PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*: COMEDY AS THE GENRE OF PHILOSOPHY

Joseph Stamey
McMurray College

During the past decade and a half along with and in part growing out of the so-called poststructuralist debate, the topic of *genre* has received much attention in discussions of the Theory of Literature or Poetics. The issues have been in part historical, in part philosophical. Historical, since, though everyone may be presumed to know what Aristotle said about the relations between tragic, epic, and comic poetry, what he meant or thought he meant has offered endless opportunity for conjecture and emendation. Philosophical, since all variants of realist, conceptualist, and nominalist positions (which may or may not have been discarded in such sophisticated arenas as philosophy of science and philosophy of mathematics) have found exponents among contemporary literary critics.

There have been discussions about whether Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* or the film *Last Tango in Paris* are instances of tragic drama or of something else ("comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral; scene individable, or poem unlimited") whether Nabokov's *Pale Fire* or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* are novels or anti-novels, what the identifying characteristics of postmodernist plays, novels, and poems are. I do not intend in this paper to attack or defend any or all such approaches, to argue that such discussions are valuable or a waste of time, though, if I did, my position would be that some of them are (valuable) and some of them are (a waste of time). I intend something much more modest in scope. I want to suggest that we can gain in our understanding of what Plato was doing writing philosophical dialogues if we keep in mind a few historical and philosophical points about conceptions of *genre* and even more about the actual structural-dynamics of writing exemplified in several types of writing by Greek poets and rhetoricians in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

Everyone knows the tradition about Plato's early ambition to be a poet. He wrote "first dithyrambs, afterwards lyric poems and tragedies" but "when he was about to compete for the prize with a tragedy, he listened to Socrates in front of the theatre of Dionysus, and then consigned his poems to the flames."[1] Plato's strictures on the poets and his proposal to ban tragic poets and representational art from the city-state of the *Republic* have often been treated as paradoxical,[2] since Plato, however many dithyrambic, lyric, and tragic verses he may have burned, became in his dialogues one of the greatest dramatic poets of world literature.

Aristotle is supposed to have said that the style of the dialogues is half-way between poetry and prose.[3] (What "being half-way between poetry and prose" might mean would be well worth considering, but like a number of other interesting and problematic distinctions, will be left unexplored here.) Many of the dialogues structurally *are* dramas. This is as true of *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* as it is of *Phaedo* and *Protagoras*. (Someone may suggest a comparison of the *Laws* with Thomas Hardy's nineteen act drama *The Dynasts*. Each might serve as the scenario for a week-long epic film. The Russians might make them.) And the dialogues that are popularly regarded as the "great classics" of literature--*Phaedo, Symposium, Protagoras, Phaedrus*--*feel* as much like drama to a reader as *Oedipus, Hamlet*, and *Benito Cereno* do, and can be given effective performance, as successful filmed versions of *Phaedo* and *Symposium* show.

Bernard Lonergan would not ordinarily be called a structuralist, but he has expressed with admirable directness the fundamental structuralist insight about what is involved in confronting a text:

> Heuristically... the context of the word is the sentence. The context of the sentence is the paragraph. The context of the paragraph is the chapter. The context of the chapter is the book. The context of the book is the author's *opera omnia*, his life and times, the state of the question in his day, his problems, prospective readers, scope and aim.[4]

(If anyone should object that everything in Lonergan's statement from "the author's *opera omnia*" on goes beyond the concerns of structuralists, I think this would be a mistake: it goes beyond popular misconceptions of structuralism.) We might amend Lonergan's statement substituting "unit" for "paragraph" and "part" (or "section" and "subsection") for chapter, since not all texts--poems, dramas, much of the Hebrew-Christian Bible and scriptures of other world religions--do not have paragraphs and chapters.

If we look at Plato's *Symposium*, we find that each of the structural levels mentioned by Lonergan is relevant to its analysis. I will not attempt comments on the structural-dynamics at the *sentence* level of the *Symposium*--to do this would involve extensive discussion of and reliance on the opinions of philologists--except to call to mind the exuberant playfulness of Plato's language. It is lyrical, allusive, punning--a language that perpetually deconstructs and reconstructs itself. Plato as few others--perhaps Joyce and Nabokov--enjoyed language, lived in it, was totally aware of its vertical and horizontal clarities and opacities. This sensitivity is probably the source of the pervasive irony of the dialogues, *not* an irony like the irony mentioned by Rilke which never descends to the depths of things,[5] but irony that is a function of awareness of the unlimited reverberations of language, of the limitlessness of meaning concealed ("like a worm") in the apparent clarity of the

simplest expression. Hence Plato's insistence in the Seventh Epistle that "no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines"[6] (textbooks, doctoral dissertations, papers).

The units of Plato's *Symposium* are seven speeches. It will be recalled that the participants are at the house of Agathon taking part in celebrating one of the great Athenian festivals and also athe victory of Agathon in the competition of tragic poets. Since most of the participants had celebrated on the night before by drinking too much, one of them, the physician Eryximachus, suggests that instead of drinking and listening to the flute-girl's playing, they should devote the evening to speeches--encomia--in praise of a neglected deity (and here Eryximachus suggests that the topic is really Phaedrus' choice), the god of love.

Professor Philis Shuler has recently described the characteristics that the encomium, a speech intended to establish the merits of a worthy individual, acquired in classical antiquity.[7] In about 150 A.D., Hermogenes gave a list of rules prescribing the appropriate topics and manner of treatment for such speeches:

> Topics for encomia of a man are his race;... his city;... his family;... You will say what marvelous things befell at his birth.... Next his nurture.... Then training.... Not only so, but the nature of the soul and body... under these heads: for the body--beauty, stature, agility, might; for the soul -- justice, self-control, wisdom, manliness. Next his pursuits....[8]

The list goes on. At about the same time, Theon specified thirty-six steps through which a eulogy or encomium should progress, including exterior excellences (noble birth, personal advantages, etc.), bodily and spiritual excellences (virtues, resultant actions, their characteristics and benefits, etc.).[9] Although these lists are late, the form was well exemplified in the time of Socrates and Plato in several of the works of their contemporaries Xenophon and Isocrates.

Five of the seven speeches that are the units of the Symposium are encomia. That of Aristophanes is not an encomium but a parody of an explanatory--cosmological--myth; Socrates' 'speech' consists of anti-speeches, one of which is an anti-encomium.[10] Four of the encomia--those of Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus and Agathon--are speeches in praise of the deity Love. The fifth, that of Alciabiades, is an encomium, ironic, not in the superficial sense, doubly ironic, since Alcibiades *speaks with intentional irony* about Socrates and the speech itself--given by the drunken Alcibiades who has burst into Agathon's house without having heard the previous speeches--*inadvertently shows* Socrates as one whose life exemplifies the very characteristics that Socrates in his speech has ascribed to those who have been guided by the god and transfigured by the Supreme Beauty that is its object. Socrates' speech, rather than being an encomium of love, is

a delineation of the relation of love--not much of a god after all, the child of Want and Resource--of Poverty and Plenty--to the Absolute Beauty and Good which is the source and goal of all desiring. Love is "not much" of a god as Socrates is "not much" of a Wise Man.

The editor of a recent collection of Plato's works has written: "The speeches are not connected with each other except that they all have the same subject, love...."[11]

Nothing could be more off base. Not only do the six speeches about love show a common theme, the later speeches continually refer to and attempt to correct earlier ones. Agathon chides Phaedrus for saying that love is among the oldest of the gods; he is in fact the youngest. Pausanias chides Phaedrus for failing to see that there are two loves rather than one, a heavenly as well as an earthly love. Socrates refers to each of the previous speeches.

But even more than this: the speeches are connected structurally. They are paired. And the second speech of each pair deconstructs--by criticizing and correcting--its predecessor. Not only this; there is a progression of pairs, each group of two involving a more comprehensive level, or perspective, of the topic, thus deconstructing its predecessor pair.

The first pair of speeches, those of Phaedrus and Pausanias, treat love on the level of common sense or popular wisdom (One might be watching *All My Children* or reading Ann Landers). Love means sexual desire. For Phaedrus, love is good, because it causes the lover to behave nobly because of fear of disappointing, of having to be ashamed *vis-a-vis*, the beloved. Pausanias notes that Phaedrus has failed to distinguish between noble and ignoble forms of love--according to Phaedrus, might love even a woman, but for the heavenly love only a boy will do, and the love must be spiritual--of the soul--not oriented to material or physical characteristics only. Only then is gratification of desire permissible.

Here two points about the *opera omnia* mentioned by Lonergan are required. The third speech in *Phaedrus*, the speech that makes use of the image of the chariot, its driver and the black and white horses, provides an extremely helpful context for understanding the *Symposium* and reinforces and corrects Pausanias' speech. 1.) Although a degree of *sublimation* (or enoblement) of the physical aspects of desire is present in each of Plato's permissible forms of erotic expression, sublimation becomes increasingly pronounced at the higher levels. What Pausanias says about permissable gratification is true, though not the whole truth, since an even more fulfilled form of love occurs when the lover and beloved do *not* do the physical acts (their wings then, lost in the higher world, grow again). 2.) Pausanias' distinction in the *Sophist*, *Statesman* and--of course--*Phaedrus*. In Phaedrus we find 'love' on both sides of a division that begins with irrational or nonrational behavior. On the right hand-side irrational behavior is good, a form of inspired or divine

madness--prophetic power, exorcism, true poetic creation, love.[12] On the left-hand side are the 'so-called' (false) instances of these--love falsely called is lust, the drive for physical or psychological gratification.

The second pair deals with love cosmologically. The first speech should have been that of Aristophanes--except that Aristophanes had the hiccups and yielded his place to Eryximachus. For Eryximachus, love is the cosmological principle or force that balances the contrasting elements--the hot and the cold, the wet and the dry. It is the principle of harmony in the universe. There is also (as for Pausanias) a 'bad' love, a principle of disorder. Thus Eryximachus' approach is that of the cosmological philosophers, especially those of the Italian school. (He brings Empedocles to mind.)

Then comes Aristophanes' speech about the original double-humans, the man-man, woman-woman, man-woman creatures who were split in two because of hybrids, because the gods feared their strength. They now seek to find their separated halves to be sexually reunited with them. This is a parody of pre-scientific, mythical kinds of explanation--not an encomium of love. Thus Eryximachus' speech, which should have come after it, corrects and deconstructs it in advance. But the placing of Aristophanes' speech did not happen just because Aristophanes had the hiccups, or because Plato knew that it would steal the show. The mythical approach is deconstructed by that of cosmological philosophy (or science), but in *one* way--as the placing of Aristophanes' speech shows--myth is superior: the *longing* of the separated creatures for reunion, finally interpreted in Socrates' account of the longing at the deepest level of each living thing to participate in Absolute Beauty to the extent that it *can* do so, is captured by the myth, even by its parody, and left out by the dry and overly-literal cosmological account. The myth conveys the passionate sense of things.

The speeches of Agathon and Socrates raise the level of discussion to the highest plane, that of comprehensive truth and falsehood. Agathon's speech (re-)commits the faults of Phaedrus. It praises Love in a completely indiscriminate way, showing no true understanding of love--not even realizing the dependence of Love on its object. In the same way, the speech of Lysiai in *Phaedrus* contrasts what it calls the lover and the non-lover, without realizing that love and non-love are both instances of *false* love (lust). Socrates finds Agathon's speech false in two ways, first, because it does not find or even seek to understand discriminately what love is, second because it is only an imitation (of an imitation!). Behind Agathon Socrates discerns the "gorgon-head" of the Sophist Gorgias. Thus Agathon's speech is an imitation of the culturally successful Sophistic method.

Socrates' speech is in fact an anti-speech composed of two anti-speeches, the first a dialogue between Socrates and Agathon in which Socrates makes Agathon admit the falsity of his account (and thus his ignorance) of Love, the second an

earlier dialogue between the ignorant Socrates and the wise Diotima who instructs him-- by means of a myth of the birth of Love, the child of Want and Resource, *and* of rigorous dialectic--concerning the nature and effects of love. Thus Diotima's speech is an ironic encomium--or anti-encomium--since love is shown as essentially lacking rather than possessing that which is of Supreme Worth--within a non-encomium.

Alcibiades' speech, as mentioned, is an ironic encomium of Socrates, showing Alcibiades deeply disturbed, but attracted by the power of the divine Beauty which, the insightful reader will know, divine madness has communicated to Socrates.

The thematic unity of the dialogue derives from its multifaceted concern with love. Its deep structure, i.e., the structure of the work as work, is mythic. This explains its relation to tragedy, epic, and comedy. Plato may well be the greatest comic poet of world literature. His comedies are not composed of units similar to those of the comedies of Aristophanes or of the Middle or New Comedy. (*Phaedo* also is a comedy; what are its units?) There is no chorus in the *Symposium*; there are no strophes or antistrophes. But Greek comedy and tragedy both show a three-stage mythical structure ("beginning, middle, and end" as Aristotle noted). Claude Levi-Strauss has detailed the three-stage pattern transformations typical of myth.[13] If one looks at Greek tragedies and comedies, one finds that the major structural difference is that in tragedy the hero has a positive manifest but a negative latent status at the beginning and middle of the tragedy and a negative manifest but positive latent status at the end (think of Oedipus Tyrannos) whereas in comedies (and in sections of epics--the end of the *Odyssey*, for example) the hero has negative manifest and positive latent status at the beginning and middle and positive manifest *and* latent status at the end.[14] This is true of Aristophanes' Strepsiades in *The Clouds* and of Plato's Socrates in *Symposium*. In the *Symposium*, at the beginning Socrates appears to be an eccentric participant at Agathon's party; his eccentricities (trances and indifference to material things) conceal *and* hint at his true character. At mid-point, Socrates' first non-speech contrast negatively with the 'elegance' of the other speeches, especially Agathon's, but in fact is true eloquence--truth-speaking. At the end of the dialogue, the puzzled Alcibiades' speech *and* Socrates' behavior show Socrates to be the one among the revelers who understands, indeed who exemplifies, love.

More could be said. But the major point is that there are two congruent uses of philosophy in Plato's major dialogues. The first is the method of division. If we do not use this method we will be lost in considering or trying to live the major and minor opportunities of our lives. But the method of division is subordinate to the ironically, mythically expressed insight into that which is of supreme importance, that which cannot be said, which no sensible person would try to say, though it can be expressed, in the ironic figures that deconstruct and reconstruct themselves in the

measured dance[15] of comic art. For Plato, comedy is the genre of philosophical writing, in fact, of philosophical discourse.

Notes

1. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* translated by R. D. Hicks, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 281.
2.. There is an insightful discussion of this issue in Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
3. Diogenes Laerti p. 311.
4. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1972), p. 163.
5. Ranier Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1962), p. 24.
6. Glenn R. Morrow, translator, *Plato's Epistles* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1962), p. 239.
7. Philip L. Shuler, p. 54.
8. Cited in Shuler, p. 54.
9. Cited in Shuler, pp. 54-55.
10. Just as the irrational (as Kant and others have observed) is a mode of the rational, an anti-encomium is a kind of encomium and an anti-novel is a novel.
11. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, editors, *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1980), p. 526.
12. See Josef Pieper, Enthusiasm and Divine Madness: On the Platonic Dialogue Phaedrus (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964).
13. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963), pp. 167-231.
14. Considerations of space require that this part of the discussion be extremely brief and cryptic. I have developed these concepts at greater length in a paper "Structuralist Analysis and Mark's Gospel" that is to be published soon.
15. William Carlos Williams, *Patterson* (Book V) (New York: New Directions, 1958). The poem continues:

> We know nothing and can know nothing
> but
> the dance, to dance to a measure
> contrapuntally...