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In liminal tension towards giving birth: Eros, the educator

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Abstract

The discussion on the nature of *Eros* (love as sexual desire) in Plato's *Symposium* offers us special insights concerning the potential role played by love in social and political life. While about *Eros*, the dialogue also claims to offer a true image of Socrates, generating a complex puzzle. This article offers a solution to this puzzle by reconstructing and interpreting Plato's theatrical presentation his argument, making use of the structure of the plays of Aristophanes, a protagonist of the Dialogue. The new image of Socrates, it is argued, signals Plato's move beyond the way he envisioned so far his master, best visible in his introducing Diotima, a prophetess who takes over the role of guide from Socrates; and by presenting the truth about Socrates through Alcibiades, cast into the role of a boastful intruder, a central figure in Aristophanes' comedies. *Eros* and Socrates are both 'in-between' or liminal figures, indicating that Socrates is still entrapped in the crisis of Athenian democracy. The way out, according to the new philosophy of Plato, lies by redirecting *Eros* from the hunting of beautiful objects to be possessed to elevating the soul to the essence of beauty as a primary means for further generating beauty, in particular through

engendering and educating children, thus reasserting a harmonious co-existence with the order of the cosmos.

Keywords

comedy, education, Eros, imitation, liminality, modernity, Plato, Socrates, theatre

Biographical note

Arpad Szakolczai is Professor of Sociology at University College Cork, Ireland. His books include *The Dissolution of Communist Power: The Case of Hungary* (Routledge, 1992, with Agnes Horvath), *Max Weber and Michel Foucault: Parallel Life-Works* (Routledge, 1998), *Reflexive Historical Sociology* (Routledge, 2000, 2009), *The Genesis of Modernity* (Routledge, 2003), *La scoperta della società* (The discovery of society; Carocci, 2003, with Giovanna Procacci), *Sociology, Religion and Grace: A Quest for the Renaissance* (Routledge, 2007, 2012), and *Comedy and the Public Sphere: The Re-birth of Theatre as Comedy and the Genealogy of the Modern Public Arena* (Routledge, 2013). He published articles among others in *International Sociology,* the *International Review of Sociology,* the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *British Journal of Political Science, Theory, Culture and Society*, *Current Sociology*, *East European Politics and Society*, *Social Research*, the *European Journal of Social Theory*, the *European Sociological Review*, and *International Political Anthropology*. Currently working on a book reconstructing the schismogenesis of modernity, focusing on the alchemic dissolution and re-fusion of reason and emotions in between the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

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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

Plato, *Symposium* (206C-D)

Our generation is serious – even at banquets

Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*

pour comprendre il faut aimer

Christian Meier, *Athens*

The paradoxes of the *Symposium*

The *Symposium*, one of the most widely read dialogues of Plato, is about the theme of *eros* (love).[1] At the same time it also pretends to give a – finally – true portrait of Socrates. That the two concerns are linked, in the sense that the portrait of Socrates offered by Alcibiades parallels the characterisation of *Eros* by Diotima, is also widely accepted since the 1837 work of F.C. Baur (Sider, 1980: 47), and can be traced back at least as far as Ficino (Fasce, 1977; see also Hadot, 1993: 98).

At the same time the parallel immediately opens up a Pandora's box around the Dialogue.[2] Why did Plato think that the best way to give a truthful description of Socrates is by comparing him to Eros? And why put this truthful description of Socrates into the mouth of Alcibiades, who is furthermore drunk, and in a particularly theatrical scene?

An early victim of the discovery of this Pandora's box was Kierkegaard, who was so much taken by Socrates being a 'kobold' (Kierkegaard, 1966) that his entire philosophy would be couched in ironical plays and masked self-presentations. Most academic commentators were more cautious, refraining from entering this trap of theatricality, *mis*-reading the dialogue as another piece of rational deliberative philosophy. This caution was arguably reinforced by a more basic problem posed by the dialogue: given that the cycle of dialogues around the death of Socrates was devoted to giving a true portrait of Socrates, why did Plato feel the need to provide a new, supposedly truer account (see Voegelin, 1957)?

At this point the problem posed by the paradoxes of the dialogue is joined by an even more fundamental dilemma, concerned with the 'development' of Plato's thought. In the second half of the 19th century it was established by Lewis Campbell that on purely stylistic grounds Plato's dialogues can be divided into three groups (Kahn, 2002: 93-4); a discovery that is still considered as paradigm defining (ibid.: 100). The question concerns whether these three groups can also be arranged in a chronological order; and whether the perceived need to give a new and 'truer' portrait of Socrates can be connected to a 'development' within Plato's thinking. In a classic

contribution Gregory Vlastos (1991: 45-80) argued that there is indeed a decisive difference between the 'early' and 'middle' Socratic dialogues. The Symposium, however, is notoriously difficult to place; and the entire debate is too much caught between two, equally unattractive alternative Germanic positions: the idea of an unbroken, linear development, a vision developed in Romantic novels (*Bildungsroman*); and the claim, characteristic of philosophical idealism, that Plato's thinking forms a complete and coherent system.

A way out of this impasse might be reached by taking seriously the manifold theatrical allusions contained in the dialogue, and connect them both to the possible reasons why Plato felt the need to correct his previous portrait of Socrates and the heart of his views concerning *eros*. If Plato perceived a need to correct his previous image, this could only have had one reason: that he changed his mind, to some extent, and that therefore the dialogue represents a new and *critical* view of Socrates. This change can account for the heightened theatricality of the dialogue.

The idea of Plato writing a critique of Socrates challenges so much the established wisdom that even those who in the past suggested a similar interpretation refrained from drawing the conclusions.[3] A reckoning is helped by realising that if such an acknowledgment is difficult to make for us today, it was even more difficult then for Plato himself. After all, he started his philosophical life by writing an *Apology of Socrates*; and the change did not and could not represent a simple change of sides. The respect for his master and much of his position stayed. Thus, the formulation of the exact the difference in his position required extreme care.

That the dialogue would present a new and unexpected image is Socrates is made clear already at the first instance where we encounter him in the dialogue, where he appears as washed and wearing sandals (174a3-6), explaining this with the claim that he wants to appear handsome at a handsome man's house – the 'humorous absurdity' of which being underlined by a threefold play with the word 'beautiful' (*kalos*) (Usher, 2002: 221; see also Osborne, 1994). The unusual character of the forthcoming portrait is emphasised, still at the start of the dialogue, by two further points: Socrates claims knowledge, in opposition to his customary ignorance (177e1-2); and he is charged with hubris (175e7) (Gagarin, 1977: 26).[4] All these features would reveal to have a central relevance for the doctrine of *eros* exposed in the dialogue (ibid.)

The central argument of the paper is to show how much Plato's changed portrait of Socrates is linked to his improved understanding of the role of *eros* in public life, as mediated through the new type of theatre, connected to his redefinition of the nature of sophistry, as contained in the dialogue *Sophist*, restored to the centre of philosophical attention by Heidegger. It will be argued that the change of position of Plato towards his master is linked to a change in his understanding of the factors that corrupted Athens, shifting the focus from Sophist rhetoric argumentative discussion to the manipulation of images and theatrical performances, especially the evocative manipulation of sexual desire in comedies, and the recognition that the erotic practices accepted by Socrates, even connected to pedagogy, were part and parcel of this culture, promoted and manipulated by the Sophists, though existing before. Thus the break that Socrates tried to establish with the Sophists was not

sufficient, and the dialogue, especially through the figure of Diotima, shows how Plato embarked on this new understanding of *Eros*.

Before a detailed analysis of the dialogue, however, it is necessary to review the state of the art on its theatrical aspects.

Theatricality in the *Symposium*

One of the main differences between Plato's earlier and later writings concern his new understanding about the dangers of theatre. In the early dialogues the main interlocutors and adversaries of Socrates are the Sophists as rhetoricians. In the later works, however, Plato clearly seems to imply that the most important instruments of Athens' decline were developments within the theatre, relying on performative manipulation of images. He recognised that dramatic poets rhapsodes can have an even more destructive influence than the debates provoked by Sophists in the agora, as the effect mechanism of the theatre is more powerful: they 'combined ignorance with a unique capacity to inflict a particular kind of psychological damage on both themselves and those who executed and witnessed dramatic performances' (Emlyn-Jones, 2004: 391-2). This is especially true for comedy which is strongly concerned with sex (Sider, 1980: 48), thus responsible for proliferating vulgarity and licentiousness. This new understanding is reflected in the *Sophist*, where Sophists are characterised through their dealing with non-Being through the evocative use of images. Even further, in the *Laws* Plato outright introduces a new type of political rule, *theatrocracy* (*Laws* 700D-1A; see Emlyn-Jones, 2004: 389; Sider, 1980: 53). As Plato makes it clear, the problem is not with theatre *per se*, especially not with classical tragedy (this is why he never confronted directly the great classic

playwrights), rather with the confusion characteristic of his present: that ‘with the progress of time’ poets, ‘through their folly’, being ‘frenzied and unduly possessed by a spirit of pleasure’, unintentionally ‘bore false witness’ against their own profession (*Laws* 700D-E).

This is the context in which the significance of the theatrical aspects of the *Symposium*, this crucial transitory dialogue, can be best recognised. Here theatrical elements so much ‘pervade the dialogue’ that it could be outright considered as a ‘drama’ (Sider, 1980: 48). Most particular is that it is tightly connected to the ‘true’ portrait of Socrates; as ‘all the undesirable imagery of competition and emotional excess associated by Plato with the drama is redirected towards the goal of true knowledge and understanding of reality embodied in the *persona* of his Socrates’ (Emlyn-Jones, 2004: 403).

The use of such elements is most unusual for Plato. Apart from the *Symposium*, the only other dialogue where men of the theatre directly appear is the *Ion* (Emlyn-Jones, 2004: 392).[5] Here, however, in the first part Socrates is not simply engaged in a dialogue with his interlocutors, but participates in a staged contest; while the second part, with the sudden entry of the drunken Alcibiades, is purely theatrical – though it is exactly the scene which is supposed to reveal the truth about Socrates. While this scene is undoubtedly ‘theatrical’ or ‘performative’, one must be very precise concerning the exact kind of performative action that goes on here – indeed, in the entire dialogue. In this regard a number of helpful hints are contained in the existing literature – though they must be complemented by an excursus about the origins of comedy.

The first question concerns the exact kind of theatre that is performed in this dialogue. It is certainly not a tragedy, but is not a comedy either. This suggests the possibility of a satyr play – and indeed a number of indications point to this direction (see Sider, 1980; and in particular Usher, 2002). After all, the last three speakers of the contest are Aristophanes, the famous comedy writer; Agathon, whose victory at a tragedy competition gives the occasion for the banquet; and Socrates, who is characterised by Alcibiades as Silenus, an arch satyr and tutor of Dionysus. Furthermore, it has been recently discovered that the closest models for the dialogue are provided by the myth of King Midas capturing Silenus, and the *Cyclops* of Euripides, the only surviving satyr play of the tragedian (Usher, 2002: 205-6) – a piece where Euripides 'pokes fun at the Athenian pederastic ideal' (ibid.: 221). Taking further this link between the satyrs and Dionysus, it has also been advanced that the dialogue can be best understood as a Dionysian festivity, while the text also incorporates Dithyrambic speeches (Sider, 1980: 41, 51-2).

Dithyrambs and satyr plays, however, just as Dionysian festivities in general, are considered to be at the origins of theatre since Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this respect it is most important that Plato finishes the dialogue by Socrates trying to convince his remaining interlocutors (exactly Aristophanes and Agathon) that 'the knowledge required for writing tragedy and comedy' is the same (*Symposium* 223d3-6). Such references can't be considered as accidental. In order to understand the reasons for Plato's allusion to the common origins of tragedy and comedy, we need to insert a short overview of this theme.

This can be done with the help of Francis Cornford's classical analysis concerning this common structural characteristics of both tragedy and comedy, to be traced back to the structure of the ritual out of which they grew, and for which he considered the plays of Aristophanes, in particular the *Clouds*, as offering perfect examples (Cornford, 1914).[6] According to Cornford, this structure consists of two parts: a contest, which originally dramatised the replacement of the old year with the new; and a celebratory feast. In between the two, there is a peculiar intermezzo called *parabasis* ('a move forward'), in which the Chorus stepped forward and directly addressed the audience. This represented a deliberate play with boundaries, as it broke the spell of the spectacle, while managing to involve even more strongly the audience. Finally, and most importantly, at the start of the second part the festive celebrations were interrupted, literally, by the bursting onto the scene of an 'intruder' (*alazon*) who appeared out of the blue, trying to capture attention and dominate the feast, stealing the show. This figure has two main characteristics: he is *not invited* to the feast; and he tries to make up for this, and gain favours, by being *boastful*. These features have fundamental significance for understanding why Plato placed his 'conclusive' characterisation in the mouth of Alcibiades, who would indeed interrupt the symposium, and whose supposed presentation of the 'truth' about Socrates is thus revealed as mere boasting.

Finally, this structure also helps to identify the speech of Socrates containing the teachings of Diotima about *eros* as a kind of *parabasis*: a direct talk, out of Plato's heart, in contrast to the theatrical set-up of the rest of the dialogue. It cannot be emphasised enough how, given the unusual characterisation of Socrates and the similarly unusual theatrical set-up of the dialogue, important it is that – as another

major upsetting of all conventions – this *parabasis* is delivered by a *woman*, who is furthermore a *prophetess* and a *foreigner*.[7] In order to offer a conclusive analysis of *eros* Plato here 'invents a woman to answer the previous speakers, whose downplaying generation, offspring, and children is consistent with their homosexuality' (Nichols, 2004: 198). Her being a stranger underlines the radical contrast with the Athenian male scenery; while the emphasis on being a prophetess might be connected to the role of priestesses and prophetesses in Minoan Crete,[8] shedding some light on the major importance Crete would play in the last dialogues.

Matters of context and framing

As this already indicates, matters of style and content cannot be separated for the *Symposium*. This impression is further reinforced by indications concerning the broader context and the concrete framing of the dialogue.

The first issue of context concerns 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 their ideas. However, as Pierre Hadot perceptively observed, 'in a manner that for us is rather mysterious, Plato in the *Symposium* placed a full constellation of Dionysian symbols around Socrates' (Hadot, 1993: 113). The links between Dionysus, Socrates and theatrical allusions will provide a guiding thread for this paper.

Second, this is one of the few dialogues where the events can be dated to 416 BC (Emlyn-Jones, 2004: 395). This has its importance for understanding the role to be played by Alcibiades, as the disastrous Sicilian expedition instigated and led by

him took place in 415-13 BC. As Alcibiades was a student of Socrates, even a particularly important one, such a rare, precise allusion can only be interpreted as a way to underline the failure of the mission of Socrates to educate Alcibiades.

Even more important are the stylistic devices that were deployed throughout, but concentrated in particular at the beginning of the Dialogue. This starts with two particularly circuitous loops: the first concerns the ways in which the dialogue was preserved, while the second the events that led to the start of the feast – from the perspective of Socrates.

The events of the famous symposium with the various speeches on love are recalled through a complicated chain of transmission. Apollodorus and Glaucon, the first two characters spend quite some time in sorting out who told what about when the events took place (172A-4A). Such an elevated degree of mediation places emphasis on the importance of memory and the fight against forgetting, a central message of Plato's philosophy, to be traced to the last words of Socrates: 'do not forget' (*Phaedo* 118A). That such a context is intended is also rendered evident at the other end of the dialogue, where the scenery, including the evocation of the cock, according to Hadot (1993: 108), following Nietzsche, recalls the death of Socrates (*Symposium* 223C-D). The question now concerns the meaning of such a reference here, given that the cycle devoted to the death of Socrates has already been finished.

Some hints toward the solution are provided by two clear references to the *Republic*, connected to the personality of Glaucon, Plato's brother and one of the main interlocutors of the *Republic* (see also Osborne, 1994: 90-1). Here he only

makes a quick appearance at the very start, just as he would also appear again shortly in the *Parmenides*, another dialogue of the middle period Plato, devoted to his other former teacher, who failed to recognise fully the depth of the problem of not-Being, which would be the 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 of the *Republic* takes place, with Socrates taking a walk there with Glaucon. 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 animating the *Republic*; while at the same time the direction of the walk, in contrast to the Republic, is an ascent, from the port towards the city (Osborne, 1994: 88-9, 96-7).

The second loop is concerned with an entire series of circumstances about Socrates's arrival to the banquet that seem to be superfluous and irrelevant but which in the context of theatricality suddenly gain meaning, starting with the already discussed unusual appearance of Socrates. This complex game of cross-references was put in place in order to evoke affinities between the theme of the dialogue (*eros* or Love); the role played in the city by theatre, especially comedy, thus mimetic art in general; and the figure of Socrates – in particular the distance Plato starts to perceive between his own position and that of his much revered master. A reference back to the *Republic* again helps to clarify the point. There one of the central messages concerns a certain kind of 'love' as the foundation of a well-ordered city: *philia* (see von Heyking, in this issue).[9] Here at stake is another Greek term about love, *eros*.[10]

That the link between the two is intended is also rendered evident by the fact that the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue broadly contemporaneous with the *Republic* and the *Symposium* explicitly discusses both types of love, and even contains the famous definition of philosophy as the love of wisdom (*Phaedrus* 78D).[11] The purpose is to sensitise the reader for the manner in which Plato's overcoming of Socrates would be related, in manifold ways, to matters of 'love'.

Such references to theatricality and the 'identity' of Socrates, beyond the picture presented in the *Apology*, also evoke the *Clouds* of Aristophanes. This is one of the most famous comedies by Aristophanes; it ridicules the Sophists, but also presents Socrates as a kind of arch-Sophist. In the *Apology* Plato argued that this comedy played a part in the condemnation of Socrates. Aristophanes, in fact, will be one of the banqueters in the *Symposium* – so special attention will have to be devoted to his eventual contributions if we are to understand Plato's characterization of Socrates.

From this perspective a central aspect of these introductory skirmishes, a whole series of elaborate points about being or not being invited, starts to gain significance. In order to participate in a banquet one first of all must be invited. Socrates has been invited to Agathon's banquet, but Aristodemos wasn't; so Socrates asks him whether he would like to join the banquet uninvited (174B). After a series of cracks about the problem of being uninvited, Aristodemos defends himself by saying 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,[12] thus imposing on Aristodemos the ridiculous experience (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 that Agathon as host had wanted to invite him but just could not find him. They try to drag Socrates inside, though he would only enter much later, in the midst of the banquet – practically another intrusion and a serious sign of asociality, used as everyone may have been to that kind of behaviour on Socrates's part.

In light of the short sketch given previously about the origins of comedy and the role played by the *alazon* one can also add the conjecture that this complex play about being 'uninvited' was part of the 'mysterious' connection mentioned by Hadot between the dialogue and comedies. Plato's elaborate referencing also signals the possibility of another, real intruder in the dialogue – and we must try to understand the exact meaning of that intrusion *as an intrusion* once it would happen.

The speeches

The knots between Socrates, *eros* and theatre are tied even tighter when it is agreed that the theme of the speeches at the celebratory banquet will be love (*eros*); with Socrates adding (after making an unusual claim about being expert in matters of love) that this would please in particular Aristophanes, who 'divides his time between Dionysos and Aphrodite' (177E). Thus, through their common interest in matters of love, Socrates and Aristophanes, otherwise sworn enemies, come to share a common platform.

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 in the dialogue, and so if we take them altogether as one, then his actually would be the seventh; a recurrent 'magic' number for Plato.[13]

Plato have already put us on guard concerning the nature and modalities of the intervention by Aristophanes. It indeed shows a few crucial features, justifying that this paper passes over the others speaking before him, especially as they, though it is sometimes argued that they are typical Greek thinking on *Eros* (Levy, 1979: 285), only contain Sophist-inspired commonplaces (Fasce, 1977: 189). Aristophanes was supposed to be the third – or 'fourth' – speaker, but at the moment he was about to speak he started to hiccup, which prevented him talking (185D); something that would be repeated twice in the dialogue. In their speeches, both Aristophanes and then Agathon launch a eulogy in praise of Love; so when his turn finally comes, Socrates starts by revealing his state of helplessness (*aporein*), caused by the fact that he is not interested in praising *Eros*, only in the *truth* about Love. His contribution consists of two parts, both frustrating the expectation of giving a speech: a first, very short, following his usual method of asking questions; and a second recounting the teaching of Diotima, a woman from Mantinea, a place in Arcadia bearing a name recalling the word prophet (*manteia*), and identifying her as a prophetess whose name means 'honouring the divine'.[14]

The short question and answer session serves to set the tone for Socrates's whole contribution, 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.

This point leads into Diotima's speech, which starts by presenting Eros as being situated in the in-between, or *metaxy*,[15] thus in a state of tension.

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* (resource, passage) and *Penia* (lack, poverty).[16] This helps her to qualify the meaning of the love of beauty: it is a desire to possess what is good – and forever. Yet, beauty will not be displaced by the search for the good, rather only change its location from being reduced to an object of desire to matters of more basic significance. Diotima also introduces a new idea about the 'method' to pursue this aim, or the nature of the effort that is love: it is the giving birth or begetting [*tokos*] 'in the beautiful, in relation both to body and to soul' (206b9-10). Now, the term for giving birth or begetting is actually the word which also connotes a woman's delivery of 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 to Diotima herself, as he states that its understanding requires prophetic gifts (*manteias*) (206b11). It is well known that Socrates, especially in the *Theaetetus*, is presented as a midwife. Here, however, it is beauty itself that plays the role of midwife (Nichols, 2004: 198); perhaps clarifying while Socrates is presented here as trying to look beautiful.

The ensuing lack of understanding on the part of Socrates, which here might be genuine and not just a usual dialectical technique, allows Diotima to add a number of crucial clarifications. First, all human beings are pregnant, meaning that they want to give birth to, or bring to light, things that are beautiful. Through Diotima, Plato emphasises the similarity and not difference between body and soul, the word

'delivery' evoking the joint need for men and women. Such begetting and delivery, however, can only happen *in* beauty, and not in ugliness: '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 [rather it is] of engendering and begetting upon the beautiful' (206E).[17] 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 he received this instruction from Diotima in a number of different discussions; but once she went further. On this occasion, Diotima started by referring to the behaviour of animals when they desire to beget.[18] The desire for procreation, and the longing for newborn is again connected to the wish for immortality; the overcoming of oblivion (207D-8A). Such feelings are characteristic as much of the body as of the soul; and in some men, this is expressed by love for women, while in others it is through a desire to guide the state. So after a time, by continuously elevating oneself, one may arrive at beholding an 'ocean [*pelagos*] of the beautiful' (210d3-4), contemplating it in its full splendour.

This is an extremely captivating image; 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 is upon us.[19] Once reaching this 'ocean of beauty', in progression towards the ultimate aims of the 'science of love', one accedes to a 'wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature' (210e6), demonstrating 'the very essence of beauty' (211d1). This vision can only be accessed by taking the right steps, as if on a ladder, following a single road – which is 'the right method of *paiderasthein*' (211b7).

The risky business of altering the meaning of words

It is on purpose that I did not translate the last word, as understanding the reasons why Plato chose to use it presents no small difficulty. The term existed at that time, in a somewhat similar sense as in current English, being part of the vocabulary of Sophist education, often derided by the comedy-writers. This, however, could not have been the meaning intended by Plato, as he was rather interested in the *right* method of *paiderasthein*. Thus, we need to consider the semantic complexity evoked by the Greek words *pais* and *paidiou*. The former means a child, whether male or female, about 7-14 years old; while the latter implies one younger than seven. *Paideia* as a noun means childhood or youth, and by implication education as well, but it also means culture, while the closely related word *paidia* means play or game, but also entertainment and joking. *Paiderasthein* therefore literally means a love of young children, but also a love of playfulness and of culture. This is the type of education to which, through Diotima, Plato wanted to return, taking the risk of altering the meaning of a word that has gained a connotation that Plato found particularly problematic.[20] But why take this risk?

Here we need to recall that the point regarding *paiderasthein* was made in the most emphatic manner possible, as Diotima asked 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 *Eros*, and central to the distance he started to perceive between the position of Socrates in this respect and his own.

The answer must lie in the fact that the tight etymological connections between the Greek words for child, playing, education and culture go at the heart of Greek culture (Jaeger, 1945) 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 them; the history of science, culture, politics, society and art is inconceivable without the contribution of the Greeks. 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 civilization – confirmed by the fact that the Greeks used this term to capture culture. Furthermore, the problem that Plato perceived around the corrosive influence of *Eros* on the polity, through comedy and the philosophical 'education' provided by 'pederasty', involved the joint corrosion of the three aspects of Athenian culture for which it is most renowned up to our days: political democracy, philosophy, and tragic theatre. In order to restore the integrity of Athens, Plato could not shy away from the heart of the problem where Socrates failed to make a difference: pederastic education.

Plato tried to re-capture the original Greek concern with education, by restoring the meaning of the word *paiderasthein*.[21] Diotima emphasized the metaphor of conception, pregnancy and giving birth, and such metaphors – which emphatically were about the joint contribution of male and female parts – could easily be continued by the metaphor of playful and loving 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 Ficino's *De Amore*, written under the shadow cast by Chrysoloras, the idea of 'watching and loving beautiful boys', thanks especially to Michelangelo, again became understood as the method of acceding to beauty (see Szakolczai, 2007, 2013). Thus, Plato's attempt to transcend the Sophist-justified pederasty backfired, leading to the interpretation of Plato's philosophy as supporting a kind of pederasty – a misreading that proved to be impossible to eradicate, up to our very days.

The essence of beauty

Returning 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 (211D). And if one contemplates all this beauty in the right kind of manner, one will 'breed not illusions but true examples of virtue' (212A), and thus will reach – through offspring, both physical and spiritual – immortality. In this famous passage Plato shifts the centre of beauty from a characteristic of objects to be possessed to an overarching quality of the surrounding world, in the original sense of *cosmos*, which becomes conducive to the generation and thus furthering of beauty, in both spiritual and material sense, not being reduced to the creation of works of art, but including all the objects in the world around us,

focusing in particular on the engendering and education of children. This is indeed the central core of Plato's new philosophy, which recognises the transformative power of love, moving beyond the forcing of a conversion to the good, characteristic of the *Republic* (Barney, 2008; Fasce, 1977: 184-9). A proper turning around must be produced by the combination of *Eros* as a moving force and a search for beauty as central aspect of the entire environment that surrounds one's life.

The intruder arrives

The moment Socrates concluded his account of Diotima's talk two things happened. First Aristophanes wanted to say something, no doubt given that he understood himself directly targeted; 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 from talking. 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 happens to be the one who is interrupted.

Before going into the content of the speech by Alcibiades, we must interpret at this crucial point the two most peculiar stylistic devices deployed by Plato: the sensitisation to the problem of turning up uninvited at a feast, or the figure of the Alazon; and the reason why Aristophanes is repeatedly deprived of the possibility of speech. In the *Clouds* Socrates as a Sophist is the *alazon*, who intrudes everywhere and bothers everybody. Alcibiades describes Socrates as *Eros*, but this demon-deity, just as the Hermes of *Lysis*, according to von Heyking (in this issue), is itself an

intruding force, a windfall who pounces on humans; and, even further, Alcibiades is giving an image of Socrates as *Eros* while being an intruder. All this seems to suggest that Plato now sides with Aristophanes. This, however, is clearly denied by the other main device, Aristophanes being repeatedly prevented from speaking. Furthermore, when he eventually talks, he delivers an eulogy of *Eros* as the greatest benefactor of mankind (189C), who should be the guide of humans towards happiness, thus talking as a genuine Sophist, underlined by his profession as a comedy writer, whom Plato in his last period considered as particularly responsible for the collapse of Athens, due to its irresponsible inciting of *Eros*. The real corrupters of Athens are the Sophists and the comedy-writers; however, signals Plato, Socrates cannot be considered as immune to this process; he failed to find the right way of combining *Eros* and education, offered here by Diotima.

Alcibiades offers two series of remarks. Both are of exceptional interest; and of surprising, even striking quality, especially through the parallel with Diotima's characterisation of *Eros*. The first one is offered half-jokingly, right after his drunken entry, during which he failed to notice that Socrates was also present. Alcibiades begins by describing Socrates 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 (*diemékhanésó*, 213c5, evoking the word *mechaniota*, a term indicating the Trickster) in order to get a seat near the most handsome person. According to Osborne (1994: 93-101), these recall the features of *Eros* that he obtained from his father, *Poros* (resource), while the second characterisation evokes the traits that *Eros* inherited from his mother, *Penia*

(need). Before these second, equally shocking series of remarks, however, he states that he won't simply 'praise' Socrates, but will tell the truth (214E).

Alcibiades starts the second part of 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 praise, as both are considered wild and incontinent.[22] They are also closely associated with the birth of theatre, especially comedy, as comedy is considered to have grown out of the satyr play, which was performed in classical times as the fourth part of the 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. He suggests that the effect mechanism of Socrates' speeches 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-E). This effective power, however, is exerted for a good reason: Socrates manages to generate a sense of shame. This worked even on Alcibiades (216B), though the effect was not lasting, as the moment Socrates left the scene, the allure and power of pleasing the crowd again took 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 this, Alcibiades proceeds to tell a true story – and asks all those not initiated to close their ears (218B). This is about the way he tried but failed to seduce Socrates, even though the latter was attracted by him.

Alcibiades declared that he wanted to tell the truth about Socrates, and implied these words of truth as a praise. However, by now we have learned not to take anything at face value in this dialogue. *Eros* was also praised by all speakers until Socrates, through Diotima, revealed the real truth. The praises offered about Socrates by Alcibiades are just as problematic, though there is nobody there who could draw such conclusion, as such an explicit point cannot be offered by Plato. He makes it evident by making another use of his favourite device: Alcibiades is also interrupted, this time by a group of drunkards (223B). Thus we are left on our own to make up our mind about the true valour of Socrates's attitude as exposed – and the history of philosophy does not offer us an encouraging view concerning success.

Conclusion: The limits of the Socratic 'method'

The limits of the Socratic method cannot be reduced to the well-known fact that Plato failed to make use the method of elenchus in the late dialogues, but extend to the more fundamental question of Socrates as exemplary teacher. For us today the question is both extremely simple and impossibly difficult, almost untouchable. It is simple, as nobody in his right mind suggests that male teachers should seduce their young male students – quite on the contrary, even the idea is prohibited by law. But it is also impossibly difficult, as – in so far as Socrates and his example is concerned –

by raising questions one has to confront an entire tradition, just as the ruling opinion of our days.

Socrates realised, like nobody else, that his much-beloved Athens, at the height of its glory, somehow lost its ways and spirit, took the wrong turn, and was precipitating into an abyss. He went around the city, talking to all kind of people, trying to force them to confront their own situation, face the moral corruptness of their ways of doing, and in particular went to the agora to confront the Sophists, whom he considered as the main source of these ills. At the end, he was put to death, paradoxically as a Sophist, as he was regularly in their company, and created more trouble than the smooth-talking Sophists who could not care less than the right ways of the city. It is this Socratic project of the social critic trying to force a turnaround in the behaviour of the citizens that reached its apotheosis in the *Republic*.

However, over time Plato gained a different, deeper understanding about the crisis of his city. The really dangerous 'Sophists' were not those who argued in the marketplace, but those who captured a much wider audience, and thus inflicted much more damage, through the power of images, or image-magic (itself the central effect mechanism of Sophist speeches), and the performances of enchanting songs and plays. Central to this was the evocation of *Eros*, the luring of audiences, thus the entire citizenry, into the pursuit of pleasures, especially erotic gratification. Here the problem with Socrates was not simply that his diagnosis was insufficient, but that he failed to problematise the erotic practices of his city, and – even worse – accepted the widespread mixing of education with the seduction of the students.

The true greatness of Plato, however, was not simply to move beyond his master, without feeling the need to voice an explicit critique, but that he managed to envelop this overcoming into the dialogue that at the same time presented his new philosophy, focusing on the converting power of a special combination of beauty and love.

Plato is our contemporary, arguably *the* most relevant philosopher for our problems, comparable only to Nietzsche, given that we today face the same kind of situation, with various forms of Sophistic dominating public and intellectual life, where the combination of politics, power and sex, so well perceived by Foucault, plays a particularly strong role in contemporary moral corruptness and voluntary slavery (Chaignot, 2010). The *Symposium*, a kind of prelude to the height of his thinking, offers us two vital insights: first, a critical forcing of changing ways is not only insufficient, but counterproductive; and second, the force of love and beauty can indeed be incorporated into the production of such a turnaround, but only if this is oriented not towards gratification and possession, but the engendering and education of children under conditions that are dominated by a care for overall beauty.

Notes

1. Given the wide difference in meaning between Greek *eros* and English ‘love’, I’ll use the Greek word throughout the paper. Capitalised *Eros* will denote the deity, in contrast to *eros* as a concept for sexual desire – though such a distinction arguably was by no means that clear for the Greeks.

2. Recently the portrait of Socrates in the *Symposium* was indeed paralleled to Pandora; see Kenaan (2009).

3. See the conclusions to the otherwise excellent papers by Emlyn-Jones (2004: 404-5), Gagarin (1977: 36-7), or Usher (who outright considers the dialogue as after all apologetic; see 2002: 225-6). Cornford, however, takes up a similar position: 'I adopted the view that Diotima's words to Socrates […] indicate that Plato is going behind the historical Socrates' (Cornford, 1950: 79). For a similar argument concerning Plato's problematisation of Socrates, see Bonner (in this issue).

4. According to Gagarin (1977: 25), the significance of this point is underlined by the fact that in the dialogue the term hubris and its derivatives appear no less than eight times.

5. About Plato's use of theatrical language and terminology in general, see Charalabopoulos (2000).

6. Francis Cornford was a major Plato scholar and also a 'Cambridge ritualist' (Calder, 1991). In contrast to Fritz Graf's rather summary dismissal of his work (Graf, 2006), and in line with a growing reappraisal of the 'Cambridge ritualists', I would argue that his work is rather strikingly fresh and relevant.

7. This points towards the role to be played by the Stranger, replacing Socrates, in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, two crucial late dialogues.

8. For further details, see Szakolczai (2007).

9. Incidentally, the term 'friend', just as the etymologically related 'free', etymologically also meant love, but in the contemporary language this connection is no longer visible.

10. 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.
11. See Seung (1995).
12. See also 220D here; for more details, Hadot (1993: 114).
13. Another way to count the speeches is to stay with six speakers, but with Socrates delivering two, thus Diotima's being the seventh.
14. Note that this repeats the mediatedness that already characterised the start of the dialogue.
15. This term would become central for Eric Voegelin (1978).
16. In his book on Giambattista Tiepolo, together with Raphael the greatest Platonic painter, 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 being particularly problematic – the mother usually being identified with Aphrodite – leading to the idea that he was 'nobody, son of nobody' (Calasso, 2006: 266).
17. This statement should not be considered as mere rhetoric, but as an implicit critique of the *Republic*, where Plato/Socrates still adhered to such a position, having a dualistic vision of *Eros* (see 458C-D; for details, see Barney, 2008: 12-3).
18. 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.

19. 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.

20. For a similar argument that Plato wanted to challenge here the accepted perspectives, see Brisson (2006).

21. This might arguably explain Plato's sudden rise of interest in the true meaning of words, a central theme of *Cratylus*, a dialogue written around the time of the *Symposium*, and also associated with *Ion*.

22. On Silenus, see in particular Kerenyi (1986). In the *Statesman* satyrs would be assigned a unequivocally negative value, and used as a central metaphor for the ills of Athenian political life.

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