros* and *eros* develop and take on a range greater than that of any single contribution to the banquet. As *Eros* and *eros* grow in significance and complexity, so do the conceptions of *poiesis* and *sophia*. To follow these themes is to arrive at the end of the dialogue.

The dialogue begins with Apollodorus setting Socrates above all men and a first statement of the profound effect and profit of hearing what Socrates has to say (173 CD; cf. 172 A–173 B; 215 D). But paradoxically this Socrates is not fair; he has *become* fair to join the company at Agathon’s (174 A). His follower Aristodemus speaks Homerically of the lesser sort of men going to feast with their betters: with the noble and wise (174 BC). Then something funny happens to both Socrates and Aristodemus: Socrates stops dead in his tracks, lost in thought, and Aristodemus appears at Agathon’s uninvited (174 E). In these seemingly insignificant details begins the philo-

sophical and poetic project of the *Symposium*: the approach to the fair, the wise, and superior. In Aristodemus we have the first mention of an *erastes*. And he is Socrates' lover (173 B).

It is Phaedrus, with the prompting of Eryximachus, who begins the celebration of Eros—a god no man had *dared* to praise before that evening (177 C; cf. 214 D; 222 C), even though lesser things had been taken seriously. For Phaedrus, to praise Eros is to say that he is the most ancient of the gods—and as a consequence the most honored and responsible for the greatest goods to men. Here already we have the fundamentals of a divine hymn: to say adequately what a god is, and to enumerate his gifts to men (cf. 195 A; 201 D). And here appears the distinction between the fair and the base or shameful which carries throughout the dialogue. So too the ambiguity of the relation between the lover and beloved and the power of Eros to make a man *entheos* (178 D, cf. 197 B). The relation between Achilles and his lover Patroclus prepares for the more complex relation between Socrates and Alcibiades, who was, like Achilles, younger and fairer than the man who seemed his lover. In the one case the *eromenos* defended his *erastes* (180 AB); in the other the *erastes* who becomes the *eromenos* defends the *eromenos* become *erastes* (220 D–221 C).

For Pausanias, Eros is not a single god; there are two Erotes. One centers on the soul, the other on the body. The heavenly love has an object that is steady; the common or “pandemic,” an object that is not abiding. Their objects define their lovers: the low, the low and the better, the high. A lover of decent character is made better by his love (185 AB). Pausanias' speech is full of antithetical notions. In its initial distinction, a separation appears. In reserving his praise for the “Ouranian” Eros, *arete*, *sophia*, and *philosophia*, Pausanias has created a gap. There is nothing but a name to connect the high and the low.

Eryximachus' speech, in extending the range of Eros to *eros* and *epithymia* (186 B), and the association of gods and men (188 A), has as its project the reconciliation of

the separate and opposing Erotes of Pausanias. He agrees with Pausanias that Eros is double, but his art of medicine allows him to observe that Eros is a wonderful god whose influence extends over everything (186 C; cf. 202 E; 222 A)—both things human and divine. But in this antithesis, which he thinks comprehensive, Eryximachus forgets that there are such things as demons (cf. 202 DE). The most important and problematic thing Eryximachus has to say is that like does not like like, but rather that love and desire are for an object that is dissimilar (*anomoion*). This promise of reconciliation is not fulfilled. Eryximachus' quotation from Heraclitus to the effect that "the one while disagreeing with itself yet agrees with itself, like the 'harmony' of a lyre or bow" brings into view the possible reconciliation or "healing" of the opposites involved in the speech of Aristophanes and the demonology of Diotima. All that Eryximachus' art can do is to encourage the love of the fair and deny the love or lust for what is base and ugly. As it extends to poetry, the encouragement of the fair Eros makes men better. And although both Erotes need to be watched after (187 E), only the base needs restraint (187 E). The doctor is true to his precept when he threatens to stand guard over what Aristophanes might say (189 A). We already know that Aristophanes' entire life as a comic poet centers on Aphrodite (the "pandemic") and Dionysos (177 E).

Comic and tragic poet then speak. In what he says Aristophanes names many things both low and laughable. But to say what is laughable (*geloia*) is the province and reward of Aristophanes' Muse (189 B). Eryximachus is worried that his neighbor will try to provoke laughter and he is prepared to "stand guard" over what he says (189 AB). He proposes to restrain Aristophanes' *αἰσχρὸς ἔπος*. True to his Muse, Aristophanes goes on to mention eggs, sorb-apples, cobblers, tumblers, limping, purses, a last, cicadas, sandal fish¹⁷, navels, and genitals. But remarkably, the company does not laugh at the end of Aristophanes' speech. In this speech the essential project of the *Symposium* first comes clearly into sight. A middle term appears in the race of "men-women" (*androgynon*,

189 C); ancient amputations are *healed* (189 D); and love (*eros*) is called by its right name: the desire for and pursuit of the whole (192 E).

The tragic poet's praise of Eros is on all points contrary to what Diotima says of him. Even when their words are the same, what they mean by them is not. The god Agathon praises is young—the youngest of all the gods. He is blessed, tender, and languid. He dwells in flowers, and is attracted by what he resembles (195 A). His “aretology” comprehends *dikaiosyne*, *sophrosyne*, *andreia*, and *sophia*. He is a poet and makes others poets (196 E). Here “poetry” becomes a comprehensive term for most of human action—like eros itself (cf. 205 B–D). Agathon ends his encomium by saying that he has offered it to Eros as a mixture of play (*paidia*) and some seriousness (*spoude*). Play and seriousness dominate the speeches of the comic and tragic poets just as they characterize the *logoi* of Socrates (216 E). It is tempting to say that Aristophanes was playfully serious. But of Agathon all that can be said is that he spoke playfully, beautifully, with solemnity, but falsely (198 B, D; 199 A).

Like Eryximachus, Agathon finishes with an illusion of completeness (188 E; 198 B). This is shattered by what follows. The project of the *Symposium* reveals itself in Diotima's instruction of Socrates and in Alcibiades' words and deeds. In departing from the “law” of Agathon's banquet, Alcibiades reveals the intention of the *Symposium*. He crowns Socrates and praises not Eros but Socrates. The Socrates of Alcibiades' Dionysian speech resembles the Eros of Diotima's.¹⁸ As Diotima describes him, Eros is neither a god nor a mortal, but a great *daimon* who binds the realms and mediates the oppositions that none of the earlier speeches had succeeded in bringing together (202 E). He is the demonic man who is *sophos* in how gods and men communicate. By contrast, any other skill, poetic or manual, is that of a mechanic (*banausos*, 203 A). Here the contrast between the *sophia* of Agathon and Socrates becomes more clearly defined and the gap between the two meanings of the word wider. In a hu-

man and poetic sense, Eros is *sophos*, but on a more than human level, he is *philosophos* (204 AB).

Eros' nature is not as Agathon had described it. He is the son of Poros and Penia. The son of Poverty, he is always poor and lacking in what he is in need of. And far from being fair (*kalos*), as most people (including Agathon) think, he is tough, goes barefoot, has no fixed abode, keeps low to the ground, and sleeps without bedding in doorways and on the road; or under the open sky (203 D). The son of his father, he is constantly scheming after the fair and noble. He is brave, impetuous, a fierce and clever hunter. He is ardent for wisdom and can find his way wherever he is. Throughout his entire life he philosophizes, is an awesome wizard, and spell-binder, and sophist. He is also a poet. He can produce in the souls of those he loves and those who become his lovers, wisdom (*phronesis*) and all of the rest of virtue (209 A, D). And his best piece of poetry is not his three sons, but that piece of poetry in which his memory has become immortal (208 B). This he created in the soul of Plato.

III

Alcibiades' praise of Socrates provokes laughter for a second time in the banquet room (222 B). It also provokes Socrates' characterization of Alcibiades' Dionysian speech as "a satyr and silene drama" (222 C). Socrates' language preserves the conception of Agathon's banquet as a drama (cf. 175 E; 194 B) and points to the paradox with which it ends. But more than this, it also suggests that the speeches in praise of love which preceded Alcibiades' praise of Socrates were "tragic." They were followed by the final satyr play. And so Wilamowitz was mistaken, but not wildly wrong, when he called the *Symposium* a comedy and the *Phaedo* a tragedy.¹⁹ The only proper description of the *Symposium* is that it is a tragi-comedy. Or a new form of philosophical drama which, in the object of its imitation, comprehends and transcends both tragedy and comedy.

What is "tragic" for us was not tragic to Plato. For

Plato, tragedy centered on the high and serious, comedy on the low and laughable. Tragedy produced in the theater of Dionysos fear, grief, pity; and comedy produced laughter through arousing the ignorant emotion of *phthonos*. Both are defined by the high or what is considered high in human experience, and the low or what is considered low. The two genres take on their character from the objects of their imitation. Both imitate men in action (*πράττοντας*, *Rep.* 603 C), but the character of the action of tragedy and comedy differs radically. Tragedy is serious, solemn, awe-inspiring.²⁰ Comedy is low and laughable. Its essential, *to geloion*, and the emotion that underlies the laughter of the audience, *phthonos*, are grouped under the banner of base ignorance.²¹ Within the *Symposium*, laughter and the ridiculous center on Aristophanes and Socrates. And Agathon, who spoke with a mixture of playfulness and seriousness, yet solemnly (199 A), provoked in Socrates confusion (*ekplexis*) and fear (198 B).

Outside of the *Symposium*, there are abundant passages which illustrate Plato's conception of tragedy and comedy and have a bearing on the Socratic paradox of a tragic and comic poet. Three stand out. The first comes from the book of the *Laws* (VII) which prolongs Socrates' discussion of the place of poetry in his *politeia* (*Republic* II, III, X). The second comes from the *Cratylus*. And the third comes from the *Philebus* where the metaphor of the tragedy and comedy of life makes its appearance in Socrates' discussion of the mixed class of pleasures and pains that affect the soul. Indeed, the entire discussion of how pleasure can be mixed with pain involves an analysis of the emotions proper to tragedy and comedy.

According to Socrates' analysis, the comic (*τὸ γελοῖον*) arises in the incongruity between the weak who fancy themselves powerful and their inability to get even if they are injured or abused (*Philebus* 49 B).²² The peculiar pleasure we feel at the misfortunes of "friends" who fancy themselves superior involves a mixture of pleasure and pain. Pain because Protarchus has agreed that *phthonos* is a kind of pleasure and pain that has no justification

(49 D). So Socrates concludes: “and so surely what our argument shows is a mixture of pleasure and pain, not only in dirges and tragedies, but in the entire tragedy and comedy of life.” This is the life of the *polis* in which pleasure and pain are kings (*Rep.* 607 A).

Tragodia, solemn, serious, awesome, is also goatish. An etymological understanding of tragedy as goatish begins with Plato and continues into the Middle Ages.²³ But the connection between tragedy and *tragos* is extremely rare in Greek for the simple reason that the canon of the separation of genres and levels of style could not easily admit an understanding of tragedy which connected and confused the high and the low. Only Socrates is capable of making the obvious and repugnant connection between the character of tragedy and goats. At the end of his disquisition on divine names in the *Cratylus*, Hermogenes and Hermes bring him naturally to Pan. Pan gets his name because language (*logos*) “signifies all, revolves, and is always in motion.” It has a double nature in being true and false:

408 C Now isn't the true part of Pan smooth and divine, and does it not dwell among the gods above; but down below, the false half dwells among the common run of mankind and is rough (*τραχύς*) and goatlike—or tragic (*τραγοειδής*)? For there dwell the greatest abundance of myths and lies concerning the “tragic” life.

Here the perspective on things human shifts radically. What seems serious or “tragic” on this lower level here on earth becomes, when seen from another vantage, false, rough, and goatish.

Last, there is another kind of tragedy: the truest kind of tragedy which is not the tragedy of the Attic stage, but *poiesis* of quite a different sort. Only late in his literary career does Plato, who began as a tragic poet and whose dialogues are filled with the language of the stage,²⁴ invent the metaphor which extends the serious imitations of the festivals of Dionysos to the greater stage of the life

of the *polis*. In the *Laws*, the unnamed Athenian had spoken of men as the puppets of the gods (I 644 DE). At a much later stage in the conversation, he concedes to Megillos that mankind is not something altogether insignificant (*phaulon*), but worthy of some serious consideration (*spoudes*, VII 804 B). But when he confronts an itinerant company of tragedians who have arrived at the walls of his city with all their gear in tow, he has this to say:

VII 817 AB Best of strangers, we ourselves are creators of tragedy, to the best of our ability—a tragedy which is the fairest and best. For all of our city has been founded as an imitation of the fairest and best life, and this we call what is in reality the truest tragedy.

In such a *polis* there existed neither tragedy nor comedy as it was known in Greece (cf. *Laws* VII 811 C–E), but an imitation and praise of what was best and fairest in life.

IV

The answer to the Socratic paradox propounded at the end of the *Symposium* is to be found in the *Symposium*; and also in Plato. One and the same man can be both a tragic and a comic poet. The tragic and comic poet of the *Symposium* is Plato and the object of his imitation, Socrates. This poet of both tragedy and comedy began his literary career as a poet of dithyrambs and a single tragic tetralogy, but when he encountered in Socrates the only object worthy of serious imitation, he became a tragic and comic poet.²⁵ In his older friend Socrates, Plato discovered a force that drove him to destroy the tragedy he was about to stage in the theater of Dionysos. But this force was protreptic, not apotropaic.²⁶ Like Pico della Mirandola and Botticelli, and Ficino himself, Plato destroyed his early work. Unlike them he was driven to develop a new form of expression—the Socratic dialogue,

and to combine in a new form of imitation the arts and objects of the tragic and comic poet. To become this, the tragic poet had to become a comic poet.

The poetics of the *Symposium* are fundamentally the poetics of the *Republic* and *Laws*. In the *Republic* and *Laws* a new form of poetry is envisaged, as is a new function for truly political poetry. This poetry involved production (*poiesis*) as well as *praxis*. Its aim is to implant into the soul the image and example of human character which are good and noble (*Rep.* 401 B). Although Plato never says as much in any of his dialogues, the object of the imitation of this new poetry is Socrates. Because of this silence, the *Republic* is as indirect and as puzzling as the *Symposium*.

In his discussion of *mimesis* in the *Republic* (III 392 C ff.), Socrates is caught up in one of Plato's most ironic utterances; for Socrates speaks in a context in which he does not recognize the full significance of what he says. Socrates' problem is that of imitation and its object. And Adeimantus has some difficulties in understanding the point he is making. The point is this: style (*lexis*) can be divided into dramatic, narrative, and a combination of the two. This last is the style of the *Symposium* which both imitates what was said and narrates what was done (cf. *Rep.* 392 A ff.). Socrates' ethical and political problem centers mainly on *imitation*. In order to imitate Chryses, Homer had to shift from a style in which he spoke as himself to a style in which he spoke not as a narrator but as Chryses (393 BC). And so, he comes to resemble the object of his imitation. If the poet never *concealed himself* in the dramatic speeches of his characters, his style would be simply narrative (*Rep.* 393 CD). But this *concealment*, which is at the heart of Platonic style, has its dangers. To use the language of another tragic and comic poet, the imitator's nature "is subdued to what it works in, like the Dyers hand."

For Socrates, there is only one solution to the problem of dramatic poetry: it is that of a moderate man imitating, and by his imitation becoming, a good man acting surely and intelligently (396 C). This precisely is the style

of imitation Plato adopted from Homer—the greatest of the tragic poets.²⁷ He spoke as Socrates; and he added the narrative links between the speeches not as Plato, but as still another *persona*.

The difficulties of this new enterprise Plato only hints at (*Rep.* 604 E). But Alcibiades' praise of Socrates brings before us the argument required by the poetics of the *Republic*: a character "intelligent, and easy, and always resembling himself." In part, this is the complex character of Socrates as he seemed to many—including the comic poets (*Sym.* 221 B; *Clouds* 362). But like Eros and Pan, Socrates is caught between two worlds. He was not what he seemed. The apparent duplicity of his simple character finds its best expression in one of Alcibiades' *ikons* of Socrates:

221 D-222 A His words too are very much like those figures of Silenus which open up and come apart. If a person were willing to listen to Socrates' conversation, he would have a perfectly ridiculous impression at first. On the outside, what he says seems to wrap itself up in queer words and phrases—just like the hide of an outrageous satyr. He is forever talking of pack asses, and tinkers, and cobblers, and tanners, and he seems to be always saying the same things, using the same illustrations. As a result a person who is foolish and had never heard him speak before would simply laugh. But once Socrates' words are opened up, one can get inside them and have a look. He will discover first that Socrates' talk is the only kind of talk which makes sense; then that his discourse is most godlike and contains within itself the greatest number of images of virtue; and that it has the greatest significance. He will discover still more: that it has as its ob-

ject all that matters for the man who means to become brave and virtuous.

But what of the comic poet? It is no accident that the laughter of the *Symposium* centers on Socrates.²⁸ In Socrates, Plato had discovered an object of imitation that was both comic and tragic. It is a mistake to see in Socrates a tragic and serious figure and in Aristophanes, or Alcibiades, or the sophists, comic and low characters.²⁹ Socrates himself was both comic and tragic. It is not hard to understand what made Socrates' seem comic. Alcibiades' *ikons* of Socrates and his peculiar *logoi* make the point clearly enough. Socrates resembles a satyr, a silene, a Marsyas—precisely those perverse creatures the Athenian stranger wanted expelled from his city (*Laws* 815 C).³⁰ And undeniably there was something about Socrates that destined him for the comic stage. We know this comic figure from the second production of Aristophanes' *Clouds*. He was often seen on stage in the 20s of the fifth century—among other things barefoot and a bane to shoemakers.³¹ K. J. Dover asked pertinently if Socrates needed a special portrait mask to appear in the *Clouds*, and his conclusions were: "The mask maker who wanted to produce a good caricature of Socrates for *Clouds* was faced with a difficulty of an unusual kind, and I do not know how, or whether, he surmounted it: the result of his attempt to portray a real person would resemble what he had often done before in portraying fictitious characters."³² That is, Socrates resembled one of the conventional comic types.

In his comic and tragic imitation of Socrates, Plato comprehended the realms of appearance and reality: what seemed low and laughable and what was serious and high. From the point of view of the audience in the theater of Dionysos, Socrates was a comic character. From the point of view of the Ionians who at Potidaea came out with their bedding to see the strange sight of Socrates seized with some problem and immobile from dawn to dusk, Socrates was a curiosity. They wanted to discover if he would keep standing the entire night. He

did—until daybreak. Then he went away, after making a prayer to the sun (220 CD). What he was thinking about we do not learn. But it was something that made human affairs seem like so much nonsense (cf. 211 E). From this point of view all of the seemingly serious affairs of this life seem “tragic” or comic.

V

Thanks to Aristodemus’ drowsiness and Plato’s reticence, we shall never learn how Socrates compelled Agathon and Aristophanes to agree to his paradox that a single poet could compose both tragedies and comedies. All we know is that the paradox was so bizarre that tragic and comic poet were forced to agree to it and even under compulsion did not quite follow its argument. But the scene is unforgettable. At the end of the celebration of Agathon’s tragic victory, and at the conclusion of Plato’s celebration of Socrates, there remain on center stage a tragic poet, a comic poet, and Socrates. Perhaps we shall never know just how Socrates managed his argument, but the character of his paradox is clear in its outlines.

Bernard Knox has stated the nature of the paradox simply and decisively: “For the fifth-century Athenian, tragedy was tragedy, and comedy comedy, and never the twain should meet.”³³ Comedy was what Aristophanes wrote, tragedy what Agathon wrote. In the fifth century, no poet did both. Much earlier in the century a philosopher depended on the clear separation of these genres to give point to the explanation of how the addition or shifting of elements in a compound can radically change its appearance: “for *tragoidia* and *komoidia* are made up of the same letters.”³⁴ From the point of view of the early atomists, there was a unity underlying apparent contraries. Like Eryximachus before the paradox of Heraclitus (185 AB), Aristophanes and Agathon cannot understand how there can be a harmony and common *logos* between the high and the low. The paradox is a violent one. Socrates must force out of a tragic poet who is *kalos* and a comic poet who is *geloios* assent to his proposition

that a single poet, by virtue of his skill (τέχνη) and understanding (ἐπιστήμη), can imitate both the high and the low. That Agathon, if he truly had understanding and art, could produce a play centering on a low character named Trygaios and mounted on a dung beetle; and that Aristophanes could produce an *Antheus*.³⁵

The words Aristodemus remembered, τέχνη and ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, point in the direction of other Socratic conversations: especially three conversations between Socrates and Diotima, Ion of Ephesus, and Adeimantus.³⁶ With Adeimantus, Socrates argues that a single individual can do only one thing well (*Rep.* III 394 E; cf. II 374 A; X 598 D). In weighing the question whether they should allow tragedy and comedy into their city and its education, Socrates outlines two fundamental objections (III 394 D – 396 E): one involves the fragmentation of human nature which allows an individual to do only one thing well; the other the effect of imitation on the imitator—the argument of the dyer’s hand. Because of our fragmentation one and the same man cannot create both comedy and tragedy; not even the actors of tragedy and comedy are the same (395 A). And the danger of the city’s guardians coming to resemble (ἀφομοιοῦσθαι) what they imitate is too great to permit tragedy and comedy into the newly founded *polis* (395 B – 396 E). Yet Plato says nothing of the philosopher king.

In Socrates’ encounter with the triumphant Ion, it becomes clear that the rhapsode’s character is a shard of the broken whole of our nature. He understands Homer (ἐπίσταται) because he knows him by heart. But his more ambitious claim is that he also understands and can explain Homer’s meaning.³⁷ Yet he has no interest in other poets and begins to doze off when conversation turns to them (532 C). Because of this limitation, Socrates argues that Ion has neither the art nor understanding to speak about Homer (532 C; cf. 536 C; 541 D): ποιητικὴ γὰρ πού ἐστιν τὸ ὅλον.

What this understanding of the whole art of poetry is, is suggested in another Socratic conversation: that he had with Diotima. Developing the concept of *eros* which had

already appeared in Eryximachus' speech (186 D), Diotima asserts that our love or will for (*boulesis*) happiness is something common to all men (205 A). In this case Greek is deceptive, for *eros* describes a whole (*ὅλον*), but men restrict the word to one form of love. They do the same with the term *poiesis*. *Poiesis* is properly the name for a whole which is production or creation. *Eros* and *poiesis* are connected in the fact that our desire to have and continue to enjoy the good makes us poets: of our children and "immortal memory" (208 DE). Poets are makers in the fact that they are the "begetters" of *phronesis* and the other virtues (209 A).

Finally one is brought to ask if the whole glimpsed at the end of the *Symposium*, and made visible throughout the dialogue, is not the object of Plato's poetry, and if its object in Socrates does not explain the Socratic paradox. For it is Socrates, or Eros, or whatever name it is right to call this *daimon*, who fills the gap between the high and the low, gods and men, and makes a whole of tragedy and comedy, binding this whole to himself: συμπληροῖ ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὐτῷ ξυνδεδέσθαι (202 E).

NOTES

¹ "J'ay esté conseillé par mes amis d'omettre le reste que Platon a adiousté seulement pour plaisir, servant au temps et à la licencieuse vie de son pays," 180.

² This is Krüger's *Einsicht und Leidenschaft* (Frankfurt am Maine 1936) 292–308.

³ Timon of Phlius, Diogenes Laertius IX 109 (= Snell, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* I [1971] no. 112).

⁴ Diogenes Laertius III 49, which originates in *Rep.* III 394 C ff.

⁵ The speeches are linked by Pausanias' reference to Phaedrus' encomium, 180 C.

⁶ ἐκωμώδησε: Olympiodorus, *Vita Platonis* 3; Athenaeus, 187 C; Aristides *Or.* 46, II p. 287 (Dindorf).

For what little can be said about these explanations, see Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge 1932) xxii.

⁷ "Sur le Banquet de Platon," in *Etudes de philosophie ancienne et de philosophie moderne* (Paris 1926) 74; 89–90.

⁸ For the ancient lore, see the *Scholia Platonica* ad loc., and Le Roi, *Le Sympose de Platon* (Paris 1558) 26–27. Plochmann, "Hiccoughs and Hangovers in the Symposium," *Bucknell Review* 9:3 (1963) 10, attempts to connect Aristophanes' hiccough with a "disharmony of the diaphragm" which divides the two lower parts of the soul in *Tim.* 70 A. But we do not know that Plato connected hiccoughs with the diaphragm.

⁹ "Man spielt mit einem Plan, nur wenn man ihn erst hat," *Vermächtnis der Antike* (Göttingen 1960) 245.

¹⁰ Cf. 174 A; 203 D; 213 C; and Diogenes Laertius II 28.

¹¹ Something easily turned to comedy: cf. *Birds* 1354; *Clouds* 835. But the ridicule of the comic poets can also be turned to praise: cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Philosophoumena* XVIII (Hobein) 221.12; Diogenes Laertius II 27.

¹² In the *Symposium* alone: 175 A; 221 C for Socrates' *δρονία*; 199 D (cf. 214 E); 215 E; 221 E; 222 B for the epithet *geloios*.

¹³ The same word describes the awkward situation of Philippos in Xenophon's *Symposium*, I.12.

¹⁴ 193 BE. Aristophanes, Alcibiades, and especially Socrates are at the center of the comic or what can be made comic in the *Symposium*. See note 28.

¹⁵ For appreciations of the significance of this gesture, see Helen Bacon, "Socrates Crowned," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 35 (1959) 415–430, and John Anton in *CJ* 58 (1962/1963) 51.

¹⁶ 213 DE. The ambiguity of the terms *σοφός* and *σοφία* develops in a dialectic between Agathon and Socrates: 174 C; 175 DE; 194 A; 196 DE; 197 D; 203 A; 204 AB.

¹⁷ Plato quotes from Aristophanes not once (as Vicaire claims in his *Platon critique littéraire* [Paris 1960] 187), but twice. For the germ of Aristophanes' speech, see *Lysistrata* 115.

¹⁸ The points of resemblance have long been recognized: by Maximus of Tyre, *Philosophoumena* XVIII 84 B (Hobein); and Ficino, *Commentaire sur le Banquet de Platon* ed. Marcel (Paris 1956) 242.

¹⁹ *Platon* I (Berlin 1920) 356.

²⁰ *Gorgias* 502 B; *Laws* 838 C; *Meno* 76 E (and Bluck in *Mnemosyne*, 4 ser. 14 [1961] 289–295); *Rep.* 413 B; The hegemony of Homer over tragedy also lends it a certain grandeur; *Rep.*

595 B; cf. *Theaet.* 152 E; *Rep.* 599 D; 605 C. Yet ultimately, it is not a serious form of imitation; *Rep.* 603 B, and the judgment of Solon in Plutarch, *Vita Sol.* 29.3.

²¹ *Philebus* 48 B; 50 BC; *Rep.* 606 C; *Laws* 816 E; 935 DE; 236 C. The connection between *phthonos* and *poneria* is also drawn by Aristotle in *EN* 1107a9; cf. *Rhetoric* 1386b16–1388a30.

²² The question provoked by this distinction is: What of those who have the strength and power to avenge themselves? Is this the beginning of a discussion of tragedy?

²³ Dante, *Epistle* X.10. Earlier, the connections between *tragos* and *tragoidia* are more aetiological than etymological: they can be studied as a whole in Brink's commentary to Horace, *Ars Poetica* 220, *Horace on Poetry* II (Cambridge 1971) 277–278.

²⁴ A repertory of this language has been put together by Dorothy Tarrant, "Plato as Dramatist," *JHS* 75 (1955) 82–89.

²⁵ Diogenes Laertius III 56 and Snell *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, I (1971) no. 46.

²⁶ So Proclus in his commentary to the *Republic*, I.204.4 (Kroll).

²⁷ For Homer as a tragic poet, see note 20. Also Vicaire (note 17) 243–249.

²⁸ 202 E; 212 E; 214 E; 221 E (cf. 198 C); 222 B.

²⁹ This is the form in which Helen Bacon (note 15) 428–430, and Kuhn, "The True Tragedy, I" *HSCP* (1941) 32, attempt to resolve the tensions of the Socratic paradox of a tragic and comic poet by making of Socrates only one half of the object of his imitation.

³⁰ Other witnesses to Socrates' appearance: Xenophon, *Symposium* II 19; V 5; 7; *Theaet.* 143 E–144 B; *Clouds* 361–363.

³¹ As he is styled by Ameipsias in the *Cloak* (DL II 28). The fragmentary details of Σωκράτης κωμωδοποιούμενος come mainly from Diogenes Laertius II 18–19; 27–28.

³² "Portrait Masks in Aristophanes," in *KOMOIDOTRAGEMATA: Studia Viri Aristophanei* W. J. W. Koster in honorem, ed. Boerma (Amsterdam 1967) 28.

³³ "Euripidean Comedy," in *The Rarer Action: Essays in Honor of Francis Fergusson* (New Brunswick 1970) 69.

³⁴ Aristotle, *De Gen. et Corr.* A 1.315b6 (DK 67 A 9).

³⁵ The potential sublimity of Trygaios is seen by Leo Strauss:

"No better emblem of the Aristophanean comedy could be imagined than a flight to heaven of the thinly disguised poet on the back of a dung beetle," *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York 1966) 139.

³⁶ The possible relevance of the *Ion* for an understanding of the paradox of the *Symposium* is well stated by Friedländer, *Plato II*, trans. Meyerhoff (New York 1964) 133; that of the *Republic*, by Adams in his comments on *Rep.* III 395 A.

³⁷ 530 B. *ἐπιστᾶσθαι* is ambiguous in Greek. It can mean to know by heart and so to be able to recite: *Gorg.* 484 B; *Prot.* 339 B; *Rep.* 393 E. It can also mean to understand: cf. Xenophon, *Symposium* III 6 for the 'understanding' of the rhapsodes.

An earlier version of this paper is known to Richard Hamilton and Bernd Seidensticker, and I owe them thanks that it is not known to others.