

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1990-91

Volume 18 Number 2

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individuals \$21
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Single copies available.

Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$3.50 extra;
elsewhere \$4 extra by surface mail (8 weeks or longer) or \$7.50 by air.

Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by
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Composition by Eastern Graphics, Binghamton, N.Y. 13901
Printed and bound by Wickersham Printing Co., Lancaster, PA 17603

Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

The Wisdom of Plato's Aristophanes

CHARLES SALMAN

Trinity University

Even if, like so much ancient biography, the story is not factually reliable, something truthful is nonetheless captured in the tale that Olympiodorus tells, that Aristophanes' comedies were found tucked away under the pillow of Plato's deathbed (2.66–72). To Nietzsche the ancients conveyed in this story something of Plato's secret nature (*Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 28), although in the *Symposium* Plato's fondness for Aristophanes appears rather more openly, in the almost triumphant power that he grants to Aristophanes' speech. It is an age-old sentiment that "Aristophanes . . . is second only to Socrates in his grasp of the mysteries of love" (Brentlinger, p. 12), and Freud himself willingly saw his own erotic theory prefigured in Aristophanes' mythical speech (esp. pp. 51–52; cf. below and Santas, pp. 155, 157, 160–62). Indeed one frequently finds Aristophanes' myth to be the best-remembered of all the speeches in the *Symposium*, and even those who see it transcended by a Platonic account often assign it a key propaedeutic place.¹

How are we to understand this Platonic admiration for Aristophanes? As a preparatory step we might point to the sense in which the poet and the philosopher shared a picture of their world, a world evoked for us, at least in a synoptic way, as we recall the "political" concerns that Plato has written into the background of the *Symposium*.

The significance for philosophy of the moment in time depicted by the dialogue could be said to be broadly circumscribed by two historical events. Indeed in the dramatic imagery of the dialogue, the philosopher is surrounded by them: on the one side, the recent crowning of Agathon as poet laureate of the day and on the other, the imminent expedition to Sicily under Alcibiades, the turning point in Athens' precipitous fall in the Peloponnesian War. If the dialogue even intimates a kind of genetic connection between the two—as if the advent of sophistry were the prelude to complete and utter ruin—it would seem more systematically still to recreate the stages leading up to that final fall. As we move from the heroic life of the Phaedrean battlefield, to the more "complex" (*poikilos*) legal codifications of Pausanias' cities, to Eryximachus' introduction of all of the technai that proliferate within them—and as we finally move on to the creative arts and the exquisite civilities of Agathonian poesis—we bear witness to a kind of symbolic structural analysis of the rise or "ascent" of Athenian culture. But Plato at the same time casts aspersions on the internal dynamic of this ascent: If only most explicitly by the character of this culture's

reigning “wise man” and by the portentous acclaim (213a) for the archon of its disastrous end (Alcibiades), Plato evokes our recognition that this ascent has been ambiguous at best, that this increasing “sophistication” on the part of culture is at the same time a kind of degenerate “softening” en route to complete decline. It is thus no accident that *apalos* and its cognates cross Agathon’s lips some fourteen times in his speech. The victory of Agathon stands at that imaginary moment when Athens finally identifies wisdom with the offspring of Gorgias, or (taking our cue from the meaning of Agathon’s name) openly celebrates a sophistical “good.”²

At least in certain of its broadest features, the cultural assessment in the background of the *Symposium* was shared by the historical Aristophanes. The focusing of our attention on the dim-sightedness of the war we find above all in the *Lysistrata*. The dubious character of the new learning (and in particular of the new scientific technai and the crowning product of their ethos, sophistry) are the central concerns of the paradoxically Platonic though anti-Socratic *Clouds*. Eryximachus, of course, is one locus of this shared reflection in the *Symposium*, and Aristophanes’ facetious derision of his reductive physicalism (on behalf of the old “gods”) has been frequently pointed out. If the attack in the *Clouds* on Athenian legalism is to be located in the *Symposium*, we must surely think first of all of the discourse of Pausanias, the other symposiast, in addition to Eryximachus, to whom Aristophanes specifically addresses himself (189c). Even the symbolic centrality of Agathon in the *Symposium* has its analogue in Aristophanes, in the comic motif of the “softness” the young tragedian represents in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (cf. esp. 140ff., 191–92, 200, 206, and n. 4 below).

The basic kinship between the comic and the philosopher that is grounded in these shared concerns seems reflected in the role Plato gives to Aristophanes in the workings of the *Symposium*. From the ambiguous unfolding of Athenian culture subtextually chronicled in the symposiasts’ collective logos about human striving, Aristophanes’ speech is thus made to stand apart. On the most concrete level he stands apart in the way that the comedian stands apart from or outside of his culture, as one who reflects back and ridicules, rather than unconsciously adopts, the prevailing conventions of the times. So it is that right away we perceive in Aristophanes something of the “wisened cynic,” standing ironically aloof from the others while mocking, and in that sense critiquing them. As Aristophanes played the critic in historical Athens so Plato seems to grant him a similar honor here, allowing Aristophanes to claim for himself, in the dialectic of the *Symposium*, something of a special role.³

But what more precisely is the nature of the special role to which Aristophanes here lays claim? Curiously enough, we can bring it to light by attending to something he has *in common* with the other speakers, to the sense in which Aristophanes’ encomium, like those of the others, is covertly a praise of the speaker himself. In a still intriguing paper on the *Symposium*, Helen Bacon identified this basic “principle” that governs the various speeches on eros:

There is, however, a kind of principle behind the manner of their praising, and that is that each man sees love in terms of his own profession. Phaedrus and Pausanias, the rhetorician and the sociologist, see Eros as a kind of supersophist, engaged in what the sophists considered one of their main occupations, the teaching of virtue. Characteristically, Phaedrus bases his speech on Homer and Hesiod and the tragic poets, Pausanias on the evidence of actual practice in religious cult and social institutions; to Eryximachus Eros is the universal doctor; to Aristophanes he presents himself as the explanation of man's comic predicament; to Agathon he is the greatest of poets. And all of them are happily unconscious of the fact that it is not love that they are praising but themselves (p. 429).

From this point of view at least one major feature of the encomia is what we might call their self-referential and self-gratifying character, and one clue to their interpretation comes from attending to the lives of the individuals who are their veiled, though perhaps all the more immediate and determining, referents. To Professor Bacon's sketch we might thus briefly add the following particulars: To young Phaedrus, the beloved of Eryximachus, Eros is a "great god," the source of virtue and "anything great and noble," and its elevating power really resides in the beloved youth or *eromenos* who inspires all manner of courageousness and valor in his lover. In battle even a "low man" can be moved by the power of love to be "like those who are best by nature," and so great is the inspirational power of the beloved that lovers are "willing to die for their beloveds." Phaedrus' narcissistic phantasy about the power of the beloved reaches a kind of peroration in his celebration of Achilles (with whom we can by now imagine that Phaedrus identifies himself), who young and beardless (180a) was "more glorious . . . than all the heroes put together."

As an older *erastes* Pausanias takes exception to this simplistic (cf. 180c4: *haplōs*) view. Though Eros is indeed what "urges us toward noble action," compelling us to "show great concern for our virtue," it shows itself properly not in the "pandemic" young boy but in the noble pedagogy of the more intelligent older lover. Indeed, simply left to its natural devices eros is an ambiguous and potentially errant phenomenon, and it is only turned to the good by virtue of sophisticated institutions and the "complex" (*poikilos*) *nomoi* of the Athenian elders.

While preserving Pausanias' sense of the duplicity of eros (186a), Eryximachus, the doctor, ascends to a rather more "universal" and indeed scientific approach. Beginning "from the medical point of view" (186b) he sees eros as a principle operating in all of nature, and so at work in the spheres of all the various arts and sciences: medicine, gymnastic, agriculture, music, physics, astronomy, and divination. In all these domains accomplishing good is a matter of reconciling or balancing opposites, of making "the most antagonistic elements . . . friendly and loving" (186d). The one who has knowledge (*epistēmē*) of these love forces is able to impose "harmony and order" upon a polymorphously baneful physis (cf. 188a6 ff.), so that through the contrivances of

mortal techne the man of science becomes likened to a veritable cosmic “demi-urge” (cf. 186d4, 187d4).

This metaphysical conceit and autoeroticism finally reaches a sort of culmination in the speech of Agathon, the beloved of “thirty thousand” (175e) at the festival of Dionysus and poet laureate of Athens. Thus not only is Eros the most “gifted of poets” (196e) and so the creator by virtue of which “all living things come into being and develop” (197a2–3), but his various other attributes are all conspicuously recognizable as those of Agathon himself: He is the “most beautiful” (195a6), the “youngest” (195b1), “soft” (195d1: *hapalos*), and “supple” (196a2: *hugros*).⁴ Indeed the beautiful poiesis that issues from Eros has “brought forth all good things that exist for gods and men” (197b8) and in engendering a time of “affection and peace” (195c5) has put an end to the harsh rule of Necessity (195c, 197b). The self-referential principle that has been at work throughout thus becomes virtually explicit in Agathon’s speech, and Plato seems to underscore the importance of this feature of the encomium by having Apollodorus break into the narrative at its end: “When Agathon had finished, Aristodemus said, the people who were present applauded the speech which was so becoming to the young man who had given it, as well as the god” (198a).

But what are we to say here about self-praise in Aristophanes’ mythical speech? Is there likewise a principle of self-reference at work in the comedian’s account of eros? Professor Bacon surely captures something promising here in saying that Aristophanic eros serves as “the explanation of man’s comic predicament,” since it explains why we are so hopelessly and obsessively preoccupied with joining and “melding” our bodies with that of another. So archaic and almighty is this erotic pathos (cf. 189d5) that all other aspects of life are finally subordinated to its end (191b), and indeed are possible only by virtue of its prior satisfaction, in periods of satiation and respite. As one only really appreciates the “power” of eros when one sees this comical human situation, so this logos on eros makes a claim for the “power” of the wisdom finally inherent in the comical perspective.⁵ In this sense Aristophanes’ exposition doubtless does aim at a praise of “his own profession.”

But this is indeed only the surface of the speech’s self-referential dimension. As we now reflect more closely on the particulars of Aristophanes’ comical speech, we will begin to see just how much he would claim for himself in giving us this exposition and the internal specificity with which his praise of eros turns out to be implicitly self-referential. According to Aristophanes’ recollective myth, the original circle-people mounted an assault against Olympus. In order to “stop their licentiousness” (190d1: *akolasias*). Zeus contrived (cf. 190c7: *mēkhanēn*) the plan of cutting them in two, and after he split them he sent in Apollo and “he told him to heal (190e4: *iasthai*) them up.” So Apollo sewed up their bodies, leaving the navel at the middle of the stomach and smoothing out the wrinkles the way shoemakers do on lasts. The operation

would make them “more orderly” (190e4: *kosmiōteros*). All the same, men began dying off in this condition (since each longed only to reunite with its other half), so Zeus himself performed a kind of second operation, “setting their genitals around in front of them” (191b5: *metatithēsīn autōn ta aidōia eis to prosthen*) that they might propagate with one another.

These events bear a striking similarity to the events of the *Symposium* itself. Like the very contrivance of Zeus himself, Aristophanes' hiccups halve the progressing circle. This splitting, in effect, causes him to send in the doctor Eryximachus, technician and “demiurge” of the body, whose speech about the harmonization of physis indeed tries to “heal” things up. That the surgery is intended to make men “more orderly” only underscores the reference to Eryximachus whom Aristophanes has recently detected in his predilection for “the orderly” (cf. 189a: *to kosmion*) and the language of whose speech clearly makes him its particular partisan. Then comes the discourse of Aristophanes. On its deepest level it tries to recall the symposiasts to the “power” that is implicit in the yearning of their sexuality. Like Zeus in the myth Aristophanes himself now tries to “set their genitals around in front of them.” With the discovery of this level of self-reference in his speech we begin to see the true grandeur of Aristophanes' self-image—and indeed just how far-reaching is his praise of “his own profession”—since with his comic exposition Aristophanes claims to be bringing to bear the very wisdom and justice of Zeus.⁶

That Zeus should serve as symbol for the object of wisdom should greet us with no overwhelming surprise. At the beginning of his description of the celestial procession which leads to the “hyperouranian region,” the place where that “true being” dwells in terms of which the realm of genesis is to be understood, Socrates announces: “And behold, there in the heaven Zeus, mighty leader, drives his winged team, first of the host to proceed, ordering all things and caring therefore . . .” (*Phaedrus* 246e: *ho men dē megas hēgemōn en ouranōi Zeus, elaynōn ptēnon harma, prōtos poreuetai, diakosmōn panta kai epimeloumenos . . .*). To Hackforth this passage is “noteworthy as being the earliest intimation of the central doctrine of Plato's theology . . .” (p. 71). Whether the presence of Zeus in the *Symposium* leads us to see this central doctrine intimated still earlier or whether we follow those who would argue that the *Phaedrus* is earlier than the *Symposium* need not concern us here (see Moore). What we need is to understand something of the substance of that “central doctrine.”

Hackforth is surely right in connecting the present passage to Socrates' talk in the *Philebus* about the *nous* that is *basileus hēmin ouranou te kai gēs* (28c). This “intelligence” that is “king of heaven and earth,” this “presiding cause (*aitia*) . . . that orders and arranges (*kosmousa te kai suntattousa*) the years, the seasons, and the months, and is justly called *sophia kai nous*” (30c) Socrates clearly connects with the figure of Zeus at 30d. In making a fuller investigation of what “sort” this *nous* is, Socrates asks Protarchus:

“Are we to say, Protarchus, that the sum of things (*sumpanta*) or what we call the whole (*holon*) is governed by a power that is senseless and without purpose (*alogou kai eikēi dunamin*), and so by mere chance (*etukhen*), or on the contrary to follow our predecessors in saying that it is steered through by intelligence and a wondrous governing wisdom (*noun kai phronēsin tina thaumastēn suntattousan diakubernan*)?” (28d)

As the “nous” which “orders all things and cares therefore” (*diakosmōn panta kai epimeloumenos*), Zeus is the personification of that law which governs over “heaven and earth”—the necessity which regulates the movements of “the years, the seasons and the months”—or finally, the mindful “power” which arranges measures and order for life, growth, and healing (cf. *Phil.* 30a9–b8) in the cosmos. Zeus is thus the overseeing principle which animates the realm of genesis, or in language perhaps more appropriate to the mythical image, the Will behind all of physis. Aristophanes’ claim to introducing the wisdom of Zeus is thus tantamount to the claim to seeing beyond opinion or the strictures of human *nomos* to the divine law or truth which resides in and animates nature itself.⁷

How are we now to evaluate Aristophanes’ implicit self-praise, his sublime claim, in the dramatic metaphor of the dialogue, to bringing to bear the wisdom of Zeus? The answer, I think, is not to be sought in a simple condemnation and dismissal. When we reflect on the critical role Plato has assigned Aristophanes in the context of the speeches of his fellow symposiasts, we are moved, rather, to adopt an attitude considerably more ambivalent, and to appreciate the sense in which Aristophanes’ Olympian self-image does have a kind of legitimacy—even if, in Plato’s last analysis, Aristophanes fails to make good on his claim.

What then is the substance of Aristophanes’ comical critique? Aristophanes sees how Pausanias and Eryximachus, while appearing to praise Eros, really praise the controls that the human artifices of *nomos* and *techne* can have over it, and so honor not so much the divine power of Eros as the all-too-human powers of reason and *logos*. In this sense he recognizes precisely their claim to having transcended the power of physis: the self-praise of the symposiasts is thus mirrored in the self-praise of the culture of which they are the Platonic icons. Aristophanes “contrives,” as it were, to “stop their licentiousness.” With his recollective tale of the power by which eros moves us to “joining” and “melding” with one another, he decisively recalls us to the “power” of sexual desire, and in this sense *compels our recognition of that erotic Necessity which transcends mortal dominion*.

Indeed Aristophanes’ hiccups had already anticipated the substance of his attack. The symposiasts’ project begins with a proposal by Eryximachus, that rather than drinking the party be devoted to the giving of speeches about eros. Moving next that they dismiss the flute girl (who might ordinarily have been pressed into sexual service at the drunken conclusion of the party), he suggests

that on this occasion they “consort with one another through speeches” instead (cf. 176e7: *dia logōn allēlois suneinai*). In view of the circumspect sexual sense of *sunousia* the meaning of the scene is clear : In the project thus being symbolically inaugurated by the symposiasts, the sobriety of logos is to take the place of or supersede the errancy of eros. Just as the orderly procession of logoi at the party caricature the claims of culture to have imposed order on unruly nature, so Aristophanes’ disruptive hiccups anticipate what he will attempt to show by his critique : that for all its apparent establishment of dominion, human “order” is still subordinate to a yet stronger “power,” the potentially subversive and intractable will of natural necessity.

Both in *ergōi* and in *logōi* Aristophanes thus incarnates his satiric wisdom in the *Symposium*, opposing a kind of hybris on the part of culture with a recollection of the rule of Necessity. Recalling us to the “power” by which we are inextricably tethered to our mortal nature, he would reorient our thinking toward a remembrance of “the gods” or the transcendence within physis. In thus recalling the rule of Necessity and undoing the injustice of the mortal rebellion against it, Aristophanes indeed acts to forestall an “assault against Olympus,” and his comedy becomes likened to a contrivance for the preservation of the rule of Zeus. In this sense Aristophanes’ comical wisdom seems to make good on its Olympian claim.

But the drama of the *Symposium* alone is enough to cast doubt on the ultimate legitimacy of Aristophanes’ claim : Despite the pronounced antisophistry of the comic Aristophanes, the reigning poet is the Gorgian Agathon. With the ascension of Agathon comes the final phase of the assault by mortal hybris, and the rebellion against Necessity here becomes most explicit and complete : Agathon finally openly declares that the ancient reign of Ananke is over—if indeed those earlier writers who once told of its dominion were even telling the truth (cf. 195c, 197b). Justice is now to be located in agreement among men since “what one person willingly agrees on with another is just and the saying ‘the nomoi are king of the city’ is right.” (Agathon quotes Alcidas, a rhetor of Gorgias’ school. Cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1406a 17–23.) As such “agreement” can seemingly be secured through the persuasive techniques of mortal speech, the students of Gorgias thus lay claim to having discovered the hegemony of mortal will and to having supplanted the archaic rule of physis by the kingship of conventional consensus. The nomoi of Pausanias and the technai of Eryximachus are in this sense wedded and raised to their highest potential. At the culmination of the speech the powers of the gods are subordinated to the creative power of this “young” new Eros, including, at the last, even “Zeus’ governance of gods and men” (197b3). The victory of Agathon’s sophistical poiesis thus points back to something lacking in the Aristophanic contrivance, to his ultimate failure to bring to bear the “will of Zeus” or the “power” inherent in physis.

Does Plato perhaps even intimate dramatically something of the ground of

Aristophanes' failure ? Though Aristophanes contrives to gain a higher position in the order of speakers than Eryximachus (and in that sense appears at first to subordinate the technician), he is himself only able to speak by virtue of Eryximachus' cure (cf. 185c, 189a). Does Plato here suggest that Aristophanes' logos is ultimately dependent on that of Eryximachus ? Does the wise Aristophanes, in giving us his allegedly "different" (18c2–3) logos on eros, perhaps finally *fail* to transcend the sense of physis at work in the logos of Eryximachus (cf. Rosen, pp. 120, 133)?

On Aristophanes' interpretation of eros, eros is our eternal search for our missing or "matching half" (*sumbolon*), a search he thus characterizes as being animated precisely by our "desire and pursuit of the whole" (193a1 : *tou holou oun tēi epithumiai kai diōxei*). Since the reason (192e9 : *aition*) for this is that is was in our original nature to be whole, eros can finally be understood still another way, as what would return us to or be "the restorer of our archaic or original nature" (191d1 : *tes arkhaias phuseōs sunagō geus*). As "everyone would openly acknowledge that this is the age old desire," the "joining and melding" (192e7 : *sunelthōn kai suntakeis*) into a whole with one they love, we must acknowledge that a logos on eros is first of all a logos about sexuality. Aristophanes' sexual frankness is thus present from the beginning of his speech : The archaic state to which eros would have us return is presented in the image of the rolling and tumbling circle-men, of whom Aristophanes names Ephialtes and Otus as if a representative couple (190b). The meanings of their names make for a wry Platonic touch : Since *ephialtēs* was "popularly connected with *ephallomai* (*LSJ*), and since "Otus" seems to derive from the verb *ōtheō*, they represent the coupling of none other than "he who leaps upon" and "he who pushes back."

But Aristophanes resists being characterized as a crudely reductive erotic theorist. If a logos on eros must first of all be a logos of sexual desire, it must at the same time be an interpretation of desire as a whole, an interpretation in which sexuality has, so to speak, its psychical analogue. Of this Aristophanes himself would seem to be well aware, since he claims his account of eros' archaic goal pertains to more than just the body's desire :

But no one would believe that purely sexual union (*aphrodisiōn sunousia*) is what is wanted, as if for the sake of this alone they enjoy coming together with such great zeal. But clearly there is something else that the psyche of each desires, which it is unable to articulate, but it does divine what it wants and hints in disguises (*alla manteuetai ho bouletai kai ainittetai*). (192d2)

The soul too thus shares in the longing to return to our archaic state and participates in the body's perpetual "desire and pursuit of the whole." Indeed the participation of the soul is such that it even seems to underlie the body's desire, so that sexual union *simpliciter* cannot be understood as the archaic "whole-

ness” that eros pursues. Beyond the aphrodisiōn sunousia itself there is “something else” that eros is after, an archaic wholeness of which sexual union is, as it were, only a token.⁸ But sexuality is indeed a bona fide token of the type—perhaps the most proximal of the phenomena in which desire as such appears—and so provides us a “hint” as to the broader sense of the “archaic wholeness” that eros as a whole pursues. Thus there is a sense in which Aristophanes can be said to have given an account of what it is that the psyche, too, desires: The blissful “merging and melding” of erotic union achieves a temporary release from sorrows, a forgetfulness of the strivings of mortal existence, and a kind of dissipation of ordinary consciousness. As one “loses oneself” in the enravishment of eros the world seems to disappear, and one escapes for a while in ecstatic freedom from the careworn labors of the creatures of genesis. In the blissfulness and eudaimonia of this moment mortal nature is given to feel fulfilled, and the vicissitudes of life give way to stillness, ease, and peace; for a time, the wheel of Ixion stands still. In this time of world-forgetfulness and strifeless existence the psyche indeed pursues a kind of return to its archaic situation, to the original nature it had “prior,” as it were, to the genesis of consciousness. The psyche too is thus marked by the “desire and pursuit” of wholeness, the blissful womb of unconsciousness, the “archaic state” from which it came. That he so envisages eros’ archaic goal Aristophanes now musefully reveals with his next words, where he finally does “divine” the nature of wholeness that eros as such is after:

Now Suppose Hephaestus were to stand over them as they were lying together this way, having his tools ready, and he said: “What is it you want, you human beings, to get from one another?” And if in their perplexity he asked them again: “Is this what you desire, to come together as much as possible, and not have to leave one another, night and day? If this is what you desire, I am willing to melt you and weld you (*suntēxai kai sumphusēsai*) into one being. You would be as two become one, and you can live as one, with the two of you sharing a life in common. And when you die, there in Hades, too, instead of two there will be one, sharing death. But see if this is what you want and if you would be satisfied if this should happen.” We know that not a single one of them, hearing this, would refuse such an offer. They would seem to desire nothing else. (192d2–e7)

What does Hephaestus offer which would seem the very satisfaction of our longing and the attainment of eros’ archaic goal? he proposes to make two into one, to create a state of wholeness or eternal union out of what had previously been held apart. Such wholeness or permanent union seems to be nothing less than a state of uninterrupted fulfillment, a state where, as Aristophanes’ image captures so unambiguously, there is no longer any separation between what desires and its object. Since it is just such a separation, as Socrates first of all shows (199c–201b), which is presupposed by the presence of eros, this state of erotic fulfillment would be a state characterized precisely by eros’ absence.

Plato deftly captures this character of eros' archaic goal in the particulars of Aristophanes' divination. The presence of Hephaestus' tools (*organa*) and his suggestion that we be "welded together" (*sumphusēsai*) evoke a sense of Aristophanic "wholeness" : Hephaestus' work appropriately transfigures us into something inanimate, like metal or stone, since his offer of wholeness is precisely to put an end to the yearning of eros. Aristophanes' claim that we would desire "nothing else" amounts to the suggestion that what eros desires is its own termination, an end to the striving of consciousness. This logos on eros thus properly has its mythical telos in "Hades." Freud has therefore divined something of the truth in seeking his own erotic theory prefigured in Aristophanes, as he too conceives the "ancient goal" to be "the inanimate state," and finally feels "compelled to say that *'the aim of all life is death'*"

Aristophanes' comical logos on eros thus harbors a profoundly plaintive and somber pathos. At the bottom of the human situation lies a contradiction in heart of life itself. The creatures of physis are animated by an erotic Necessity which puts them fundamentally at odds with themselves, since they are compelled to strive by what would find its fulfillment only in the release from striving. Since such release is only finally attainable by virtue of an end to erotic animation, there can be no genuine well-being or eudaimonia for animate creation. Life is animated by the ideal of death, the strivings of consciousness by the ideal of quiescence. Physis is fulfilled only by self-negation; in the meantime, the wheel of Ixion rolls on. The eros which moves mortal creation is the affect of a futile striving.

The Aristophanic cosmos is in this sense fundamentally *anous* or "mindless", and the whole of nature governed by a "power senseless and without purpose" (*alogou kai eikēi dunamin*) (cf. discussion on wisdom of Zeus above). The overseeing principle which animates genesis compels its creatures to strive "in vain" (*eikēi*), thus condemning them to a life of perpetual frustration and suffering. In this way Aristophanes' hiccups themselves caricature his interpretation of eros : a recurrent and intractable demand from which we could only wish respite and surcease. From this point of view one might represent the Will behind all of physis as uncaring for and even ill-disposed towards the aspirations of its resident creatures—aspirations which it itself nonetheless demands of and evokes in them. So Aristophanes pictures Zeus: Hostile to the strivings of the circle-men, Zeus refuses to wipe them out completely, being unwilling to lose their worship (190 cd); he decides instead to debilitate them. He thus creates a situation where men retain their "upward" orientation but are deprived of the means of fulfilling it.

The pathos generated in the one who so perceives the "power" behind erotic Necessity thus emerges in the "moral" Aristophanes would have us draw from the wisdom of his exposition : This logos on eros shows that it behooves us to be obedient to the gods and "in the present circumstances" to do what "is best for now : that is to fall in with one of like mind to oneself" (193c9 : *touto*

d'esti paidikōn tukhein kata noun autōi pephukotōn). The cosmos that is *anous* and *alogos* is also by nature left for whatever good befalls to a fortuitous and promiscuous fate: *tukhein* (from *tugkhanō*, “to fall in with” or “hit upon”) thus pointedly carries the sense of “to meet by chance.” Human existence is compelled by an *eros* that allows it only surrogate and fugitive satisfaction and for this exiguous solace it is fundamentally abandoned to “chance” (cf. also 193b2, 193c1, 193c4).

“In the present circumstances,” then, the best we can have comes from getting together with one of “like mind to oneself” (*kata noun autōi pephukotōn*). In the mythical ideal this beloved is less precisely a “complement” (cf. Dover [1980], p. 113) than a reaffirmation of the self-same: These lovers, as Aristophanes would have it, have “two faces, exactly alike” (189e7–a1: *kai prosōpa . . . homoia pantē*). In his beloved the Aristophanic lover thus pursues not what takes a different form from the lover himself, but rather only, as it were, a kind of permanent reconciliation with what he already is like. What is “best” is thus the absence of striving that comes from being with one of “like mind to oneself,” who in reflecting the countenance of nothing beyond what one already is induces a kind of stillness and peace. In this sense in “sharing their lives in common” these two share a kind of mutual quiescence. Since the cosmos that is animated by *eros* is fundamentally *alogos* and contradictory, here again what is “best for now” is not to awaken or incite it, but rather to lull it into rest by whatever technique it can be quieted or “kept still.” (cf. 190d5 where Zeus warns : *kai mē thelōsin hēsukhian agein . . .*). Aristophanes’ famous “conservatism” is thus profound and pervasive : The wisdom at the telos of this *logos* on *eros* counsels a kind of retreat from the agitations and movements of genesis. As the assuasive effects of the *techne* of comedy might now finally be held up to attest, the “best” we can have comes from the *poiesis* of what might allow us to release ourselves and take respite from life.

Where are we here to locate Aristophanes’ failure and see what from Plato’s perspective is wanting in his perception of the “power” behind *eros*? Here we might root ourselves once again in the “principle” which guided us earlier on and bring to light one final self-referential feature of Aristophanes’ speech. As Aristophanes tells the story, after their original nature had been severed men “yearned to be enmeshed together,” and caring only for this they began to die off from “hunger and general inactivity” (191b). For this reason Zeus moved their genitals around in front of them, “. . . and through this got them to propagate with one another, the male inside the female. This way, if a man happened to meet (191c5 : *entukhoi*) a woman, while they were embracing they would generate and the race would continue” (191c).

In Aristophanes’ story, the procreation that results from erotic union is thus *incidental to its true motive*, namely, the desire to return to the archaic state of “melding” and being “enmeshed.” Here again Aristophanes’ *logos* proves implicitly self-referential precisely insofar as the generation of offspring is some-

thing incidental in Aristophanes' interpretation of the "power" behind eros and inessential to understanding the archaic goal that eros ultimately pursues.

But what does it mean for procreation to be incidental to an interpretation of eros, or conversely, to understand eros in terms of an essential orientation to offspring? Only in this latter way, one might say here, do we truly recover eros' archaic goal, and so begin to see the nature of the Necessity behind eros' intractable "power." So Diotima warns Socrates : He must understand that all humans are fundamentally pregnant (206c1) and that eros is for "giving birth and procreation in the beautiful" (206e). For as what is to be born lives on, beyond the reaches of what brings it into being, so eros, viewed from this perspective, begins to appear this way : as a longing of what is subject to the vicissitudes of genesis for what endures beyond these vicissitudes—standing more strongly and with greater vitality within the stream of becoming—and in that way better constituted for what befalls mortal nature though the intractable will of genesis. It is this mortal's perception of something "immortal" which is behind the "power" of sexuality and what is implicit in the adamantine will of erotic Necessity. In this sense eros is the affective presence of something transcendent in the mortal breast : In erotic longing the child who would be born is already daimonically present.¹⁰

From this point of view what is wanting in Aristophanes' interpretation of eros is precisely recollection of the transcendence within physis, and as this is what is "behind" the power of eros, we might say that this is what he fails to see : That what is erotic is unconsciously animated by a vision of the "immortal"—of what is divined to be in some way delivered from the infirmities of the mortal—and so of what in its transcendence is immanent as what orients the process. In this way we can understand the meaning of Diotima's oracular reference back to Aristophanes : "Whereas a person might tell a story that those who seek after the other half of themselves are lovers, my account describes love as being neither of the half nor of the whole. unless it should happen, my friend, to be something good" (205de). On this view eros is archaically oriented less by the other ("half") or even the sunousia of the two (the "whole") than by a prior perception of the "power" of what might be created by virtue of their union, a hidden promise within physis of what they thus "instinctively" divine as making good on their mortal lacking.

This understanding of the power of eros, has, so to speak, its psychical analogue or provides a "hint" through which one might likewise understand the "desires and pursuits" of eros as whole. Here too the longing of eros would have its arche in a perception of something "immortal," and would be animated by a glimpse of the power of something it might produce, "something new, like itself" (208b12), but which it divines to be delivered from its own infirmities. The "mantic" character of the psyche is thus an elaboration of the general metaphor of mortal pregnancy : The longing of the soul is not the archaic affect of what would return to the stillness of the inanimate, but rather of what al-

ready nurtures within it a still greater vitality, speaking, like the prophetic "pregnancy" of the body, of a future animation. In the soul too eros would thus not find its fulfillment in release from mortal striving and the peaceful quiescence of "death," but rather in bearing what is better constituted for this mortal existence and in bringing something new to life.

In this way the soul would share in being animated by what stands beyond the vicissitudes of genesis, having always already divined, as it were, what is stronger, and makes good on its lacking. In its transcendence this would always be immanent as what orients the soul in its desire, the arche of the "power" that compels it to longing, and the source of erotic Necessity. In being animated by this the soul is indeed subject to the demands of a higher Will, since this is what, of Necessity, compels the mortal soul to its pathos, to the inspired awakening of a resolute pursuit or the hypnogogic inveiglement of a plaintive and forgetful flight.¹¹ As the affective presence of what transcends the mortal soul, eros divines precisely that with respect to which this mortal's life now appears as lacking, and so is the revelation of what points up its infirmities and failings. The affect of Necessity thus undoes and debilitates the completeness and integrity of a way of life, or in the more imposing language of the mythic metaphor, sunders the hybristic whole. In this way erotic Necessity brings with it sufferings and sorrows and is the archaic affect of a hard and demanding Will, since it shows what must first be overcome and undergo genesis in order that its promise be delivered and fulfilled. Here erotic Necessity might evoke the pathos of mortal flight, and generating, as it were, in mortal forgetfulness, give way to a timorous delusion.

But just insofar as erotic necessity points up our mortal debility by first divining that in view of which this way of life now appears as lacking, it is itself the revelation of how one could yet stand more strongly, and dwell, one might here say, in a cosmos that is "beyond" this one and which transcends it. In revealing what thus stands "beyond the horizon" of the present "cosmos," eros is, in the language of the *Phaedrus*, an intimation of the "hyperouranian" place. Erotic necessity thus brings into view something captivating and beautiful, since in pointing up our mortal lacking it divines the very way in which what is lacking could be made good. The hard Will of intractable necessity could here awaken mortals' resolute affection and be the inspiration of a cosmogonic pursuit, the daimonic power by which an infirm mortal soul can see the way it could be "nourished and prosper" (cf. *Phaedrus* 247c ff. where by the vision of the hyperouranian place the soul is *trephetai kai eupatheî* . . .). The plaintive pathos of mortal flight is thus not itself demanded by this divine Will, since in the matter of the affect generated in the face of Necessity we are not fundamentally abandoned to "chance." In this way Plato's philosophical logos on eros harbors an encouraging and inspiring pathos, and an altogether more just and divine image of the nature of the will of Zeus, since it sees first of all hidden within the "power" of eros the promise of a better cosmos.

The cosmos in this way animated by eros would not be anous or “mindless,” and not governed over by a “power senseless and without purpose.” The creatures of physis would not be compelled to strive “in vain,” since they are moved not by what finds its fulfillment only in the release of death, but by what would be fulfilled here, in the regeneration of life. In this sense the Will behind physis is not “ill-disposed” towards mortal nature, having animated it with an eros which at its arche holds the measures by which life is replenished and goes on. The “power” which animates genesis is thus not alogos, “senseless,” or even wholly “inarticulate,” but rather speaks daimonically of the very way in which a mortal’s lacking could be nourished into strength, its affective presence harboring the hidden logos of a cosmos transfigured, its infirmities overcome. While mortal nature may thus be subject to genesis and being “sundered” by what prevents it from remaining the same, it is animated by an eros that can heal this by revealing how Necessity has arranged for a way it can change. In this sense the “power” that rules over physis has filled its creatures with something divinely promising, and while its adamantine Necessity may be demanding and hard they are not deprived of the means of fulfilling it. The Will that governs the cosmos thus does not abandon mortal creation for its eudaimonia and whatever good befalls to the fortuitous workings of “chance,” but rather arrange measures and order for life, growth and healing in the cosmos, and in that sense “cares for” the mortal creatures which dwell in the realm of genesis.

From this point of view, our “archaic nature” would never be thought in terms of the inanimate substance of physis, since it is what in its transcendence animates this that is at the arche of our erotic coming-to-life. Here one might speak of a cosmic nous that steers through all that is inanimate, like Zeus in the myth, the “first to proceed, ordering all things and caring therefore . . .” (*Phaedrus* 246e: . . . *prōtos poreuetai, diakosmōn panta kai epimeloumenos* . . .). Thus Plato’s logos would not move in the imaginal direction of the mythologizing of Hades but rather towards a recollection of the psyche’s divine or “hyper-ouranian” origins. In this sense Plato brings to bear a sense of physis different from that which Aristophanes and Eryximachus both share, the “archaic nature” of a fundamentally “mindless” and desacralized cosmos.

Since the cosmos that is animated by eros is at its arche divinely promising, the “best for now” could not possibly be to lull it into quietness or “keeping still,” but rather to pursue the good that is promised mortal nature which honors the Will behind genesis. In this way the initiate Socrates proceeds in the counsel of “Diotima.” The wisdom at the telos of this logos on eros would thus not issue in the “conservative” and “soft” poeisis of what delivers us respite from life, but bids us suffer the sacred rites of genesis which promise its renewal and rejuvenation. Two lovers “sharing their lives” in this way would not share a mutual quiescence, since here again in their love what they share is some third thing, which makes good on and still transcends them (*Phaedrus* 250b,

252e). Thus in the end it would be better not to say that Aristophanes' failure consists in "making eros fundamentally sexual." Even for the initiate into Platonic love it fundamentally is that. Aristophanes' failure does not as much consist in his thinking that the "psyche is defined by and depends on the body" (Rosen, p. 140) as in his not seeing how both the body and the psyche are "defined by and depend on" their animation by something divine.

Thus the wise Aristophanes could be said to have reminded us of the rule of a higher Necessity, recalling us to a "power" to which we are subject and which transcends mortal dominion. His comic recollection of intractable erotic compulsion in this way would mitigate mortal hybris, and at first sight lays claim to being a poiesis that recalls us to wisdom about the power of Zeus. But just as Aristophanes' hiccups are an anticipation in *ergōi* of the substance of his critique, so they are an ironic caricature of what is still wanting in his wisdom, of Aristophanes' failure to himself rightly perceive the "power" implicit in eros. Recalling erotic Necessity without the nous and cosmic divinity behind it, he might be likened to one who presents the will of Zeus as nothing more than a hiccup, making Aristophanes' hiccups themselves Plato's joke on the wisdom of Aristophanes.

NOTES

1. Thus in his inspiring paper "Platonic Love" L.A. Kosman finds Plato's view that the "proper object of erotic love is *to oikeion kai endees*" already present in Aristophanes' speech: "Central to Plato's vision as articulated comically in Aristophanes' myth is that the self which I am about to become, my "ecstatic self", is ideally no mere projection of my fantasies or desires, but is my true nature from which I am only in some accidental sense, by a willful and jealous act of the gods, alienated" (pp. 60–61).

2. Agathon's representative connection to sophistry is indicated by Socrates' opening words of response to his speech (198c: "The speech reminded me of Gorgias"). On the "abundant" presence of Gorgias' rhetorical "machinery" in Agathon's speech cf. Bury, pp. xxxv–vi and note to 194e.

That Phaedrus brings us back to the Homeric beginnings of this culture Plato indicates in a number of ways: not only is warfare the existential context for Phaedrus' conceptualization of virtue, and not only is Achilles finally named as the one who lives out his ethical ideal (179e ff.), but Phaedrus quite openly identifies virtue with the archaic Homeric *menos* (179b).

For a somewhat fuller account of the subtextual "anthropogony" in the first five speeches of the *Symposium*, cf. the author's "Anthropogony and Theogony in Plato's *Symposium*".

The centrality of the *Symposium* of Plato's quarrel over the "wisdom" of Agathon is of course symbolically indicated already in the dialogues' prologue. Cf. esp. 174b–d and 175c–e.

3. Thus Brentlinger aptly says of Aristophanes that "he dramatically fulfills a role in relation to the first three speeches which in other dialogues belongs peculiarly to the Socratic art of question and answer—that of a wise critic. It is essential in understanding the *Symposium* to grasp this point, namely the similarity between the comic poet and the dialectician." (p. 12). Cf. also Friedländer: "It is apparent, to begin with the human or social content, that the four other speakers form two pairs of friends, Phaidros and Eryximachos, Pausanias and Agathon. Even as Aristophanes is alone among the guests in this human situation, so his speech is the furthest removed from the speeches of the others. . . . Aristophanes is the sharpest critic . . ." (p. 18).

In the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche speaks of “the profound instinct of Aristophanes” in recognizing “the signs of degenerate culture” (cf. sections 13 and 17). To the extent that the drama of the *Symposium* lends a kind of approval to the Aristophanic “instinct,” we are led to wonder about a principal and complex issue—about the extent to which Nietzsche’s critique of what he deems “Socratic” culture is really Platonic in origin.

4. Along with Phaedrus the youngest at the party, Agathon was renowned for his physical beauty, and Alcibiades only gives voice to the general sentiment calling him “the most beautiful” (213c: *tōi kallistō*) man at the banquet. (Cf. also Phaedrus’ remark at 194d and Socrates’ at *Protagoras* 315d.) According to Aristophanes (*Thesmophoriazusae* 191–92), he kept his beard close shaven, presumably to heighten the appearance of early youth. His predilection for “softness” is not unconnected. On the basis of Aristophanes’ portrait in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, it appears that Agathon was widely known for his effeminacy and for his role as a passive homosexual (cf. 140 ff., 191–92, 200, 206). If we are to believe in Aristophanes’ merciless portrayal, at any rate, we can also understand the attribution of “suppleness” : hugros (“supple,” “pliant,” “easy”) has a circumspect sexual sense, and the sexual accessibility Aristophanes attributes to Agathon makes it an apt characterization (cf. e.g. *Th.* 35, 56 ff., 200). But we need not turn to Aristophanes for a hint of Agathon’s promiscuity. Of all the lovers in the *Symposium*, it is Agathon who displays a propensity for “looseness” by his open flirtation (175d) with Socrates (this in spite of the presence of his lover Pausanias). Cf. also 222c ff. On Agathon’s effeminacy cf. Dover (1978), pp. 139–44.

5. Cf. Nussbaum, p. 172 : “As we hear Aristophanes’ distant myth of this passionate groping and grasping, we are invited to think how odd, after all, it is that bodies should have these holes and projections in them, odd that the insertion of a projection into an opening should be thought, by ambitious and intelligent beings, a matter of the deepest concern.”

It is of course precisely the “power” of eros which Aristophanes claims his predecessors have failed to see : “It seems to me that men do not perceive the power (*dunamin*) of eros at all. . . I will try to show you its power, and you, in turn, will be the teachers of others” (189cd). For an extremely interesting discussion of the centrality of the theme of comic and tragic wisdom, see Clay.

6. On the circular arrangement of the couches at Agathon’s symposium, see Dover, p. 11. Dover takes *epi dexia* at 177d3 to indicate that the speakers are moving in an “anti-clockwise sequence.” Cf. also Friedländer, vol. 1, p. 161.

For Eryximachus cf. 187d5, 187d6, 188a3, 188c3 and Bury’s note to 189a. Consider here also the scene at 223b : When the revelers finally take over the party and “the slightest semblance of order (*kosmōi*)” disappears, Plato has Eryximachus make his exit.

For the claims of Aristophanic comedy to critical sophia, cf. the parabasis of the *Clouds* esp. 518–48. In making the claim to wisdom implicit in giving a logos of Zeus, Aristophanes here seems to take what he deems his rightful place in the “contest over wisdom” that Agathon had initiated at the dialogues’ outset (175e). We should note too how he was implicitly solicited—or perhaps better, provoked—by Socrates who characterized him as “devoting himself entirely to Dionysus and Aphrodite” (177e).

7. Thus Aristophanes begins : *dei de prōton humas mathein tēr anthrōpinēn phusin kai ta pathēmata autēs* (189d4–6). (On Aristophanes’ conflation of “human nature” and “nature” generally cf. 191a5.) The connection between wisdom and the figure of Zeus should of course also recall to us the passage at *Phaedrus* 250b where the philosophers are said to be the ones who have followed in the train of Zeus. (Cf. also 252e.) Perhaps even more important in the present context though is a passage in the *Critias* where “Zeus, the god of gods” is the one who has the power by which such things as mortal decline are seen (121b).

8. Thus we can already see how it cannot be wholly right to say : “By making Eros fundamentally sexual, Aristophanes illustrates two inseparable principles of his teaching. Human striving, whether for truth or fame, is essentially physical : the psyche is defined by and depends on the body” (Rosen, p. 140). Cf. however Rosen’s fascinating reading of Aristophanes’ entire speech (pp. 120–58) with which what follows might be compared.

9. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 51, 32. On p. 51 Freud says : “Apart from this, science has so little to tell us about the origin of sexuality that we can liken the problem to a darkness into

which not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated. In quite a different region, it is true, we do meet with such a hypothesis; but it is of so fantastic a kind—a myth rather than a scientific explanation—that I would not venture to produce it here, were it not that it fulfills precisely the one condition whose fulfillment we desire. For it traces the origin of an instinct to a need to restore an earlier state of things.' In the context of a discussion of whether Freud conflated Aristophanes' speech with Plato's erotic theory Santas says that a major "novel element in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was Freud's notion that the instincts are essentially 'conservative': they aim at restoring an earlier state of affairs." Freud "surveys the findings of biology for positive evidence of a death instinct or for the instincts being conservative," but finding none, he refers us to Aristophanes' myth—which as Santas points out Freud had recited to his betrothed some forty years before (pp. 160–62). On p. 181 (n. 11) Santas remarks that the "aims of Freud's Eros and Aristophanes' eros would seem to coincide *in general*, in both aiming at an earlier state of affairs" but seems to wonder as to whether they would "coincide more specifically." The symbolic significance of both Hephaestus' smith art and his mention of Hades seem to make the coincidence deep-running indeed. Some version of the intuition that Aristophanic fulfillment culminates in death goes back at least as far as Aristotle (*Politics* II 4 1262b 9–17), as Friedländer (vol. 3, p. 20) points out.

10. Here, strangely enough, we can seek help from the eccentric "Platonist" Schopenhauer, who describes how only the presence of something "immortal" can account for the overwhelming "power" of eros: " . . . this longing and this pain of love cannot draw their material from the needs of an ephemeral individual. On the contrary they are the sighs of the spirit of the species, which sees here, to be won or lost, an irreplaceable means to its ends, and therefore groans deeply. The species alone has infinite life, and is therefore capable of infinite desire, infinite satisfaction, and infinite sufferings. But these are here imprisoned in the narrow breast of a mortal; no wonder, therefore, when such a breast seems ready to burst . . ." (vol. 2, p. 551). Behind sexual attraction Schopenhauer thus sees something like the unconscious "*meditation of the genius of the species* concerning the individual possible through these two . . ." (p. 549). "Its new life, indeed, is already kindled in the meeting of their longing glances . . ." (p. 536)." Eros is thus the archaic affect in the breast of the mortal of what has a more "infinite life." But as we will suggest shortly below, what for Schopenhauer is the sexual substratum to which all love is to be privatively reduced, for Plato is the prototype of what holds analogically across the spectrum of erotic phenomena.

11. On the centrality of the notions of affective presence and pathos to Plato's conception of the relation in which mortals stand to the "truth" cf. the author's forthcoming "Platonic Rhetoric."

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