Plato's Critique of Poetry in the *Symposium*

Martin Black

I. Introduction

The *Symposium* is a pivotal text for interpreting Plato's critique of poetry, and in particular his critique of the two genres of poetry that he appears to take most seriously, comedy and tragedy.[1] Plato does not have Socrates offer the direct criticisms of poetry we find elsewhere, but rather exposes the psychological root of those criticisms by staging a contest in self-understanding between Socrates and Agathon and Aristophanes. Agathon's invocation of a contest in wisdom (*peri tês sophias*) with Socrates is one of the more prominent indications that the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is a central theme of the dialogue, and after the evening is dedicated to speeches praising Erôs, Plato conspicuously juxtaposes the speeches of the comic and tragic poets and the philosopher by means of the little stage business of Aristophanes' hiccoughs.[2] This quarrel becomes thematic in Socrates' account of *erôs*, which turns upon the philosophic and poetic responses to the question of the human good.

This suggestion immediately touches upon the central question posed for the interpretation of Socrates' speech, which is whether its main subject is the good (*to agathon*) or the beautiful or noble (*to kalon*). The most obvious signs of this dilemma are that Socrates' speech begins from the claim that *erôs* is directed towards the beautiful[3] (201e4-5); subsequently, however, it seems to be directed towards the possession of good things always (205e11-12), which in turn proves to mean that *erôs* is the desire "to give birth in the beautiful" (206b6-7); and, finally, in its philosophical form *erôs* appears to be fulfilled in the apprehension of the beautiful itself (210e2-6).

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Many commentators, ancient and modern, cut this knot with the claim that Socrates identifies the beautiful or noble with the good, either without qualification or by interpreting the beautiful as a species, a part, or the sensual aspect of the good.[4] Given the close relation between truth and wisdom (e.g. *Republic* 508d10-e2), one might say of this view, with slight exaggeration, that it finds in Socrates' speech the same message that Keats feigned to read upon a Grecian urn: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."[5] But that is the teaching of another poet, Agathon (e.g. 196d5-197b5), Socrates' direct competitor in the *Symposium*. Alternatively, since Socrates allots priority to the good elsewhere (e.g. *Republic* 505a2) and asserts here that he will select only the beautiful among the true things to say of *erôs*, it has been suggested that his apparent reversion to the beautiful is not genuine but a rhetorical accommodation to his contest with the poets.[6]

The thesis advanced in this essay is that Socrates' speech consistently differentiates the beautiful and the good, and that poetry (at least tragic poetry) and philosophy are distinguished by their relation to them. Plato's critique of poetry in the *Symposium* derives from the contrast between the philosophic and the "poetic," that is, productive or generative, responses to our mortality, and our mortality poses a question that turns out to be coeval with the question of the human good. In this account, poetry in this broad sense and tragic poetry in particular are, in a manner of speaking, apparently moved by the beautiful or noble as if it were the good, while making instrumental use of beauty or nobility in the attempt to be immortalized. The assimilation of the noble or beautiful to the good is transmitted to the political horizon, which the poets play such a large role in constituting. Philosophy, on the other hand, is indeed orientated by the good precisely in its contemplation or scrutiny of the beautiful. Socrates' account is complex and his rhetoric is elusive because it mimics the self-deception that he implies most of us practice concerning the ends of life. This thesis will be developed in an examination of the understanding of *erôs*, poetry, and philosophy in the speeches that Plato attributes to Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates.

A complication for any thesis concerning this topic is presented by

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the well-known difficulty of translating its chief terms. *Poiêsis* (literally, "making"; conventionally, "poetry"), for example, is not simply the composition of lyric verse. For Socrates and Agathon at least, "poetry" or "making" has a broad sense that comprehends all genesis or production, and a peak sense represented by the "making" of images and tales, especially tales of the gods, expressed in verse. Correlatively, the modern notion of the "fine arts" is not current in ancient Greek thought: when Socrates asks whether poetry is "an art or a science," that is, whether it is a *technê* ("skill, craft") or an *epistêmê* ("knowledge, science"), he is assuming the rationality of these two and asking whether poetry can claim such rationality, contrary to the modern sense of the question whether something is an art or a science.[7] Further, *kalos* denotes a kind of splendour that may refer primarily to the body or the soul or their attributes or products, and will often be translated "beautiful or noble" to suggest this range.[8] Lastly, *erôs* denotes a passionate longing, comprehending if not reducible to sexual desire and different from familiar affection or friendship (*philia*); it will be transliterated when not rendered "love," since it has connotations of daring and the contravention of law or convention (*nomos*) that seem beyond the reach of our use of "love." These connotations are visible in, for example, Herodotus' report that "Candules conceived an *erôs* for *his own* wife," and that his acting on it precipitated his misfortune (*Historiae* I.8.1, emphasis added).[9] In this essay the controlling notion of *erôs* considered as the passionate desire for another is that which seems implicit in Socrates' speech, in which *erôs* combines the desire "to be with" (including sexual union) with the desire "to look upon" the beloved (e.g. 211d3-8).

II. Aristophanes

Plato attributes the fantastic conceit to Aristophanes that *erôs* is literally our longing for our "other half," from whom we have been sundered by the Olympian gods. We were once spherical beings, with two heads and two sets of limbs; double men, double women, or "androgynous" (i.e. half men and half women) in the likeness of the cosmic gods, the sun, earth, and moon, respectively. Our "proud thoughts" (190b6) led us to assault the Olympian gods. Zeus calculated that he could both weaken us

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sufficiently and double the sacrificial revenue by splitting us in two. He instructed Apollo to heal us in such a manner that we should contemplate (*theômenos*) our cut, and be reminded to fear the gods and be orderly lest we be split again. The plan failed; human beings clung to their desevered halves and began to die out from hunger and other forms of self-neglect. Zeus had Apollo change the sexual organs to the front so that the race might reproduce and that sexual relief might allow us to part and attend to the necessities of life.

Plato's purpose is not to imitate Aristophanean comedy but to supply the poetic account of human nature underlying it.[10] On the literal level, the myth's details indicate that no one could ever meet their genuine "other half" after the first generation, even if the latter survived the initial vivisection; in reality *erôs* leaves us with only "great hopes."[11] Human beings are comic because their deepest and most serious (*megalês spoudês*, 192c7) aspirations are founded in illusion.[12]

The distance between the defective self-understanding of the lovers seeking their other halves and reality is the mythical reflection of the ambiguous status of *erôs* in Aristophanes' speech. On the one hand, Aristophanes begins by calling for greater homage to Erôs as "a physician of those things whose healing, if they could be healed, would generate the greatest happiness for humankind" (189c8-d3). Such healing would lead us back to our spherical wholes, our "archaic" or "original nature," and so "*erôs* is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole" (189d6, 193e5, 192e9-193a1). In sum, *erôs* is not so much a god as the desire that "leads us into our own" (*oikeion*, 193d2); the natural is identified as what would fulfill our desire to be wholly "our own." Since this *erôs* is not reducible to sexual desire (192c5-7), it seems, to judge by the unexplored character of the original human beings, to represent our desire to be wholly independent. However, on the other hand, not only does it seem that any healing of our nature is impossible, but any reconstitution of our original selves would be a rebellion against the "current" order created by the Olympian gods and the standards of right or the laws that they sanction. Thus, Aristophanes' speech does not conclude with a straightforward celebration of *erôs,* but with a warning to have "fear" and reverence for the

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gods (193a1, 8). Aristophanes has created a fundamental tension between nature (*physis*) and convention or law (*nomos*), in which *erôs* is the desire to take one's natural shape (*phusis*, *eidos*) and the power of the gods who sanction the laws (*nomoi*) opposes that desire (e.g. 189e5-6, d5, 191a4-5).

Thus, the quality of *erôs* is clearly antinomian in the etymological sense, since it opposes the standards or laws (*nomoi*) of the gods whether *erôs* is experienced as the desire for a substitute "other half" or is displaced upon politics; thus, Aristophanes explains, the "halves" of original androgynous double human become adulterers, those of women lesbians, and those of men homosexuals, not through shamelessness, but through daring, and these become ambitious politicians (191d6-192b5). An inherent complication of this picture is that not only the "present," upright shape of human beings and their sexuality, but also their erotic disposition itself is caused by the work of the gods and the laws.[13] On the non-mythical level, Aristophanes seems to teach that communal or political life effects a harsh but inescapable imposition upon our natural desires or our natural longing for independence, yet it is this very imposition that is itself responsible for the sense that there is some natural state of independence that we seek. When Aristophanes says that we must become friends, that is, become reconciled with Erôs (193b4), he presumably means to reconcile us with these political necessities so that *erôs* "leads us into our own" in the conventional and feasible sense. If correct, this interpretation explains why Aristophanes is readily identified as some kind of political conservative and provides the motive for two of the main threads of his comedy: obscenity undercuts any overwhelming and potentially illicit erotic attachments, and political satire undercuts selfish or power-seeking politics which does not pay due heed to the common good or justice as expressed by the laws (cf. *Laws* 816d3-817a1).[14]

This interpretation does not bring out the widely acknowledged power of Aristophanes' speech, which is sometimes defended as championing the love of a whole person, in the sense of a particular individual, as against Socrates' apparent teaching that the beauty which leads us to love one person also leads us to devalue the individual as such in favour of loving beauty itself as such.[15] However, this view overlooks the incipient

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narcissism of the notion that the love of another is really the love of one's own, and to hold this view one must renounce any intelligible reason why one prefers one's beloved to any particular other. If wholeness must encompass qualities manifest in principle to all, then Aristophanes' account does not justify loving a whole individual, but rather just this individual for no reason which can be expressed in speech. Therefore, if the power of Aristophanes' speech resides in its championing of the love of the individual, it is because Aristophanes has fabricated a correlative to the feeling that there is nothing random in one's choice of a partner, that love has overcome chance. This is presumably impossible. By extension, it might be suggested that on the non-mythical level Aristophanes wishes to teach that *erôs* is motivated by the equally impossible hope that we may overcome that element of chance or artifice which belongs to the necessarily particular *nomoi* which form us. Our basic desire is a longing for a natural wholeness which never was and cannot be.

Plato's implied criticism of Aristophanes emerges from the latter's version of the opposition of nature and law or convention. It is a result of this opposition that there can be no accounting for the nature of the human mind, speech, or the soul prior to the operations of the Olympian gods. Thus, Aristophanes' lovers cannot say but only divine or riddle at the very wholeness which is meant to constitute their genuine nature and the object of their desire.[16] Aristophanes has Hephaestus ask a pair of lovers what they want from each other, but they are perplexed and he himself must articulate for them that they desire "to have become one from being two" (192d2 ff.). But simply being united is not at all to become whole, which is why the united couple may "become one from being two" indifferently alive or dead: such unity is the extinction of the desiring individual (192e1-3). There is thus no connection between human nature and the fully formed human faculties or the ends of human life. Consequently, Aristophanes cannot provide a natural standard for the "orderly"[17] behaviour of human beings "now." Nor can Aristophanes justify his own independent articulation of human nature, which he presumably does not intend to be merely conventional. These difficulties ultimately stem from Aristophanes' effective reduction of the soul to the

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body in the first place, representing the desires of the soul as wanting a part of the body.[18] Plato "makes a comedy" (*kômôidei*, cf. 192d8) of this by having Aristophanes silenced by his body before he can speak, and then, when he wishes to rebut Socrates' criticism, silenced by the arrival of the Alcibiades.[19]

III. Agathon

Although it is routinely dismissed as a trivial linguistic display, Agathon's speech makes one realize that Aristophanes has rendered an admired account of *erôs* without mentioning the desire to look upon the beloved, or, what is the same thing, without mentioning beauty.[20] Agathon is the first speaker to claim for *erôs* itself (apart from its effects) a dimension above the passionate desire for another, in the desire for or love of beauty or nobility (197b8-9). This view renders intelligible the passionate love of a particular other, as Aristophanes could not, but it simultaneously transcends the desire for any particular other. This is quite possibly the sort of incipient rationalism that causes Aristophanes to pair Socrates and Agathon in the *Symposium*, just as the historical Aristophanes connects Socrates with the decline of tragedy he sees in the likes of Euripides and Agathon.[21] There are three prominent signs of this rationalism or artificiality in Agathon's speech in the *Symposium*, which help to exhibit his understanding of poetry.

Firstly, there is the self-consciously reflexive structure of his speech. He begins by announcing that he will say how one must speak and then speak. He says that he will first describe Erôs and then his gifts; Erôs is most beautiful (or noble) and the best (or most virtuous); he is most beautiful because the youngest god, the most delicate, fluid in form, and beautiful in colour; he is best because he is the most just, moderate, courageous, and wise. His gift is to makes others like himself.

Secondly, Agathon identifies his claim to distinguish Erôs from his gifts with a general rule for giving praise by stating "what sort of cause [and] of which things" something is (194e5-195a3). Agathon's representation of the beauty and virtue of Erôs gradually tends to reduce the god to the psychological cause of certain effects. While Agathon says that "there is

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need of a poet such as Homer was" (195c7-d2) for this representation, he clearly takes himself to be such a poet. Agathon's appropriation of Homer's lines on Atê to describe Erôs illustrates his forgetting of harsh necessities or the softness for which Aristophanes mocks Agathon in the *Women at the Thesmophoria*, as well as Agathon's reduction of the god Erôs to a capacity of the soul.[22] Both traits are also evident in his sophistic arguments that Erôs is most moderate because moderation is "mastering pleasures and desires, and no pleasure is stronger than *erôs*," and most courageous because Arês is more courageous than anyone else and "not even Arês withstands Erôs," having been defeated by "Aphrodite," that is, by the pleasures of sex (196c4-d4). These arguments are not merely sophistic, they also illustrate Agathon's forgetting of the harsher necessities of life which were prominent in Aristophanes' speech; he suggests that the laws may be completely replaced by what is voluntary (196c1-3).

Thirdly, Agathon asserts that Erôs' most important virtue, wisdom, makes Erôs a poet who is able to make others into poets, not only including the arts (*technai*) possessed by craftsmen along with poetry more narrowly understood but also claiming that "the making (*poiêsis*) of all animals is the wisdom of *erôs*, by which animals are generated and by nature born" (196e6-197e3). The assimilation of wisdom to poetry is meant to show off his own wisdom, but far from arguing, say, that poetry is an art (*technê*), Agathon appears to allow that the conscious production of artifacts, whether technical or musical, may be assimilated to natural instinct. In the case of the craftsmen and poets, *erôs* is specifically related to becoming famous (197a5-6, and context). Given the relation between "the noble or beautiful things" (*ta kala*) and honour or glory, we may interpret Agathon's claim that all good things come about through the *erôs* for *ta kala* (197b7-9) to refer primarily to the longing for such glory on the part of poets and technical innovators, as much as to the love of the beauty of the images of the gods that the former invent or the utility of the artifacts produced by the latter. This notion of the poet's end will prove to be central to Socrates' interpretation of the poets.

Agathon provides a sample of verse of his own invention to describe how Erôs is a cause of "all good things for gods and human beings":

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> *He is the one who makes* (ho poiôn)
> *peace among human beings, and windless calm for the sea,*
> *the sleep of the winds, and rest amid care (197b7-8, c3-6).*

Agathon describes Erôs as a poet who makes others into poets, and he here provides a demonstration of Erôs' power to make Agathon into a poet who is in turn describing the effect of Erôs and so, in a sense, the meaning of poetry. Erôs is "the one who composes" or simply "the poet" (*ho poiôn*) and his poetry composes the soul or brings it peace. In describing this action, these lines move from human beings to larger powers of nature and then back to human experience, thus exhibiting one mode of how poetry works, which is to describe human affects through metaphors drawn from non-human nature.[23] We might conclude that the purpose of poetry is to make literally true a state of the human soul through metaphor, that is, a kind of falsehood. In this case, one might also question the truth of the thought that *erôs* brings peace to the soul. Thus it is fitting for Agathon to say, ambiguously enough, that Erôs is the "order" or "adornment" (*kosmos*) of all the gods and human beings" because the charm of poetry bewitches their minds:

> *Erôs is the leader whom every man must follow, hymning him beautifully [or "nobly"], participating in the song which he sings, enchanting the thought of all gods and human beings (197e2-5).*

The ultimate charm of by which Agathon's speech seeks to enchant the mind is to conflate *erôs* with the *end* of desire. This conflation forms the crux of Socrates' criticism of Agathon and of Diotima's criticism of the young Socrates and "the many": they all identify the qualities of what is loved with love, or they make *erôs* itself into something beautiful or noble and good, just as Agathon makes the cause of beautiful and good things into a beautiful and good god, who is immortal (197d5, 204c1-6, 201e3-5, 203c6-d3). In his speech as a whole, Agathon gives an example of the poet's art: he has tried to give form to *erôs* as the god Erôs, gathering together from various aspects of our experience the principles of that experience and trying to render them manifest in a being that is familiar because in some sense it has been given a human form. The fabrication

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of the anthropomorphic gods are the means by which *erôs*, through the poet's desire for a noble name, "empties us of alienation, but fills us with familiarity [*oikeiotêtos*: the sense of one's own]" (197d1).

IV. Socrates

As we have seen, in the first preliminary part of his speech Socrates pledges that his speech will be a fitting arrangement of the beautiful or noble aspects of the truth about *erôs* (198a3-199b7). Socrates' speech as a whole implies the priority of the good over the beautiful or noble, but he presents the good in its most beautiful or noble light, an ambiguity suggested by Socrates' demeanour from the outset of the dialogue.[24] In a second preliminary passage, Socrates conducts a dialogue with Agathon, which resolves the tension in the latter's speech between Erôs as a god and *erôs* as a desire of the soul for "beautiful things" (esp. 194e7 and 197b8). Agathon admits that *erôs* is a relation between the soul and what it desires and so lacks. Thus *erôs* cannot be beautiful, and, since Agathon agrees that good things are beautiful, he must also agree that *erôs* cannot be good (199c6-200b3). Defining *erôs* as a desire relates it to time, since one can obviously desire for the future what one already possesses (200b4-d7). There is thus no *erôs* without soul, and since there is no soul without life, there is no *erôs* without death.[25] From Socrates' viewpoint the quality of one's *erôs* issues from one's response to this fact, a response that is either, on the one hand, broadly "poetic" or generative, or, on the other, philosophical.

Socrates defers the conclusion from Agathon's admissions, that *erôs* cannot be a god, to Diotima, the imaginary interlocutor of his youthful education.[26] Socrates too had accepted the thought "that Erôs was a great god, and is of beautiful things" (201e5), and is similarly compelled to admit that *erôs* is neither good nor beautiful according to his own account (201e5-7). The young Socrates wouldn't "dare" say that a god is not happy in the possession of good and beautiful things (202c7-9), but there needs no daring now to say that none of the Olympian gods are really gods from this Socratic viewpoint, which accords with their assimilation to the unchanging, soulless forms elsewhere.[27]

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Erôs may not be good and beautiful or immortal, but Diotima insists that he is not thereby bad and ugly or mortal; rather, he is something "in-between" these inseparable pairs (*toutoin*, 202b5). Her example of an "in-between" is right opinion, which is in-between knowledge and ignorance because it hits upon being but cannot give an account (202a5-9). That is, an in-between somehow encompasses both extremes of an opposition, as in her parallel descriptions of *erôs* as being well-supplied with deficiency[28] and of the philosopher as resourceful because self-consciously aware of a lack of wisdom (203e4-204a7).

In the next section, Diotima splits apart the good and the beautiful or noble, which Agathon and the young Socrates had identified. She begins once more from their premise, asking Socrates, "the one who has an *erôs* for the beautiful has an *erôs* for what?" Socrates answers that it is that the beautiful be one's own, but he cannot say what such possession would bring. When Diotima suggests substituting the good for the beautiful Socrates readily answers that the possession of good things brings happiness (204d4-205a3). This answer only "seems" (*dokei*) to bring an end to the question because it leaves the good unspecified both in itself and in its relation to the beautiful. Diotima focuses on the latter question. She is about to show that almost everyone misunderstands their own good, and so although everyone "loves" (*erāi*) the good, we cut off a form of it and only call some people "lovers" (*erastai*). Diotima compares this usage to the fact that we also cut off a part of "making" (*poiêsis*) and call only those involved in the part concerned with the muses "poets" (*poiêtai*, 205a9-c9).

This is not an accidental comparison. Diotima will go on to claim that all mortal beings desire to be immortal, and that the apprehension of the beautiful is in effect the apprehension of the promise of fulfilling that desire, the response to which is productive or generative, a response that is typified by the lovers and the poets. Diotima concludes that the end of our desires is immortality through two intermediate definitions of *erôs*. Firstly, *erôs* is the desire to have the good always. This definition is not argued for, but it appears that the desire to be "always" (*aei*) somehow issues from the fact that desire, whenever one does desire, is "always"

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(*aei*) of the good (cf. 206a11-12 with 205a7).[29] Secondly, it follows that the "work" of *erôs* is "giving birth in the beautiful both in body and in soul" (207b7-8). The reason for this definition is more clearly brought out: everything mortal desires immortality insofar as lies in its power, and the only immortality for a mortal being is by the generation of another like itself (207d1-2, 206c5-7, e7-8). This desire is, however, a "device" (208b2) of nature, not a deliberate decision or an activity based on self-understanding of the being concerned, just as the product that the desire issues in is not really a continuance of one's self. *Erôs* is not really "of" but only "concerned with" (*peri*, 204c1-6) the beautiful because the beautiful or noble is somehow only a means to the good.

Thus our response to beauty is generative or productive, because we apparently – but only apparently, of course – live on in that which is produced. Those who are more pregnant in body seek to reproduce themselves by children, while those more pregnant in soul seek to leave behind a beautiful or noble name or, in Homer's words, "to lay down an immortal fame for all time" (208c5-6). At the peak of this activity are the poets themselves, who educate in "*phronêsis* and the rest of virtue" (209a3). Diotima will refer to Homer and Hesiod as the makers of children for whom temples are built, children which inform the loves of people for each other and their understanding of the various human excellences.[30] Their "children" then are the gods and their ways, an interpretation which appears to find confirmation in Herodotus' assertion that these two poets set down for the Greeks the being, shape, name, arts, and honors of their gods (*Historiae* II.53). The memorials left by the great poets are in a sense more the product of their souls than that of lovers; yet, even for the poets, the deceptive character of the generative or poetic response to life is twofold: it is based upon the illusory end of immortality, and despite appearances it uses the beautiful or noble as an instrument to achieve its end or good.

Diotima emphasizes that the desire for the beautiful or noble would appear to be quite "irrational" if it were not for the motive of fame, presumably because of the impossibility of becoming literally immortal by substituting another for oneself (208c3-4). These considerations do

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not reduce the beautiful or noble to an illusion. In fact some awareness that one cannot actually become immortal is essential to the nobility or beauty of actions and words. It is for this reason that love and death are so often associated in literature, sometimes with seemingly insufficient reason; that is why, for example, Shakespeare's Juliet and Romeo speak in images of death from virtually the moment they meet, and why the couple are so quickly settled upon the tomb.[31] The same phenomenon is essential to the recognition of nobility more broadly understood, although perhaps a Platonic education is necessary for it to reach the degree of self-consciousness expressed in the melancholy of Cornelias Scipio Aemilianus Africanus when he watched his legions finally defeat Carthage after more than a century's war. According to Polybius, instead of glorying in his victory Scipio was moved to reflect on the inevitable fate of Rome and quoted the words Homer puts in Hector's mouth, "For I know this well in my mind and my heart: the day will come when sacred Ilios will be destroyed, and so too Priam and the people of Priam of the good ash-spear."[32] The noble is always tinged with sadness. The admiration for those who act nobly or for a "higher good" is necessarily compounded with the recognition of the sacrifice of other tangible goods that such deeds exact. Thus it is not that the beautiful or noble is an illusion, but Diotima finds an element of ambivalence or self-misunderstanding in our poetic or productive activities which both respond to and embody beauty or nobility. Diotima borrows the words of a poet to illuminate that ambivalence or self-misunderstanding of our ends: "in sum, all desire for good things and for being happy is both 'the greatest and a treacherously deceptive *erôs*' for everyone" (205d1-3).

Diotima's understanding of *erôs* is intended to comprehend and surpass that of the poets. All human beings desire the good, not the half or the whole, as Aristophanes asserted (205d10-206a2). It is because their desire for the good leads them to desire to be immortal that *erôs* is for "genesis and giving birth in" or "by means of the beautiful or noble" (205d10-206a2). The beautiful is subordinate or instrumental to the orientation by the good and not, as Agathon thought, identical to or the cause of the good: "beauty is *only* the promise of happiness," as a modern "poet" said.[33]

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The last section of Diotima's speech, often called the ladder of love, represents an education *via* a progress upwards through the apprehension of the beauty or nobility manifested by bodies, souls, laws and practices, and the sciences, culminating in a single science of beauty itself. There is space here only for an observation on the priority of philosophy to poetry that this passage suggests. One must pass from the attraction to the beauty in one body to that in all because, "if it is necessary to pursue beauty in form (*ep' eidei*), it would be a quite mindless (*anoia*) not to believe that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same" (210b2-3). Naturally the priority of mind and intelligibility make one wonder if the full experience of *erôs* can be preserved in philosophy.

Diotima states that the recognition of the kinship of the various exemplars of beauty is only possible "if the one leading leads correctly," and the recognition of the superiority of the beauty of the soul to that of the body is accomplished by force of the political concept of honour (*timiôteron*), just as the beauty or nobility in laws and practices is seen only by compulsion (210a6-7, b7, c3). That is to say, the customary or habitual and punitive means which particular communities employ in varying degrees to transmit their convictions are necessary if one is to be able to give priority to the soul and to "see" or contemplate (*theasasthai*, 210c3) the nobility of soul exhibited in actions, practices, and laws. Nobility and virtue or philosophy may be human ends by nature, and so by definition universal in some sense; however, one can know or see what is noble and good only after habituation in the *mores* produced by the legislator's or poet's art, and these are by definition conventional or particular. On this basis one might say that Diotima agrees with Aristotle that art or habituation completes nature.[34] Of course the political community cultivates its members as citizens for its own sake, which differs considerably from taking that cultivation as a means to seeing the nobility of the soul regardless of the particular conventions it issues from, that is, as a means to philosophy.[35]

Diotima therefore concedes to Aristophanes the compulsory and particular character of the laws; however, unlike Aristophanes, who posits an impossible and pre-political human end, Socrates' trans-political end

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is grounded in a view of human nature that comprehends the capacity for speech and the intelligibility of beauty or nobility.[36] Diotima also agrees with Agathon that *eros* is concerned with the beautiful or noble, but teaches that the lovers or poets misunderstand themselves in experiencing it as the end. The philosophic interest in beauty or nobility would seem to be non-productive in this respect because it resists the false inference to the desire for immortality. Socrates expresses this elsewhere by saying he is a midwife to the opinions of others and so sterile, by denying that he is a poet, and by saying that philosophy is studying to die (*Theaetetus* 149b4 ff., *Phaedo* 64a4-6 and ff., *Republic* 330b8-c8).

Diotima makes two presentations of the end of the progression in beauty or nobility. In the first the philosopher may instantaneously catch sight of beauty itself, and such vision is that for the sake of which all the prior labours were undertaken: practice and production are for the sake of "theory" in the original sense of "seeing" or "contemplation" (210e2-6). In the second, she describes how beauty or nobility itself will appear to the imagination (*phantazesthai*) as separate from any particular beautiful things yet responsible for their beauty (211a5-d1). Then she offers the prospect that one may "touch" (*haptoito*, 211b7, cf. 212a4) this product of the imagination of philosophic poetry, the beautiful or noble itself, thus going beyond "looking upon" it to "being with" it, knowing what it is in itself, and subsequently producing true virtue. She offers, in sum, a picture of reaching the end of philosophy and becoming wise regarding at least this part of the whole (211d7-8, 212a1-5). It seems at least arguable that she presents an image that exceeds her own definition of what may be accepted as knowledge (202a6-7). Certainly she makes this positive claim with the same term that Socrates uses to reject Agathon's claim that wisdom may be conveyed by touch (*haptomenos*, 175c7-e2); Socrates claims only that he is "persuaded" by her that *erôs* is one of the more useful fellow-workers for human nature (212b1-4). It may be Diotima's final claim to wisdom which causes him to characterize her as both wise and as someone who falsely claim**s** wisdom, that is, "a perfect sophist" (208b8, c1; 206b6).

However we interpret the final section of Diotima's speech, it does give priority to "looking at" over "being with" and so "making." Thus,

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if philosophy is characterized by the contemplation of the beautiful or noble this does not mean that its end is the beautiful. From the point of view of Socrates' speech, the whole sphere of human activity is guided by an anticipation of the good, and the peak, self-conscious quest for the good is philosophy. Within that broader sphere are those motivated by *erôs* and guided by the beautiful or noble, in general the lovers and at the peak the poets. By contrast, philosophy is listed not with the poetic or generative activities but with goods that do not obviously share that aspiration (205d4-5). It may be that Socrates makes the most diffident claim that his speech is actually a praise of Erôs (212b7-c3), because the priority of theory to practice extirpates the element of "being with" in *erôs*.[37] The conscious priority of the good is visible in Diotima's claim that "it is here, if anywhere, that life if worth living (*biôton*) for a human being - contemplating the beautiful itself" (211d1-3). This phrase reminds one of Socrates' declaration in the *Apology* that "the greatest good for a human being is this, to make speeches every day about virtue and the other things you hear me conversing about in examining both myself and others, and the unexamined life is not worth living (*ou biôton*) for a human being" (38a2-6). This seems entirely consistent with the picture in the *Symposium* – the good is to be found in the contemplation of the beautiful or noble which is exhibited in the poems, laws, and practices produced by the poets, politicians and others. Why is the good found there? This question is not addressed explicitly in this text, but it seems to be because those whose poems produce or express the noble or beautiful identify the noble with the good, just as every regime must say that following its standards is not just noble but good for one.[38] Thus the legislators of the city of Plato's *Laws* claim to be tragic poets of the best and most beautiful tragedy in founding the regime "as an imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life" (817b1-c1), which is another way of saying that the law wishes to be a discovery of being (*Minos* 315a2-3 with 315a6-b12). Socrates' turn to the contemplation of the beautiful or noble is thus a turn to the examination of authoritative opinions about the human good, and so one way of characterizing Socrates' obliging philosophy "to examine life and customs [*moribus*], and good and bad."[39]

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V. Conclusion

> *Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be…We shed tears from sympathy with real and necessary distress; as we burst into laughter from want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable and unnecessary…To explain the nature of laughter and tears is to account for the condition of human life; for it is in a manner compounded of these two!*
>
> William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1841: 1-2)

In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes and Agathon provide comic and tragic perspectives upon the distance between human life and its end; both associate the role of the gods with the arts, laws, and discourse of civilized life, and give poetry the first role in forming and ennobling, or in reconciling us to this life.[40] For Aristophanes, comedy both expresses and ridicules our resentful desire for some impossible natural fulfillment or absolute autonomy against the arbitrary constraints of civilization. In Agathon's speech it appears that the emulation of poets and innovators in the arts is the mainspring of civilized life, like the "good strife (*eris*)" in Hesiod.[41] The beauty or nobility Agathon enjoins in this text seems not to express the nobility of the tragic hero, yet he does illustrate the function of the poet as the maker of beautiful gods. This gives tragedy some priority over comedy, as Socrates suggests at the ends of the dialogue:[42] icon making must precede iconoclasm however edifying in intention.

Socrates' speech makes the case for philosophy's comprehension of comedy and tragedy. Philosophical inquiry is founded both in the recognition of the necessary arbitrariness or incompleteness of human life and in the apprehension of beauty and nobility, or the examination of the promise of its completion. In so doing it provides a psychological criticism of the poets on two grounds. Firstly, their rendering of human nature elides the faculties of speech and mind that would justify their own "high thoughts" (190b6). Secondly, it is claimed, the beauty or nobility of their works is in the service of the poets' own desire for self-perpetuation, which depends upon the perpetuation of the virtues they articulate by the political community (cf. *Republic* 493d3-7). Although it may seem

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paradoxical, in addition to the charge of self-misunderstanding, the root of Socrates' political criticisms of poetry is the allegation that the poet must care too much for the political virtues. The basis for that allegation is that the poet thereby slights the intellectual virtues that enabled him to see what he could make (cf. *Republic* 599d7 ff., esp. 600a1-7).

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Notes

1 The most prominent candidate for the peak of poetry appears to be the epic (see *Symposium* 209d1-2), but Socrates calls Homer "the most poetic and the first of tragic poets" and "the first teacher and leader of all these beautiful [or "noble"] tragic things" (*Republic* 607a2-3, 595c1-3). Aristotle's view is similar: he credits Homer with providing the model of both comedy and tragedy, offering the proportion that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are to tragedy as the *Margites* is to comedy (*Poetics* 1448b39-a3). That comedy is defined by concerning the laughable (*geloios*) and tragedy the noble (*kalos*) is suggested at several points in the *Symposium* (e.g. 189a8, b3, 6-7, 213c3-4; 212e7-8). It might be helpful to mention Aristotle's definitions of tragedy and comedy: tragedy and comedy are differentiated by the quality of their protagonists, the actions of the tragic character being noble or serious and those of the comic character mean or inferior (1448a1-b3, 24-38, 1449b24-28). Tragedy causes pity and fear, which are elicited by imagining that some evil which is painful and destructive will happen to someone unworthy of it (*Rhetoric* 1382a21-2, 1385b11-16). Comedy concerns "the laughable, which is a part of the disgraceful," that is, of an "error or disgrace which is painless and not destructive" (*Poetics* 1449a33-5).

2 175e7-9; 185c5 and ff. The latter incident not only provides a comment on Aristophanes, it brings together the comic and tragic poet with Socrates as the second and weightier half of the six speeches on *erôs* (Clay 1993 provides a thorough discussion of this point). Socrates directs explicit criticism only at the speeches of the poets. Henceforth, citations of Plato will appear in the text, those for the *Symposium* without a title, according to the line numbers of the Oxford edition, vol. I, ed. E. A. Duke, *et al.* (1995), vols. II-V ed. J. Burnet (1905-13), and the single volume of the *Republic*, ed. S. R. Slings (2003). Citations of other classical texts will employ the standard references of the editions listed in the Bibliography. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

3 "The beautiful" will frequently translate *ta kala* (literally "the beautiful (or noble) [things]"). The nominalization of adjectives is less common in English (e.g. "the great and the good"), but the

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alternatives seem at least as unhelpful.

4 L. P. Gerson has recently sought to revive the Neo-Platonic version of the identification of the good and the beautiful (not excluding Proclus' view of Platonism or Plotinus' understanding of Plato's notion of the good as "lover of itself"), which Gerson claims constitutes our best chance of "A Platonic Reading of the *Symposium*" (2006: 55). Christopher Rowe identifies the beautiful as a species of the genus, the good (1998: 244 ff.). R. E. Allen identifies the good and the beautiful, asserting that the beautiful is the sensible aspect of the good (1991: 45, 54, 85). Gould calls the beautiful "a special, electrifying example of the good" (1963: 46). We shall claim that the beautiful is not homogeneous with the good, regardless of the voltage.

5 Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," V.9-10 (n.d.: 248).

6 This seems to be the position of Allan Bloom (1993: 522). In a book notable for its anti-reductive retrieval of classic texts, Bloom might appear at this point to be reductive about the beautiful or noble. Gerson (2006: 51, n. 10) claims with some reason to see the same position in Leo Strauss' published seminar notes on the *Symposium*: Strauss claims that Diotima distinguishes the good and the beautiful, but he states that "in the final presentation the beautiful is substituted for the good, and this is another indication of what I call the poetic presentation of philosophy" (2001: 200 and 238). Gerson remarks, "[i]n such a presentation there is no compelling need for consistency" (2006: 51, n. 10). But is consistency the only aim of poetry (as opposed to the account of poetry)? Outside of these two isolated statements Strauss develops the proposal that this substitution is not merely rhetorical but rather that the love of the beautiful is an aspect of the poetic response to the fundamental love of the good (2001: 241-2). The position of this essay is closer to this second interpretation, and to that of Stanley Rosen (1982: 273) and Seth Benardete (2000: 181).

7 Cf. *Apology* 22a1-e6 and the *Ion*. It is easy to misunderstand Plato's position because when we ask whether something is "an art or a science" we usually assume an opposition between the two (the more intuitive or creative *versus* the rational). Cf. the remarks of E. H. Gombrich, the author of a prominent text in art history, which begins with the statement that "[t]here is no such thing as art" (1995: 4). He explains this assertion as follows: "I go back deliberately to the old meaning of the term 'art,' when art was identified with skill or mastery – the art of war, the art of love, or whatever else. Art is something with a skill, there's no disembodied skill as such; skill is always applied to a particular task…For Leonardo, *arte* was a skill, a know-how applied both to his scientific experiments and to his painting" (quoted from an interview with Carrier 1996: 67).

8 It is a commonplace that the word *kalos* may denote "beautiful, noble, decent, proper, specious, useful, admirable," and so forth. If there were an English word that approximately encompassed this range we could employ it consistently and try to solicit Plato's intention from its various usages, but there is no such word. The word "fine," which is sometimes so used, is not only too narrow but those who use it to refer to bodily splendor now seem to belong to a different linguistic group from those who use it to refer to the soul. Joe Sachs, in his consistent if idiosyncratic translations of Plato and Aristotle, claims that we can simply use "beauty" on the grounds that we can say "that was a beautiful thing you did" (his most extensive discussion of this point appears in "Part III: The Noble?" of his translation of Aristotle's *Ethics*: 2002: xxi-xxv, quoted from xxii). This seems to me quite wrong. If the word 'noble' "probably denotes some sort of highminded naiveté, something hopelessly impractical" (2002: xxi), that is due to the low, calculable utility of what is considered "practical" in this time and place, especially since the first and increasingly since the last war. Such a view is precisely the contrary of the notion common to many of the classical poets and philosophers that the practical is the arena of the noble.

9 Cf. Thucydides' report that "*erôs* fell upon all alike to send the expedition" to Sicily, which was ultimately the downfall of Athens (*Historiae*, VI.24.3). The date of the *Symposium* and the presence of Alcibiades make the Sicilian expedition and the violation of the Hermes and of the mysteries

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and their aftermath all part of the context of the dialogue. For discussion see Rosen (1987: 7-8, 285-6 and ff.).

10 Thus Dover is right to say that those who seek to construct a "hypothetical comedy" out of the tale are "confounding essence and accident" (1966: 41). Less plausible is Dover's claim that Aristophanes' tale can account for "the observed facts" of *erôs* or love better than does Socrates' (see note 15 below).

11 *elpidas megistas* (193d3). Aristophanes claims that even when someone does meet their other half they "are then wondrously struck senseless with affection and intimacy, and with *erôs*" (192b7-c1). Presumably they are struck with *erôs* at the very moment when the desire for union should be satisfied because of the intuitive knowledge that they are not genuine other halves and that they cannot truly become one from being two. Otherwise put, they sense that they must separate again, if only at death, or that no human union can truly satisfy them.

12 Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1159b16-17: it is laughable for a lover to expect to be loved in return.

13 Note that the original "double" humans are apparently already paying obeisance to the Olympians before their revolt, and that there seems to be no question they might succeed in defeating the Olympians and becoming independent of them.

14 E.g., one of Aristophanes' chief editors, Dover, characterizes the "the recurrent political themes" in *Birds* as "a familiar one: old ways good, new ways bad" (1993: 69). Rosen discusses the political character of the plays, and also suggests that Aristophanes' intends his obscenity "either to restrict Eros through the body or to turn Eros against itself" which also accounts "perhaps for [the obscenity] of later moralists like Rabelais and Swift" (1987: 121 and ff.; quoted at 125).

15 Martha C. Nussbaum, for example, takes Aristophanes to teach that "the individual is loved not only as a whole, but also as a unique and irreplaceable whole," a teaching which is then realized "in the person and story of Alcibiades" (1987: 173, 197). Nussbaum admits this makes our preference for another "mysterious," just as Dover asserts that "the most singular characteristic of love" is that someone may have a "preference" for another without that other possessing "objectively desirable qualities" that anyone else may understand, which "preference is unshaken by the accessibility of [another] infinitely desirable" person (1966: 48-50). These views seem to betray "the observed facts" of love, as these have always sought expression in literature, by overlooking the complexity of *erôs* and/or of love, not to mention that Alcibiades' "person and story" expresses a conflict chiefly between his attractions to philosophical protreptic and to political glory and not simply a preference for a whole individual.

16 Cf. 192c7-d2 with *Republic* 505e1-3 and ff.

17 *kosmoi*, 193a4; *kosmioteros*, 190e4. *Kosmios* is derived, obviously, from *kosmos*. One could express the problem of nature for Aristophanes by saying that the cosmic gods from which human nature is derived can tell us nothing about the virtue or "orderliness" of human beings (see Strauss 2001: 144).

18 No details are provided concerning the possible communion of the two halves before they were split. Their togetherness seems to be limited to the physical and this is how the inarticulate desire to be re-united is represented.

19 185c5 and ff. and 212c4 and ff.; cf. 193d6-8. That Alcibiades' entrance disrupts Aristophanes is, we take it, a hint that political ambition or the love of the noble contains elements not explicable in Aristophanes' schema. That is, even if Aristophanes is right that there is a displacement of the longing for wholeness upon the longing for power, he cannot then account for a love of what is splendid (the beautiful or noble) for its own sake, or a longing not only to be admired for one's virtues but to actually possess the various excellences for which one is admired. This is the dialectic of honor that allows Socrates to attract Alcibiades for a time at least (cf. *Alcibiades I* with Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b22-30).

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20 For example, R. E. Allen's insightful criticism of Aristophanes' speech contrasts with a brief delineation of Agathon's speech that is chiefly occupied with showing it to be an example of Gorgias' style of rhetoric (1991: 38-40).

21 At the end of his speech Aristophanes refers to "what each of the remainder will say, but rather what each of the pair [*hekateros*] will say, for Agathon and Socrates remain" (193d8-e2). For the connection between Socrates, Agathon, and Euripides, see esp. *Frogs* 1491-5 in the context of the contest between Euripides and Aeschylus; *Clouds* 1371 in the context of 1321 and ff.; and Agathon's role in the *Women at Thesmophoria* esp. 173-4, 193 and ff.

22 The *Women at Thesmophoria* is obviously predicated on the perceived softness or effeminacy of Agathon and his works. Agathon's quotation from Homer omits the following words, that Atê in walking on their heads is "harming human beings" (*Iliad* 19.94). For commentary see Rosen (1987: 178-9).

23 Rosen (1987: 195) wonders why it is that, "although Agathon links gods and men thoughout his speech, when he is moved to poetry the gods are replaced by nature": surely it may be because it is "the irony of Plato, who inspires Agathon to prophesy the real consequences of his interpretation of Erôs," but is it not also a demonstration of how Agathon believes that poetry has the power to remake human nature? Strauss (2001: 166-7) proposes that the metaphorical means by which "eros as human love [can] be responsible for quieting winds and waves" is "a kind of parody of what poetry does with eros," by which he appears to mean its falsification and construction into a self-subsisting being (2001: 177-7 with 156, 162, and 165).

24 Socrates has made himself "beautiful or noble" (*houto kalos gegenemenos*) for the occasion when he meets Aristodemus (174a5, 8-9), and explains that he has "beautified [him]self in order to be beautiful in going to the beautiful," not 'the good going to the good,' which obviously puns on Agathon's name (174b3-c4).

25 Assuming with Socrates in Plato that the characteristics of life and thought are the attributes of the soul (e.g. *Republic* 353d3-12; cf. Aristotle, *de Anima* 405b11 ff. with 414b29 ff.).

26 The fictional report Socrates makes of his dialogue with Diotima seems to refer to a dramatic date in the vicinity of 440 BC, although it represents an indeterminate period of instruction. This date is calculated on the basis of the reference to Diotima's delaying of the Athenian plague of 330 BC by ten years (*Smp*. 210d; so, e.g., Bury, 1932: 94-5). The *Symposium* thus represents the third youngest portrait of Socrates in the dialogues, following his autobiographical account of his early interest in the "inquiry into nature" in the *Phaedo*, and his encounter in the *Parmenides*, when his first venturing of the hypothesis of the forms is subjected to refutation by Parmenides (for a useful summary of the evidence for the dramatic dates see Nails, 2002: 308-9, 314-5, 323-4). The *Symposium* supplies us with an essential aspect of Plato's depiction of the "Socratic turn" from natural science to dialogue, the "forms," and *erôs* (for some discussion of this point see Rosen 1987: 221-5; Benardete 2000: 178-9; and Strauss 2001: 17-18, 186-7). No assumptions about the chronology of Plato's writings or the development of his thought are made in this essay.

27 As, e.g., in the latter part of *Republic* Book II. Perhaps one might say that the forms are what the gods become when the confusion of desire and that which is desired has begun to be resolved.

28 See, e.g., the expression "Isn't it the case that *erôs* is, first, of some certain things, [and] secondly, that it is of whichever things the lack of which is ready to hand [*parêi*]" (200e8-9). One's lack constitutes an aspect of one's holdings, as it were. Bury comments that "[t]his sounds like a jocular constradiction in terms: in Erôs there is a plentiful lack" (93, *ad* 200e). Bury possibly refers to the "plentiful lack of wit" Hamlet implies Polonius has (*Hamlet* II.ii.199), but of course the self-ignorance of a Polonius is just what this does not refer to, "for this is the difficulty of ignorance, that what is not noble and good nor intelligent seems to itself sufficient, so whoever supposes that he is not in need does not desire what he lacks" (204a4-5).

29 This seems to be the reverse of the error that Socrates alleges the previous speakers committed,

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and of which Agathon, the young Socrates, and "the many" are guilty; that is, of giving *erôs* itself all of the great and beautiful attributes possessed by the end of desire (198d7-e2, 203c6-7, 204c1-6). Cf. Benardete (200: 181).

30 See 209c7-d4 with 209a8-c7: it seems clear that the passage describing the speeches about virtue and what a good man must practice that arise between those lovers who love each others' souls as well as their bodies appears here because those speeches are informed by the creations or "children" of the poets.

31 E.g. II.iii.83-4, III.v.17-25, 54-6.

32 Polybius *Histories* 38.22 (a fragment from Appian; cf. the fragment from Plutarch preserved as 38.21.1-2). The quote is from *Iliad* VI.447-9.

33 Stendhal (1927: 44, n. 1, emphasis added).

34 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b27-1095a13; *Physics* 194a21-28.

35 This is of course a great theme in Plato. For one articulation of it, see, e.g., *Republic* 476a5-b2, 478e7-479a7, d2-4, 480a1-12.

36 Cf. the use of the word *eidos* in the three speeches (189e3, 196a2, and 210b2).

37 In which case Diotima described the philosopher more accurately when she called *erôs* "homeless" (203d1). Diotima herself is a product of the poetic aspect of philosophy, as are the very speeches in which Socrates gives this account (cf. *logous poioito*, 207a6, in the light of the surrounding discussion of *poiêsis*). There is no space here to explore the poetic aspect of philosophy as it is presented in this dialogue, but it seems safe to argue that it is represented as subordinate to seeing or knowing.

38 This is the theme of the first half of the dialogue between Socrates and Meletus in the *Apology* (24c10-26b2).

39 Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* IV.iv [10-11].

40 For the connection between the arts and the Olympian gods see 190d6-191a3, 197a3-b7.

41 *Works and* Days, ll. 11 and ff., quoted at 24.

42 223d5-6: Socrates argues that "someone who composes tragic poetry by art is [also] a comic poet," (223d5) but he does not specify that the reverse is true.

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