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In liminal tension towards giving birth while beholding beauty: The truth about love, beyond comedic sophistry

by

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It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing
to birth, an immortal element in the creature that
is mortal; and it cannot occur in the discordant.
The ugly is discordant with whatever is divine,
whereas
the beautiful is accordant.
Symposium (206C-D)

Our generation is serious – even at banquets
Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, p.36.

Introduction

As it is only appropriate, let me start with some questions of context. The first concerns the very meaning of a 'symposium'. It is well known that the word means a banquet or a feast, but it is important to be a bit more precise concerning its exact meaning. 'Symposium' does not mean a 'joint eating', as its renditions in many contemporary languages imply,[i] but a 'joint *drinking*'. This is important for two reasons. First, in order to have a substantial happy time spent together, which is the meaning of a feast, thus procuring real delight and pleasure, as associated with the Greek word *charis* (grace), the drinking of wine – or 'spirits' – is more conducive than eating. Eating continuously renders one dull; drinking continuously, in the right manner, enlivens the spirit. Wine is fundamental for Mediterranean sociability, which immediately signals that from a Platonic perspective there is something deeply problematic with also those – Puritanical, easily fundamentalist – systems of thought and ideology that prohibit drinking. Second, however, and just as fundamental for proper sociability, wine must be drank *rightly*, with due moderation, as otherwise its effects will be nefarious, leading to strife and conflict, eventually even division and schism, and not a sense of delight, reinforcing unity. The reason why drinking is outlawed in certain times and places is exactly to prevent such an occurence – but this fact immediately reveals these ideologies as having a fundamental mistrust in the human being, thus tailor-made for those humans who indeed cannot be entrusted to care for and regulate themselves – or, perhaps, are ideologies which somehow *produce*, schismatically, such kind of humans.

The second matter of context is about the kind of feast that is represented by the *Symposium*. At one level, it seems to be just a normal banquet, with speeches – the only difference concerning the importance of the people who participate, and of their ideas. However, as Pierre Hadot perceptively observed, 'in a manner that for us is rather mysterious, Plato in the *Symposium* placed an entire constellation of Dionysian symbols around Socrates' (Hadot 1993: 113). While Hadot lists a number of features in the dialogue that directly brings in the figure of Dionysus, we'll see that the indirect references to theatrical performances, especially comedies, and even their sources, are much more numerous, and this will be one of the guiding threads of our entire analysis.

The third point concerns the place of the *Symposium* in the oeuvre of Plato. The dialogue is considered to belong to the middle period of Plato's work, together with the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*, after the early dialogues, including the circle around the death of Socrates, and before the final works, starting from the *Theaetetus* or the *Sophist*. In another sense, however, it is one of the most popular and influential of all the Dialogues. In the footsteps of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, it is again Pierre Hadot who offers a particularly incisive explanation for this fact: according to him, the dialogue, through the speech of Alcibiades, not only offers one of the most important direct characterisations of Socrates, but through Diotima's speech on Eros/Love it also transpires that Socrates

strongly recalls Eros. However, it is exactly at this point that my interpretation will depart from Hadot's as I will argue that this Dialogue not only represents the height of Plato's capturing the features of Socrates, but also a – partial – departure from and overcoming of his master. This also implies a self-overcoming, best visible through the clearly perceptible differences between Diotima's characterisation of Eros, and Alcibiades's description of Socrates.

This last point is already indicated by the frame into which the dialogue is fit. The most evident element of context is the very complicated chain of transmission through which the dialogue is told. Apollodorus and Glaucon, the first two figures in the dialogue, spend quite some time in sorting out who told about the events of the famous Symposium with the various speeches on love, and when exactly it took place (172A-4A). The reason for such an elevated degree of mediation, however, is not some kind of postmodern game with reflexivity and distance, rather an emphasis placed on the importance of memory and the fight against forgetfulness; a central message of Plato's entire philosophy, arguably rooted in the last words of Socrates, about not forgetting. That such a context is intended is also rendered evident from the other end of the dialogue, where the entire scene, including the evocation of the cock, according and Hadot (1993: 108), following again Nietzsche, recalls the death of Socrates (223C-D). The question concerns the meaning of such a reference here, given that the cycle has already been finished. This must have something to do with truth, and not just with a further celebratory tribute, all the more so as questions of truth are often evoked in the dialogue, in contrast to pure celebration. What is the new truth Plato felt necessary to tell here concerning the personality of Socrates?

The other main element of context at the start of the play moves us closer to the solution. There are two very clear references to the *Republic*. The first is to the personality of Glaucon, Plato's brother and one of the main interlocutors of the *Republic*, who makes a quick appearance at the very start – and who only appears, also shortly, in the *Parmenides*, another dialogue of the middle period where Plato plays a tribute to, though also indicates major differences from, his other main former teacher, who failed to recognise fully the depth of the problem of not-Being, main theme of the *Sophist*. The second reference is to Phaleron, the old port of Athens, in contrast to Piraeus, the new port, where the start the *Republic* takes place. From a 'modernist' perspective, that would indicate the significance of the *Republic*, in contrast to the *Symposium*; but Plato was a believer in the value of traditions, and this dialogue in particular started and ended with a tribute to memory, so it can only mean that here Plato starts to descend into the layers of a tradition that runs even deeper than the one touched in the *Republic*.

Moving towards the content of the speeches told in the banquet about love, the dialogue continues by referring to an entire series of circumstances that seem to be superfluous and irrelevant, but which, placed into the context of theatricality, especially comedy, suddenly gains meaning. Such references represent neither a suspension of sense and seriousness, nor an effort by Plato to stage the dialogue in a 'theatrical' manner. Such modes of proceeding are against the spirit of Plato. Rather, this complex game of cross-references was put into place in order to evoke affinities between the theme of the dialogue (Eros or Love); the role played by theatre, especially comedy, thus in general mimetic art in the city; and the figure of Socrates – in particular the distance Plato starts to perceive between his own position and that of his much revered master. Here again a reference back to the *Republic* helps to clarify the meaning. One of the central messages of that dialogue concerns a certain kind of 'love' as the foundation of a well-ordered city; this is *philia*, often translated as friendship, which is valid only in so far as Latin *amicitia*, and the related words in Romance languages, are also derivates of *amore*.

Here at stake is another Greek term about love, eros.[ii] That the link between the two is intended is also rendered evident that a third dialogue, broadly contemporaneous with these two, is *Phaedrus*, which explicitly discusses both types of love, and even contains the most famous definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom (78D).[iii]

Such references to comedy and the 'identity' of Socrates clearly evoke the *Clouds* of Aristophanes. This is one of the most famous comedies by Aristophanes, ridiculing the Sophists, but it also captures Socrates as a kind of arch-Sophist. In the *Apology* Plato argued that this comedy played a part in the condemnation of Socrates as a Sophist. Aristophanes, in fact, will be one of the banqueters in the *Symposium* – so special attention will have to be devoted to his eventual contributions.

The first matter of circumstance concerns the question of being invited or uninvited. In order to participate in a banquet one first of all must be invited. The story told about the banquet (and no longer the story of how the story was told) starts by a whole series of elaborate points about being or not being invited. Socrates has been invited to the banquet of Agathon, but Aristodemos – whose story we hear from second or third hand – wasn't; so Socrates asks him whether he would like to join the banquet *uninvited* (*aklēton*) (174B).[iv] After a series of cracks about the problem of being uninvited, Aristodemos defends himself that he is not really uninvited, as Socrates did invite him; but once they arrive at the place, Socrates withdraws into one of his famous ecstatic meditations,[v] thus imposing on Aristodemos the ridiculous experience (*geloion pathein*) (174E) of first appearing uninvited at the door, thus as an intruder, an *alazon*, and then at that embarrassing moment being pulled inside by a servant and told by Agathon the host that he wanted to invite him, just could not find him. They finally try to bring Socrates also inside, though he would only enter much later, in the midst of the banquet –a serious sign of asociality, though everyone was already well used to that kind of behaviour on his part.

I told this convoluted narrative in some depth because I think Plato had a purpose with all this – though it would only become visible through a digression on the origins of theatre. It is well known, not least through Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, that the origins of theatre lie in Dionysian festivities, especially a kind of satyr play. However, it is less known that Francis Cornford, a major Plato scholar and also a 'Cambridge ritualist' (Calder 1991), argued that the joint origins of both tragedy and comedy can be sought in a particular kind of 'feast gone wrong' experience, where a feast had been interrupted by some intruders who appeared uninvited and tried to insinuate themselves into the centre of attention; and that the structure of this original performance can be best recovered through a structural analysis of the plays of Aristophanes, in particular the *Clouds* (Cornford 1914). We may assume that Plato knew at least as much about the origins of tragedy and comedy as we now know through Nietzsche and Cornford, and thus this complex play about being 'uninvited' was part of this 'mysterious' (Hadot 1993: 113) connection between the Dialogue and the performance of comedies – all the more so as at the very end of the Dialogue Socrates would try to convince his remaining two interlocutors – who, by no means accidentally, are Agathon (whose victory by his new tragedy is celebrated by the banquet) and Aristophanes, the comedy-writer – that the knowledge required for writing a tragedy and a comedy is the same (223D). The elaborate play was also performed in order to sensitise us about the possibility of another, real intruder in the Dialogue – and that we must try to understand the exact meaning of that intrusion *as an intrusion* once it would happen.

The Speeches

We can now turn to the substance of the speeches. It is suggested that the theme be Eros, which Socrates heartily supports, claiming that he is 'set up to understand nothing but love-matters', and adding that this would certainly please everyone else present, but in particular Aristophanes, who 'divides his time between Dionysos and Aphrodite' (177E). The claims are important for two reasons: first, because here Socrates, famous for always declaring his ignorance, outright proclaims himself an expert in love, and *only* in matters of love; and second, because he establishes here, though half-mockingly, an affinity between himself and Aristophanes. Once the theme is settled, there come the speeches, of which Socrates's will be the last – the sixth told; however, given that after the first speaker there were a number of others who intervened but whose words were not recalled, and so if we take them altogether as one, then his actually would be the seventh. One of these speakers would be Aristophanes – and by now we should be well on our guard concerning the nature and modalities of his intervention.

It indeed would show a few crucial features – and we need to pass over the others coming before him. He was supposed to be the third – or 'fourth' – speaker, but the moment he was about to speak he started to hiccup, so had to pass the turn. Whatever is the exact meaning proverbially associated with hiccupping in classical Greece, it certainly prevented him talking – something that would be repeated twice in the Dialogue. When he would finally manage to speak, however, as if to compensate for the *faux pas*, he would launch into a full-scale tribute about Love, arguing that so far 'humanity has entirely failed to perceive the power of Love', as otherwise this divinity, the greatest benefactor of mankind (193D), would had been provided with the most splendid temples (189C).[vi]

Given that the tone was altered in this way, the next speaker, host and tragedy writer Agathon continued with an exclusive praise of love; so when it finally came his turn, Socrates started by revealing his state of helplessness (*aporein*), caused by the fact that he was not interested only in praising Eros, but in the *truth* about Love. His actual contribution consisted of two parts: the first, very short, followed his usual method of asking questions, instead of giving a speech; while in the second part he told a speech he once heard from Diotima – a women from Mantinea, a place in Arcadia carrying a name which resembles the word prophet (*manteia*), so which identifies her as a prophetess – all the more so as the person otherwise is not known, and her name means 'honouring the divine'.[vii]

The short interrogation serves to set the tone for Socrates's intervention, identifying Love at a first approximation as the love of beauty; but also introducing the idea that beauty is therefore something the person who is in love does not possess – even though this does not mean that he is necessarily ugly. The point serves well to lead off Diotima's speech, which would start by presenting Eros as being situated in the in-between or *metaxy*,[viii] thus in a state of tension. Still, this idea concerning the lack of beauty as a precondition for love is highly problematic, as it is based on a confusion between possessing and being.

Turning to Diotima's speech, we need to notice first of all the radical novelty of such a way of proceeding within the dialogues. So far in all the dialogues, including those of the middle period, Socrates was the main figure, so referring to a talk by an unknown person, who is furthermore female but possesses a knowledge and authority greater than that of Socrates is a major innovation. It is usually argued that in this way, and also through the parallel speech by Alcibiades, Plato found a way to characterise Socrates from the outside. However, it might turn out that the reasons are more complex. In my

reading, the fact that this speech about Love is told by a woman is of major importance, and gives further support to the actual content of the message.

After introducing the in-between nature of Love, Diotima tells a story about the birth of Eros, including his conception on the birthday of Aphrodite by Poros ('crossing', 'passage') and Penia ('lack', 'poverty').[ix] This helps her to qualify the exact meaning of the love of beauty as a desire for possession of beautiful things; of what is good; and forever. This allows her to introduce a new idea about the 'method' to pursue this aim, or the nature of the effort that is love: it is the 'giving birth [*tokos*] to a beautiful thing by means of both the body and the soul'. Now, the term for begetting is actually the word by which a woman is delivering a baby into the world; so the metaphor uses fully the possibilities offered by a woman 'delivering' a speech – and Socrates in fact immediately alludes to this, even the 'nature' of Diotima, as he states that its understanding requires prophetic gifts (*manteias*) (206B11).

The ensuing lack of understanding on the part of Socrates, which – one might wonder – here could be genuine, and not just the usual dialectical technique, allows Diotima to add a number of crucial clarifications. First, all human beings are pregnant, meaning wanting to give birth to, or bringing to light, things that are beautiful. This, however, can only happen *in* beauty, and not in ugliness; and such a birth assumes the getting together of a man and a woman: 'It is a divine affair, this engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal; and it cannot occur in the discordant. The ugly is discordant with whatever is divine, whereas the beautiful is accordant' (206C-D). Thus, a pregnant being can only give birth when seeing something beautiful, thus becoming full with joy and delight; while the sight of something ugly forces it to persist with its burden. This part is concluded when Diotima explicitly refutes Socrates: 'For you are wrong, Socrates, in supposing that love is of the beautiful', as it is something else: 'of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful' (206E). From this it also follows that love implies a desire for immortality.

At this point there is a clear break in the story; a plateau is reached; Socrates states that this instruction he received from her in a number of different discussions; but once she went further. This started by referring to the behaviour of animals when they get the desire of begetting.[x] This desire for procreation, and the longing for newborn is again connected to the wish for immortality; the overcoming of forgetfulness (207D-8A). Such feelings are characteristic as much of the body as of the soul; in some men, this is expressed by love for women, while in others in a desire for guiding the state. So after a time, by continuously elevating oneself, one may arrive at beholding an entire 'ocean of the beautiful' (210D), contemplating it in its full splendour.

This is an extremely captivating image, also quite close to the similarly blissful oceanic feeling, as narrated by Thomas Mann and Karen Blixen.[xi] Yet, instead of giving us a rest here, Diotima/ Plato does the exact opposite, asking *now* for our full attention – as evidently the culminating stage of her narrative now reached.[xii] As, once reaching this 'ocean of beauty', in progression towards the ultimate aims of the 'science of love', one reaches a 'wondrous vision', or a beauty of wonderful nature (210e6), demonstrating 'the very essence of beauty' (211d1). This can only be reached through the right steps, as if on a ladder, following a single road – which is 'the right method of *paiderasthein*' (211B7).

It is by purpose that I did not translate the last word, as the understanding of its meaning presents no small difficulties. This is shown by the fact that the word even seems to exist in English – as 'pederasty' – though its meaning is certainly radically different from the one intended by Plato – which, however, is not easy to reconstruct. In order to approach this task, we first of all need to introduce the semantic complexity evoked by the Greek words *pais* and *paidiov*. The former means a child, whether male or

female, who is about 7-14 years old; while the latter implies one younger than 7. *Paideia* as a noun means childhood or youth, by implication education as well, but also culture, while the closely related word *paidia* means play or game, but also entertainment and joking. *Paiderasthein* therefore literally means a love for young children, but also a love for playfulness and for culture; so the question of how and when its meaning was reduced to the current sense of pederasty poses a difficult problem, also full of ideological connotation, for the present as well as for the past, and is therefore far from clear whether it is at all possible to accomplish. What is certain, though, given the argument presented so far by Plato, is that his intention concerning the *right* kind of *paiderasthein* could not have been related to pederasty, even in an extended and 'enlightened' sense. So we might wonder why he put this term into the mouth of Diotima if already by that time it came to acquire the meaning 'love of boys'.

Here we need to recall that this point was made in the most emphatic manner possible, as Diotima was asking Socrates for 'the very best of [his] attention' (210E). It therefore could not have been unintended; and had to be at the heart of both Plato's interest in the question of Love (eros as different from philia); and the distance he started to perceive between the position of Socrates in this respect and his own.

The answer must start from the fact that the tight etymological connections between the Greek words for child, playing, education and culture are extremely significant, and go at the heart of Greek culture – suggesting the reason why Greece exerted such an impact at the level of history, and still exerts such a fascination at the level of ideas. Greece is the source of the Renaissance, the home of political thought and philosophy, the origin of law and architecture, painting and sculpture, as we know it; the history of science, culture, politics, society and art is inconceivable without giving tribute to the contribution of Greek culture. Given that all this is fundamentally connected to the search for knowledge, and that such a search for knowledge is inseparable from education, this specific semantic figuration around the root *pais* must have played a crucial role in the formation of the specific characteristic of Greek culture – confirmed among others by the fact that the Greeks used the same word to capture culture.

In trying to make sense of this semantic complex, we note on the one hand the close connection between learning and playfulness, and on the other the need for a delicate attention to the characteristics of children who are undergoing such a learning experience. This implies, on the part of educators, a love of playfulness – which is contained in the term *paiderasthein* – and which is connected to a similar attention to questions of beauty (in contrast to a purely gloomy vision of the world, according to which life is drab and ugly, in contrast to being playful and beautiful); on the other, a deep concern with, or even love for children – which again can be expressed by the word *paiderasthein*. All these considerations, however, which had to be at the source of the stunning vigour of Greek civilisation, are radically different from the idea of teachers showing a physical attraction for their students, which – whether or not in our legal sense of 'pederasty' – involve an active, interest-motivated physical-sexual seduction of the youths one is supposed to educate, in the sense of leading them by showing example (the original sense of *paidagogos*, or pedagogue). The only possible explanation is that at a certain point the classical type of love and care for the playful education of children was as if transmogrified or hijacked into the 'acknowledgment' of the 'natural existence' of some kind of 'sexual' attraction between teacher and pupil. Such an inspiration could only have come from outside the core parts of Greek culture; so it does not require special advocacy to charge the Sophists with it.

So what Plato tried here, and arguably failed to succeed, was as if to re-capture this concern, by altering radically the meaning of the word. Diotima was emphasising

throughout the metaphor of conception, pregnancy and giving birth, and such a metaphor – which emphatically was about the joint contribution of male and female parts – could easily be continued by the metaphor of playful childrearing, thus *paiderasthein*. The effect, however, turned out to be the exact opposite, and not only in classical times, but also in the Renaissance when, through – though also in spite of – Ficino's *De Amore*, the idea of 'watching and loving beautiful boys', through Michelangelo & Co, again became understood in the Sophist sense as the method of acceding to beauty.

So by this means, according to Plato, by raising oneself 'as on the rungs of a ladder' (211C), one can finally accede to the contemplation of the 'very essence of beauty' – which is the only thing that makes life worthwhile to live (211D). And if one contemplates all this beauty – again! – in the right kind of manner, one will 'breed not illusions but true examples of virtue' (212A), and thus would reach – through his offspring, both physical and spiritual – immortality.

Socrates concluded his talk, or rather Diotima's talk in this manner – and at that moment two things happened, one right after the other. First of all, Aristophanes wanted to say something, no doubt given that he understood himself to be directly targeted by the discourse of Socrates; but before he could open his mouth, the feast was interrupted by the drunken voice of Alcibiades – and thus for the second time he was prevented to talk. Thus, again smuggled into the context of a direct reference to Aristophanes, we have the event that the frequent allusions to comedy made us expect: after the end of the first part, meaning here the speech of Socrates, the intruder or *alazon* appears (Cornford 1914: 129-40); a favourite trick of Aristophanes, though here he happened to be the one who was interrupted.

Given that the *Symposium* is widely considered as giving a true portrait of Socrates, it is of vital importance to see how exactly Alcibiades captured his main features. Given that he simply interrupted Aristophanes, this characterisation should be considered as presenting the full truth, in contrast to the description provided by him in the *Clouds*.

Alcibiades offers two series of remarks. Both are of exceptional interest; and of surprising, even utterly striking quality. The first one is offered half-jokingly, right after his drunken entry, during which he failed to notice that Socrates was also present. In these Socrates is depicted as a typical Sophist: one who is always lying in wait (213B-C); performing his 'old trick' of turning up suddenly, at places where he is least expected (213C); and one who successfully intrigues (*diemékhanésô*) in order to get a seat near the most handsome person. Before the second, equally shocking series of remarks, however, he states that he won't simply 'praise' Socrates, but will tell the truth (214E).

Alcibiades starts his discourse by saying that he will tell the truth about Socrates not directly, but by way of similitudes, or images (*eikonón*); and while Socrates might think that this is in order to deride him, it will be done for the sake of truth (215A). The images indeed are striking, as the two recurrent metaphors are Silenus and the satyrs (215B, 216D, 221D). Being compared to these figures is generally not considered to be a praise, as both are considered wild and incontinent.[xiii] They are also closely associated with the birth of the theatre, especially comedy, as the comedy is considered to have grown out of the satyr play, which was performed in classical times as the fourth part of a dramatic cycle. Thus, after being described, half-jokingly, as a Sophist, Socrates is now characterised, quite seriously, as a figure of comedy.

Now Alcibiades must give an account of his images; and he proceeds promptly. The effect mechanism of the speeches of Socrates can be compared to a theatrical performance, as he manages to enchant, or entrance, by the simple power of his

speeches, unaided by instruments (215C). This effective power, however, is exerted for a good reason: Socrates manages to generate a sense of shame even in Alcibiades himself (216B); though the effect is not lasting, as once Socrates is gone, the power of pleasing the crowd again takes hold of him.

At this point, Alcibiades introduces a major difference between Socrates and Silenus; while *outward* Socrates is ignorant like Silenus, inside he knows the measure (216D). In order to demonstrate that this is so, Alcibiades proceeds to tell a true story – and asks all those not initiated to close their ears (218B). The story is about the way he tried to seduce Socrates – who, he believes, was strongly in love with him – but failed.

The question now concerns the exact nature of the parallel between Diotima's story about Eros, and Alcibiades's story about Socrates. While there are certainly similarities, as Hadot points these out in detail (Hadot 1993: 98), there are also quite basic and vital differences. Diotima's story, a story told by a woman, which Socrates only transmitted, was about being pregnant and giving birth, which are par excellence female features; and the emphasis is on the need for the joint presence and activity of the male and female sides in order to conceive and bring into light something that is beautiful. In the story told by Alcibiades, however, women are not present – so the only measure of quality, as related to love, becomes not beauty and giving birth in beauty, but the power to renounce; or, in the terminology of Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal.

Alcibiades finished his story just before another intrusion happened, this time by an entire group of drunkards (223B). With this, every order was dissolved, and everyone was forced to drink too much. Thus it came about that by dawn Socrates forced on Agathon and Aristophanes to admit the identity of the art of writing a tragedy and a comedy – which is the third time Aristophanes ended up being deprived of coming up with an argument.

Conclusion: the limits of the Socratic 'method'

The philosophy of Socrates belongs to the 'axial age'; and towards its end. The 'axial age' was not simply a period of unprecedented renewal, the first appearance of transcendence and enlightened elites on the planet, as it is often asserted, rather first of all a period of unprecedented crisis, brought upon by an escalating spiral of warfare and the subsequent rise of the first world-conquering Empires.

Socrates embodied this crisis, and with particular clarity, by his personality as well as with his thought. This is how we can make sense of his strange physical features, emphasised by everyone, in particular his ugliness, which was so much problematic, even repulsive, for Greek culture. The same point applies for his thought, in the sense that it was exclusively *negative*. Socrates was very honest about the fact that he did not have a solution – in fact, he claimed total ignorance with respect to everything – and that his *daimon* gave only negative signalling: it prevented him doing what was wrong, and identified what was false.

It is for this same reason that his activity as a thinker was completely reduced to his here and now, the crisis of democracy in Athens – a situation so evidently similar to ours. He walked all around the city, talked to all kinds of people, and tried to make them aware of the nature of the collapsing, decaying society in which they were living. It was thus a 'critical' activity, and in several senses of the term – the medical sense of recognising the 'critical' condition of an organism; the socio-philosophical sense of providing a 'critique' of the present; and of course the classical sense of standing in judgment over such a state of being. Critique and crisis, in this sense, were thus already connected in the classical period, though the conceptual separation and thematisation would only take place in the 18th century (Koselleck 1988).

A certain kind of 'critical philosophy' was also what the Sophists were doing: criticising everything, the present state as a well as the entire culture and traditions of Athens; undermining whatever was still intact by taking everything apart, by sophistic arguments as well as by ridicule, without any concern with putting things back together harmoniously, and thus making a fortune out of the genuine state of crisis. In spite of superficial similarities, the activities of Socrates were light years away from this cynical sophistication – and yet, they remained thoroughly anchored in that moment of crisis. Socrates had no mandate of going beyond making people aware of the deep nature of the confusion into which they were increasingly drawn and entrapped; that theirs was a world that was being turned upside down.

It is here that the genuine dividing line between Socrates and Plato lies. Plato came to realise that the limits which Socrates had to observe, due to the nature of his calling, or even related to his physical features, must be overcome. Any kind of 'critique' is not sufficient, merely a symptom of 'crisis'; and thus one must detach oneself from this crisis-marred present – not ignoring the crisis, escaping into a world of pure ideals, following the Gnostics and Puritans of all times, but literally, by the force of reason and willpower, to *tear oneself away* from this upside down turned world – and return to the past, in order to gain momentum, and direction for a genuine renewal.

Plato was 'traditionalist' in the sense of becoming convinced that – unless we are granted an extraordinary new epiphany; and *even then* – the key to the future, in the sense of a 'good society', lies in the past, through its manifold memories.

Notes

[i] See for e.g. Italian *convito*, going back to Latin *convivium*; the term banquet itself; or Hungarina *lakoma*.

[ii] The third Greek word denoting love is *agape*, originally referring to a general affection related for e.g. to a feast, and through the New Testament came to denote the divine love.

[iii] See Seung (1995).

[iv] The word *klétos* is quite close to *kléros*, a central word of the *Statesman*, signifying election. Strikingly, in modern English calling (for e.g. in the sense of inviting someone) and election gain a shared meaning, through Luther's translation of similar expressions by the single German word *beruf* – which, according to Max Weber, would have a major impact on the Protestant Ethic and subsequently on modern culture and capitalism.

[v] See also 220D here; for more details, Hadot (1993: 114).

[vi] Please, note the similar argument offered by Aristotle about Graces in the Nicomachean Ethics (1133a).

[vii] Note that this repeats the mediatedness that already characterised the start of the dialogue.

[viii] This term would become central for Eric Voegelin (1978).

[ix] In his book on Giambattista Tiepolo, the greatest Platonic painter together with Raphael, Roberto Calasso gives a fascinating account on the genealogy and veneration of Eros. According to this, the question of Eros's father was always considered as bwing particularly problematic – the mother usually being identified with Aphrodite – leading to the idea that he was 'nobody, son of nobody' (Calasso 2006: 266); which establishes striking similarities with the dogma of the 'Immaculate conception', which of course was one of the favourite themes of Tiepolo.

[x] While prehistoric cave paintings never depict animals coupling, they are often represented – for e.g. in some famous images in Lascaux – in the state of excitement that takes hold of them before.
[xi] For Thomas Mann, see the starting section of the last, seventh chapter of *The Magic Mountain*, is entitled *Strandspaziergang* (beach-walk), with the felicitous English translation 'By the Ocean of Time', which included the recognition of the fundamental parallels between contemplating the infinite sea at the beach and the infinite snow of the mountains. Concerning Blixen, scenery that keeps returning in her last tales, where God's epiphany in nature becomes most visible, is the 'enveloping blueness' that one can observe when walking on the seaside, 'in which the horizon dissolves and the sea and the sky seem to be the same element' (Thurman 1984: 327).
[xii] I would like to stress here strongly this special call for attention, as it is much quite different from a mere rhetorical device. Instead of allowing us to relax at a moment of evident climax, it specifically asks for *more* attention.
[xiii] On Silenus, see in particular Kerenyi (1986).

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