

# The Subversion of Plato's Quasi-Phenomenology and Mytho-Poetics in the Symposium

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*Is there a significant difference between Plato's texts and what is known as 'Platonism', that is, the philosophical tradition that claims Plato as its progenitor? Focusing on the Symposium, an attempt is made here to show that, far from merely fitting neatly into the categories of Platonism—with its neat distinction between the super-sensible and the sensible—Plato's own text is a complex, tension-filled terrain of countervailing forces. In the Symposium this tension obtains between the perceptive insights, on the one hand, into the nature of love and beauty, as well as the bond between them, and the metaphysical leap, on the other hand, from the experiential world to a supposedly accessible, but by definition super-sensible, experience-transcending realm. It is argued that, instead of being content with the philosophical illumination of the ambivalent human condition—something consummately achieved by mytho-poetic and quasi-phenomenological means—Plato turns to a putatively attainable, transcendent source of metaphysical reassurance which, moreover, displays all the trappings of an ideological construct. This is demonstrated by mapping Plato's lover's vision of 'absolute beauty' on to what Jacques Lacan has characterized as the unconscious structural quasi-condition of all religious and ideological illusion.*

To bring the texts written by Plato, and those written by Jacques Lacan (or, for that matter, any other thinker who provides one with equally powerful conceptual means of interpretation) together, yields interesting results. I am thinking especially of the hermeneutic significance of Lacan's early work on the genesis, in infancy, of certain psychic structures or 'images', which play a crucial role in the subject's life with respect to ideological or religious aspirations and attachments. To approach Plato's work with this in hand, enables one to differentiate between those insights on his part which are highly illuminating as far as human experience is concerned, even across a chasm of more than 2000 years, and those (regrettably perhaps more influential) aspects of his legacy which bear the stamp of metaphysical illusion—precisely what Lacan enables one to unmask so effectively.

This should not be regarded as being tantamount to subjecting Plato, or one of his dialogues, to psychoanalysis. One has to agree with Vernant (1981: 63-65), that instead of foisting a (Freudian) 'psychoanalysis' on to works that appeared in the historical, socio-political and cultural context

of ancient Greece—Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* being a case in point—such an interpretation would only be justified if a painstaking analysis of all these factors surrounding, *and* internal to the text, were to demonstrate the justifiability of proclaiming it as revealing a universal truth regarding the Oedipal triangle Freud famously 'discovered' in Sophocles' tragedy. At best one could speak, with Gadamer (1982: 273), of understanding or interpretation here as a 'fusion of horizons' between the Greek (con-)text and the Freudian theoretical context of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Judging by what he says here, Vernant (1981: 65) would, I believe, agree with Gadamer:

For the modern interpreter it is only if account is taken of this [historical, social and mental] context and framework that all the significant meanings and pertinent features of the text can be revealed.

Vernant sees in Greek tragedy the incipient signs, in the ancient world, that humanity was discovering its own relative autonomy from supernatural forces. According to him, tragedy at the time manifests (1981: 66):

...an anxious questioning concerning the relationship of man to his actions: to what extent is man really the source of his actions? Even when he seems to be taking the initiative and bearing the responsibility for them does not their true origin lie elsewhere?

It is not difficult to perceive here the possibility of a rapprochement between Vernant's scholarly philological approach to Greek tragedy (which sets out to understand it in relation to its own cultural-historical setting), and the Freudian interpretation of *Oedipus Rex* (which discerns in it 'direct' confirmation of Freud's own theoretical position regarding the child's desire for the mother and murderous intent towards the father), in the guise of a 'fusion of [different] horizons'. Such a 'fusion' between different horizons of meaning implies a certain analogous, shared structure, without reducing the historical meaning of Greek tragedy to its paradigmatic psychoanalytical understanding: the one illuminates the other. Just as a painstaking investigation of all the factors surrounding Sophocles's text yields the insight into its contemporaneous cultural meaning that Vernant articulates in terms of an interrogation of the 'true' source of human action, so, too, Freud's understanding of it draws attention to the unconscious provenance of human behaviour in a domain that 'lies elsewhere'. Armed with this knowledge one may well detect resonances of comparable kinds of causal displacement

between the historico-psychological understanding of a text like *Oedipus Rex* and its Freudian interpretation. I believe that certain of Lacan's structural-psychological concepts allow one to elicit similar resonances in Plato's *Symposium* (and *vice versa*), as I shall attempt to show.

Lacan (Lee 1990: 14-15) distinguishes among three so-called 'imagoes' in his early work on the family complexes—the 'maternal' imago, the 'fraternal' imago and the 'paternal' imago, each of which represents a psycho-structural complex which, upon acquisition by the infant subject in formative experiential situations, continues functioning paradigmatically at an unconscious, quasi-transcendental level for the rest of the subject's life. Their respective functions are different, but related. The 'maternal' imago is engendered in the situation of the needy infant's dependence on the mother (or carer) who, being correlative to its own chronic deficiency, represents the fullness of being that it craves. The 'fraternal' imago, in turn, signifies the unconscious structural dynamic according to which the child's primordial social experience is one of being with others (sisters, brothers, cousins), with whom he or she identifies—something which invariably gives rise to envy, jealousy, rivalry and aggression. The upshot is that human social behaviour is modelled on the 'fraternal' imago as its unconscious foundation, and—rather startlingly—that envy and jealousy are archetypal social affects. Lacan's 'paternal' imago corresponds to Freud's Oedipus complex, in so far as it comprises the formative structural configuration correlative to paternal authority (internalized as the superego, or societal normativity), with its double function of being the source of repression of the child's sexual desires, as well as the paradigm of worthy sexual maturity (Lee 1990: 15).

In his important essay on the so-called 'mirror stage' (Lacan 1977: 1-7), the line of thought concerning identification, fundamental to these three imagoes, is taken further. Here Lacan argues that the infant's apprehension of its own mirror image affords it the ambivalent opportunity of identifying with an iconic totality which ostensibly re-presents itself (its 'self'), and simultaneously alienates it from itself (its 'self'). The reason for this is that the image—which Lacan describes as being 'orthopaedic', and hence desirable—displays a (spurious or fictional) unity and wholeness lacked by the infant at a time (between 6 and 18 months) when it is still physically uncoordinated. Hence the countervailing impulses of identifying with the image or fiction of 'oneself', on the one hand, and showing aggression towards it, on the other hand, as 'someone' who appears to be a rival.<sup>1</sup> The 'self' which has its provenance here, is what Lacan calls the *moi*, or ego (the subject as located in the register of the imaginary), and one cannot overestimate the

importance of his insistence, supported by his analysis of the mirror stage, that it is a fictional construct.<sup>2</sup> Nor can one ignore the disconcerting implication of Lacan's theory of the ego or *moi*, namely, that the structure of human knowledge is 'paranoiac' (Lacan 1977: 3),<sup>3</sup> and of his observation, that in its "most general structure" human knowledge endows "the ego and its objects with attributes of permanence, identity, [and] substantiality" (1977a: 17). I would say that this amounts to the claim, that there is a contrast, conflict, or at least a tension, between the fluctuating field of human experience and humanity's 'delusional' tendency to substantialize this 'punctuated flow', and moreover, that it goes back to the formation of the 'maternal imago' as 'retrospectively' projected illusion' that compensates for the infant's pitiful lack of independence. Small wonder that Joan Copjec (1990: 52) remarks: "...Lacan insists on the constitution of a 'desire not to know'; and thus of a subject at odds with itself."

Why are these imagoes relevant for the understanding of 'metaphysical illusions' detectable in (among others) Plato's thought? I would like to show that such illusions may be interpreted as metaphysical counterparts of the Lacanian imagoes outlined above, and that such a 'metaphysical illusion' conforms precisely to what Lacan characterizes as the 'paranoiac' structure of human knowledge. The most pertinent of them is probably the 'maternal' imago, in conjunction with those aspects of the others, as well as of the 'mirror stage', which are paradigmatic for what is known as 'identification' (the acquisition of a sense of 'self') on the part of the subject. Lee (1990: 14-15) stresses that Lacan's main interest here is to show how human actions are structured by these unconscious imagoes in the shape of formal patterns for possible human behaviour. It is not difficult to glimpse the structuring function of the 'maternal' imago behind all (fundamentally ideological) quests for a *plenum* of some kind, whether narcissistically iconic (concerning the 'self'), religious, 'philosophical' (that is, metaphysical) or political, insofar as it corresponds with the interminable lack or deficiency on the part of the subject in the face of whatever totality it desires. Lacan puts it as follows (quoted in Lee 1990: 14):

If it were necessary to define the most abstract form where it is refound, we might characterize it thus: a perfect assimilation of the totality of being. Under this formulation with a slightly philosophical aspect, we can recognize these nostalgias of humanity: the metaphysical mirage of universal harmony, the mystical abyss of affective fusion, the social utopia of a totalitarian guardianship, and every outburst of the obses-

sion with a paradise lost before birth or of the most obscure aspiration toward death.

Ironically, as I hope to show, Plato's demonstrable commitment to 'delusional totalities' notwithstanding, one finds in his work, equally, an abundance of insight into the human condition in what I would argue are non-metaphysical terms. It is well-known that Plato's work has influenced western philosophy since its inception. When reading his dialogues, one is struck by the difference between 'Plato' and 'platonism', or the traditional, oversimplifying account of his thinking. In a dialogue such as the *Symposium*, for instance, one encounters evidence, not only of the standard conception—that he provided the metaphysical-philosophical means to arrest the flow of time, or becoming, by way of a hypostatisation of being in trans-spatio-temporal terms—but at the same time also undeniable indications that he understood the world of human experience in all its complexity. To a perceptive reader it is conspicuous that these two sides of Plato—his insight into human experience, and his attempt to rise above it—do not rhyme. Except, of course, if one keeps in mind Lacan's assessment of human knowledge as structurally 'paranoiac' or delusional, or another poststructuralist, Michel Foucault's (1972: 219) remark, consonant with Lacan's, that human beings' *desire* for knowledge and truth is stronger than truth itself. Evidently Plato was no exception to this rule.

One could focus on certain parts of the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, or of the *Timaeus*, to illustrate what I mean with the above claim. In the *Republic* (Plato 1991), it is not difficult to deconstruct the familiar myth of the cave (in Book VII) by demonstrating carefully that the very thing on which Plato wishes to cast suspicion, namely sensory perception (which corresponds with shadows against the cave wall as its objects), is indispensable as *recognizably* the source of perceptive knowledge of the world in all its variegatedness. To be able to articulate his argument concerning the symbolic meaning of the sun-lit world outside the cave, he tacitly has to assume the value of sight as a source of knowledge—paradoxically, the very thing he wishes to reject in favour of the eternal verities accessible by reason alone, turns out to be necessary for reason to attain its goal. Moreover, Plato's elevation of intellectual 'sight' (as metaphor for intellectual conceptualisation) at the cost of the devaluation of sensory vision may also be rejected on phenomenological grounds, as Kaja Silverman has shown in *World Spectators* (2000: 1-15), not to mention Luce Irigaray's (1994) thoroughgoing feminist critique of his repression of the feminine body in his devaluation of the cave, for the sake

of promoting masculine reason (embodied in the sun).<sup>4</sup>

In the *Timaeus*, on the other hand, Plato (2000) has recourse, on the one hand, to an anthropomorphic, technomorphic account of the origin or creation of the world, while, on the other hand, he grants that it is only one possible account, and that an ‘other’ errant or bastard kind of causality—one irreconcilable with anthropomorphic cosmogonies—is thinkable, according to which the cosmos might have come into being. Jacques Derrida’s (1981: 95-117) impressive analysis of certain aspects of the *Phaedrus* (specifically concerning Plato’s aporetic use of the concept of writing as a *pharmakon*, which denotes poison and cure simultaneously) is another telling example of similar tensions at work in the ancient Greek thinker’s work.

Here the spotlight falls on the *Symposium* (Plato 1965), however—a dialogue that deals extensively with love. The first thing that strikes one about it, is that Plato places love in a constellation with a number of other concepts, including beauty, desire, wholeness, immortality, poverty (or lack), resourcefulness, creation, truth and the absolute. In Aristophanes’s contribution to the praise of love, for instance (Plato 1965: 58-65), a mythical account is given of the nature and provenance of love by attributing it to the loss of one’s ‘other half’: love is explained as the desire for completion in the restitution of one’s original ‘wholeness’.<sup>5</sup> In Socrates’s (that is, arguably Plato’s ‘own’) respective contributions to the conversation, he elaborates on virtually all these complex interconnections: that love is the offspring of poverty and resourcefulness, that the impulse to create, is fundamental to love, that love (as desire) and possession, as well as divinity and love, are mutually exclusive, (love is a ‘spirit’ halfway between humans and the gods), and that someone (even animals) is impelled to love or desire because it imparts a measure of ‘immortality’ to the individual in question. Eventually Socrates describes the account rendered by his teacher and instructress, Diotima, of the lover’s path, from the ‘lowest’ level of love (of a beautiful body), via all the intermediary levels until it reaches the highest level – that of love of absolute beauty or beauty ‘in itself’, accompanied by an ecstatic loss of self in a mystical apprehension of the Beautiful.

It is precisely at this point, I would argue, that Plato loses his bearings, as it were, and exchanges the richly variegated, sometimes paradoxical world of human experience for the unattainable world of the absolute, or what Kant called the unconditioned. From the evidence one can infer that he makes this move to subordinate the paradoxical state of affairs that exists in the world of experience or ‘becoming’—which he characterises incisively, but apparently finds unbearable due to ubiquitous finitude and

uncertainty in matters human —once and for all to an unassailable source of absolute certainty and wholeness. And with Lacan's imagoes in mind, it is not difficult to recognize in Plato's absolute an early counterpart of the totality which, at an iconic as well as a symbolic or linguistic level, entails the unfulfillable, but for most people irresistible promise of 'wholeness' (a promise or illusion inseparable from any ideology or religion). In the process of postulating such a *telos* of human endeavour, Plato ineluctably negates his own quasi-phenomenological<sup>6</sup> insight into the phenomenon of love, namely that it is born of, and nourished by, desire (which is itself predicated on lack and deprivation): love culminates, finally, in complete (not momentary), flawless fulfilment or satisfaction (*jouissance*), in this way subverting the conditions that made it possible in the first place. How does this happen in the *Symposium*?

One has to admire Plato for the sheer virtuosity of his isomorphic or analogical alignment of the performative aspect of the text (the action) with its philosophical or intellectual content from the outset, specifically in so far as the *character* of Socrates may be understood as the concrete embodiment of the *Form* of Beauty. As with so many other things in the *Symposium*, this is done via the relation between what is 'direct' and what is 'indirect'. At the beginning of the dialogue (Plato 1965: 33) Apollodorus encounters an acquaintance of his, Glaucon, and the latter requests that Apollodorus provide him with a reconstruction of the symposium or drinking party which was held in celebration of Agathon's dramatic victory with his first tragedy, where Socrates supposedly made a memorable contribution on the nature of love. Initially one gets the impression, from their conversation, that this symposium took place quite recently in the time of the narrative, but is then informed that, in fact, it occurred years earlier, when they were still mere boys. Contrary to Glaucon's belief, Apollodorus could therefore not have been an eyewitness. The analogy in question therefore depends on the following structure: Socrates, the main object of Glaucon's interest, is only indirectly accessible to him, and is several spatio-temporal levels removed from him. Glaucon, who desires information about Socrates' and others' contributions to the discussion at Agathon's drinking party, as well as Apollodorus, who was not personally present at this party, and Aristodemus, who originally gave an account of this occasion to Apollodorus, stand between Glaucon and Socrates as 'object of thought', to which one should add that every implied reader of the dialogue is an additional level removed from Socrates.<sup>7</sup>

If one compares these relations of narration to Socrates's account of the relations involved in the lover's pursuit of the Beautiful, it appears that 'absolute Beauty' corresponds isomorphically to the position of Socrates in the narrative. As mentioned earlier, the lover's quest for the Beautiful, which surpasses all merely beautiful 'things', culminates in the 'direct' apprehension of Beauty (Plato 1965: 92-95). But before this can happen, the lover first has to discover the Beautiful contemplatively in an 'indirect' manner at 'lower' worldly levels: initially in the physical beauty of one beloved person, followed by its apprehension in the beautiful bodies of many beloveds. Such a person becomes a lover of all physical beauty. Subsequent to this the stage is reached when it dawns on the lover that beauty of soul exceeds physical beauty in value and desirability, followed by the discovery of the superior beauty of moral actions and of institutions, and eventually of the beauty belonging to sciences or disciplines such as mathematics and philosophy. In this way the lover, who (according to Diotima, as related by Socrates via Apollodorus) gradually realizes that beauty is common to all these different things, is systematically led to the unique discipline that has (absolute) beauty *as such* as its object, instead of a mere derivation of it, in an admixture with other attributes. At the culminating stage of the dedicated lover's 'ascent', such a person eventually becomes privy to a revelation of 'absolute', 'eternal', Beauty 'itself' (Plato 1965: 93-94). I shall return to this.

This account of the nature of love—one that places it in an integral relation to Beauty—comes from Diotima, the woman who imparts to Socrates her knowledge in this regard (Plato 1965: 79-95). In other words, even Socrates's account of love, regardless of being 'desired' by his pupils, is again an indirect rendition, 'originally' shared with him by Diotima, the woman from Mantinea (Plato 1965: 79).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, one cannot help but notice all the intermediary stages through which a person who 'loves' has to pass before reaching the apogee of love in the mystical contemplation of that Beauty which, as object of love, must be presupposed by all other acts of love.

The question is: what does Plato want to achieve through this? By means of this mutually confirming, analogical or isomorphic relation between the dramatic-performative and the philosophical aspects of the phenomenon in question, each of which demonstrates that the true object of human striving for knowledge is elusive, and may only be attained by means of the greatest perseverance and dedication, he seems to be foregrounding something, which he believes to be of cardinal importance, at various levels. This is that there is a gap or chasm between what he understands as the sphere of Being (that



of the Forms, *inter alia* of Beauty, transcending time and space) on the one hand, and that of Becoming (the realm of all spatio-temporal phenomena), on the other. It is important to note that, his valorization of the domain of Being notwithstanding, Plato's procedure simultaneously demonstrates that the things consigned to the sphere of Becoming are not entirely worthless, in so far as they comprise the indispensable means by which the 'absolute' may be indirectly attained by humans.

Before (and in fact after) this point has been reached in the dialogue, however, one encounters other, different, but equally important instances of Plato using the 'indirect method' to convey his central insight, namely that humans are ontologically impoverished beings who may only share in the metaphysical fullness of the eternal absolute by being a *lover* (not only in the ordinary sense, but also, especially, as lover of knowledge and truth), who is committed to the pursuit of ideal beauty. My argument is that these in-between, contingent, spatio-temporally oriented phases, on the way, as it were, to what he conceived of as the absolute, exemplify Plato's true genius, in so far as they are astonishingly illuminating and revealing in (what I have referred to as) a quasi-phenomenological manner, converging, as it does, with what may also be described as a mytho-poetic mode of philosophizing. Moreover, it is striking that Plato's characterization of the *lover*, at every level where it functions (from the physical to the philosophical), subverts the mirage of a putative ontological *plenum* to which humans supposedly have participatory access—a *plenum* which instantiates one of the purest examples of a metaphysical-ideological hypostatization of an illusionary totality; one which has left its centuries-long imprint on western thought, and which has served as model for other ideological constructs of similar ilk.

If one therefore reads Plato, in a certain sense, 'against himself', one is rewarded with a wonderful insight into the ambivalent nature of being-human. On the one hand, human finitude is affirmed, but on the other, it is done without relinquishing the equally human, arguably anthropologically constitutive, ceaseless striving for self-transcendence or self-overcoming—even if the metaphysical illusion of transcending time, and concomitantly, the attainment of 'eternity', have to be forfeited.

Consider the following, for example. In Aristophanes' contribution to the eulogy on love (Plato 1965: 58-65), already, humans are characterized in mythological-narrative terms as a race of beings that has been reduced by Zeus (with the healing assistance of Apollo) from a kind of paradisiacal condition of quasi-fullness, as punishment for their hubristic craving for power, to their present mode of individual embodiment. The original quasi-fullness

in question was, according to Aristophanes (as character in Plato's dialogue), the self-sufficient whole or combination of what we know as human individuals of masculine or feminine form—that is, four-legged, four-armed, two-headed beings joined at the spine. Accordingly, Aristophanes explains love as the manifestation of every individual person's desperate striving for re-unification with her or his original 'other half'.<sup>9</sup>

One may detect a quasi-phenomenological, experientially persuasive insight here: love, or alternatively, desire, goes hand in hand with lack or absence. No one could love and desire someone or something if it is the case that she or he already 'owns' or possesses the person or entity in question.<sup>10</sup> Only that which is not part of yourself, in other words, that which transcends you in a distinctive manner, can possibly or conceivably become an 'object' of your love and desire. Love is characterized by lack. Needless to say, this phenomenological 'rule' applies not only to love between individuals; it applies equally to philosophy as practice. After all, the word 'philosophy', etymologically speaking, means 'love of wisdom', implying that the philosopher never reaches or fully attains such wisdom (and paradoxically an awareness of this impossibility is itself co-constitutive of 'wisdom'). Hence Socrates' famous *docta ignorantia*: all that one 'knows' as *philosopher*, is just how little one knows. 'Knowledge' is revisable. (It is therefore not difficult to distinguish philosophers from pseudo-philosophers—in contrast with the former, these charlatans act as if they already possess the 'truth'.) The mythological account of the nature and origin of love articulated by Plato's character of Aristophanes, is another instance of an indirect approach to the subject, in this case a narrative, mytho-poetic approach.

In Socrates' 'own' account (Plato 1965: 79-95)—which has already received some attention, and which practises the 'indirect' method of knowledge-acquisition at more than one level—the question of 'lack', 'poverty' or absence as essential constituent of love is taken further. In the first place it functions through the character of Diotima, who was allegedly Socrates' instructress in the 'art of love' (Plato 1965: 79). Secondly Plato resorts, once again, to mythopoetic means where Diotima explains to Socrates that love is not, as claimed by the majority of speakers at the symposium, a god, but rather a spiritual being halfway between gods and humans (Plato 1965: 81)—an image by means of which Plato personifies the 'incompleteness' of love once again. In other words, according to Socrates (in Plato) love is an intermediary being who is, to a certain extent, comparable with Hermes, the messenger who mediates interpretively between gods and humans.<sup>11</sup> Her striking quasi-phenomenological account of the genealogy of love continues

along the way that Plato has prepared for it by way of Aristophanes' eulogy. According to Diotima, love is the child of 'Resourcefulness' (or 'Contrivance') and 'Poverty', who had sexual intercourse at a party in celebration of the birth of Aphrodite (Plato 1965: 81-82). Not only does this explain the close association of this goddess with love, but allegedly also the connection between love and (a passion for) beauty. The astonishing accuracy of Plato's 'phenomenological' account of the structure of love – albeit in mytho-poetic terms—is apparent in the following passage, spoken by Diotima (Plato 1965: 82):

...having Contrivance for his father and Poverty for his mother, he bears the following character. He is always poor, and, far from being sensitive and beautiful, as most people imagine, he is hard and weather-beaten, shoeless and homeless, always sleeping out for want of a bed, on the ground, on doorsteps, and in the street. So far he takes after his mother and lives in want. But, being also his father's son, he schemes to get for himself whatever is beautiful and good; he is bold and forward and strenuous, always devising tricks<sup>12</sup> like a cunning huntsman; he yearns after knowledge and is full of resource and is a lover of wisdom all his life,<sup>13</sup> a skilful magician, an alchemist, a true sophist.<sup>14</sup> He is neither mortal nor immortal; but one and the same day he will live and flourish (when things go well with him), and also meet his death; and then come to life again<sup>15</sup> through the vigour that he inherits from his father. What he wins he always loses, and is neither rich nor poor, neither wise nor ignorant.

In consummately poetic, but simultaneously phenomenologically compelling fashion, Plato here uncovers the paradoxical structure of love as human (and perhaps even trans-human) phenomenon. If love did not, at one and the same time, display the features of (awareness of) lack or absence (of that which is loved or desired), *and* vigorous, resourceful striving after a desirable 'object', it could easily be confused with something alien to itself. As Plato (1965: 82-83) further remarks (via Diotima), it would make no sense for a god to desire wisdom, because gods are already wise, or for the ignorant to strive for it, complacent as they are in their ignorance. The ambivalent nature of love thus appears clearly: whether of wisdom or knowledge (as in the case of the philosopher, who 'knows' that he or she does not have it) or for someone (who is desired only in so far as he or she is not already 'possessed' or dominated), love displays the paradoxical, 'impossible' structure of something which simultaneously is and is not, but is instead continually in the process of overcoming an existing non-being (ontological 'poverty')

via a momentary, short-lived actualization, only to fall back into a condition of non-being or 'death'. Perhaps one could say that love has quasi-being—a kind of ontological inter-modality which, as far as I can judge from Plato's poetic-phenomenological evocation of its structure, corresponds accurately with the experience of love.<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately Plato does not restrict his reflection on love to this philosophically cogent account. The part of *The symposium* (already referred to earlier) after the passage just discussed, where Diotima describes the ascent of the lover—from the particular beloved through intermediary stages, culminating in the mystical intuition of 'absolute, universal beauty'—is nothing less than the subversion of what Plato has uncovered in virtuoso style concerning the nature of the phenomenon of love up to this point.<sup>17</sup> How does this happen? The precise place where Plato leaves the realm of intersubjectively accessible philosophy behind, and enters the sphere of metaphysics—or worse, of what Lacan would call (ideological) illusion in the register of the imaginary—is where Diotima (i.e. Plato) states, after her description of the different, successive levels traversed by the lover in his or her upward journey (Plato 1965: 93-94):

The man who has been guided thus far in the mysteries of love, and who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation a beauty whose nature is marvellous indeed, the final goal, Socrates, of all his previous efforts. This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes; next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to him like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or a science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it, yet in such a manner that, while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change.

This evocative description of an autonomous, self-sufficient, 'eternal', 'absolute' 'entity' (beauty) would—regardless of what Plato claims here—place

it *outside* of all human relations, *including* the very relation where the lover is supposed to be privy to the 'revelation' in question. Why? Because it is characterized as being *completely* independent, in fact, *outside of all possible relations* ('alone with itself')—a description which not only militates against Plato's contrasting, quasi-phenomenological approach (discussed earlier), which is predicated on the thought- and perceptual *relationality* of all phenomena, but which further follows, more decisively, from its putative 'eternity' (being outside of all temporal relations). No time-bound beings, such as humans, could perceive an 'eternal' (or ontologically absolutely self-sufficient) 'entity' of any kind *as* 'eternal', 'absolute', and so on because, as Kant already demonstrated convincingly, all possible perception presupposes spatiotemporal relations. At most it could be argued that a phenomenological description of something like mystical experience, could (and probably does) reveal something (a divinity of some kind, perhaps) as being *experienced* as 'eternal', but paradoxically such a description, as well as the experience itself, would only be possible in time.<sup>18</sup>

Ironically, in the *Symposium* itself the untenability of Plato's strenuous attempt, to rise above the time-bound world of experience is exposed<sup>19</sup> where Alcibiades delivers a eulogy immediately after Socrates' speech—this time not on the subject of love, but on Socrates (Plato 1965: 100-111). Here one encounters Plato's indirect approach once again, this time in the guise of an isomorphic relation between Socrates and the Form of Beauty: no matter how hard one tries to do justice to Socrates, it could never succeed because Socrates, whose physical appearance is anything but conventionally 'beautiful', and whose actions and 'lifestyle' are just as unconventional, is depicted as being unique, wholly singular and incomparable (Plato 1965: 110-113). In other words, analogous to Beauty itself, Socrates must be understood in non-physical terms as its sensuous embodiment, and reciprocally Beauty must be understood as Socrates' wholly abstract, trans-spatiotemporal counterpart. The important difference, which could easily be overlooked, is that (as in the case of all uniqueness) Socrates' uniqueness may be grasped relationally, while 'absolute' Beauty supposedly (but spuriously) surpasses such relationality.

At this point it is not difficult to interpret Plato's attempt at defending the accessibility of absolute Beauty as a paradigmatic case of what Jacques Lacan (Lee 1990: 14) describes as the function of, firstly, the 'maternal imago'—the cornucopian 'maternal' image of fullness and abundance which is established in its unconscious as experience-structuring principle, in this way operating as compensation for the infant's chronic deficiencies

and dependence.

This means that there is a correlation between the primordial lack or deficiency (as manifestation of finitude) on the part of the infant, on the one hand, and the projected image of fullness of the maternal image, on the other. As pointed out earlier, this imago of the mother as desired *plenum* plays a fundamental experience-structuring role for the rest of the subject's life—including his or her commitment to ideological-imaginary totalities, whether these are of a personal or a collective-political kind. The connection is especially conspicuous where Lacan refers to the 'nostalgias of humanity' and 'the mystical abyss of affective fusion' (Lee 1990: 14) as some of its manifestations.

Most fundamentally, then, what Plato describes as 'absolute Beauty' may be understood, in Lacanian terms, as a metonymic projection of the 'maternal imago' which, in the final analysis, fulfils a proto-ideological, imaginary function. Needless to stress, the structuring identification-function of the other two imagoes (the 'fraternal' and the 'paternal'), together with that of the mirror-image in the 'mirror stage' (as discussed at the beginning of this paper)—all of which are characterized by a desired wholeness or unity of some kind – reinforces this ideological-imaginary susceptibility, on the part of subjects, to the allure of putatively attainable absolutes or totalities of some kind, of which Plato's aesthetic-ethical ideal of absolute Beauty is an instance. Moreover, it follows that comparable ideals of a religious or political nature, with their metaphysically illusory promises of 'eternal' fulfilment of some kind—all of which ignore and betray the inescapable finitude that human beings are subject to – are likewise metonymies of the unconsciously functioning, structuring imagoes identified by Lacan. Only by way of a thoroughgoing, critical-reflective appropriation of these commonly human structures at the level of the symbolic register of language (that of Freud's 'talking cure') can one successfully resist their potentially suffocating hold on one's perception of the world. As I have argued here, Plato provides the quasi-phenomenological means for such a critical liberation, but ironically subverts his own position through his appeal to a supra-temporal, metonymic embodiment of the imagoes in question.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See in this regard my essay (Olivier 2005) on Lacan's contribution to narrative identity, where these considerations are fleshed out in relation to the Michael Haneke film, *The Piano Teacher*.

<sup>2</sup> It contrasts with the *je*, or 'I'—the subject in the register of the symbolic or language.

<sup>3</sup> This aspect of Lacan's work is explored at length in a comparative study of Lacan's conception of human knowledge as exhibiting a 'paranoiac structure' and John Fowles' *The magus*, where one encounters a similar 'will to untruth' on the part of the protagonist. See Olivier 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See in this regard Olivier (1999) on the contemporary relevance, regarding cyberspace and the internet, of Irigaray's reinterpretation of the metaphor of the cave in Plato's *Republic* as a covert reference to the womb.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan's conception of the human subject is related to this image from Plato, in so far as it emphasises the essential 'incompleteness' of the subject. The difference, of course, is that, in contrast to Plato, any prospect of final 'completion' of one's endemic lack (what Lacan calls *jouissance*) is illusory, for Lacan.

<sup>6</sup> 'Quasi'-phenomenological, because, unlike Husserl's phenomenological procedure, Plato does not uncover the distinguishable structures (eidetic, phenomenological, transcendental) in things in purely rational-analytical terms by way of the *epoché* (the suspension of all claims to 'reality'), and yet, he still succeeds admirably in bringing to light the indispensable characteristics of love as a phenomenon inscribed in interhuman relations.

<sup>7</sup> The virtually incomprehensible complexity of such an open-ended set of relations may be regarded as an instance of the sublime. It is not merely the case that the occasion related 'third-hand' by Apollodorus to Glaucon is spatio-temporally complex in so far as it is 'received' at another time and place by another person (as mediated by the potentially distorting function of various mediator-narrators). In addition—as in the case of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, exemplarily re- and deconstructed by Michel Foucault (1994: 3-16; see also Olivier 2001)—the ever-changing and historically varying identity of the implied reader or spectator contributes a decisively complexifying element to the already given configuration of elements. After all, no matter how well the reconstructed, re-narrated event in question (the



symposium) is comprehended, it is impossible to know the identities and interpretations of all the readers or spectators who have appropriated it interpretively in the course of centuries, and it therefore functions as 'sublime', that is, as a 'presentation of the unrepresentable'.

<sup>8</sup> Keeping in mind the inferior political status of women in the ancient Greek polis, it is not entirely clear why Plato attributes the authoritative account of the nature of love to a woman, although Socrates is indeed the medium or 'midwife' through whom it reaches the guests at the symposium. I suspect that it is a way of emphasizing the ontological 'otherness' of the Form of Beauty, yet again in isomorphic terms: Beauty is *different* from merely beautiful things or entities, to such a degree that not even a man endowed with Socrates' 'otherness' can be an adequate medium regarding its true nature (although, later in the *Symposium*, in Alcibiades' speech, Plato does seem to use Socrates precisely as human counterpart of the Form of Beauty). It seems that only a woman is sufficiently inscrutable for this role (See in this regard Shlain 1998: 149-158).

<sup>9</sup> Here Plato's ingenious—albeit experientially enriched—account of different sexual orientations assumes the form of a mythical-narrative image of three 'original' proto-human sexes: those who were a combination of what one ordinarily knows as two masculine individuals, those who existed as a combination of two women, and those who were a composite of a man and a woman. Along this mythical avenue three types of sexual behaviour are simultaneously accounted for: male homosexual, lesbian, as well as heterosexual—since Zeus punished each of these 'originally' composite creatures for their *hubris* by splitting them in two, each 'half' has searched tirelessly for its 'other half', and if he or she is fortunate to find him or her, they stay together for the rest of their lives.

<sup>10</sup> Marriage counsellors would do well to remember this insight on Plato's part—whenever any partner in a marriage (or any other intimate relationship) 'succeeds' in dominating or 'possessing' the other so completely that no hint of independence or autonomy remains on the part of the latter, a true marriage no longer exists. In many such cases the marriage in question founders, understandably, in light of Plato's wisdom. Hence, too, the wisdom of D.H. Lawrence's striking metaphor for the most desirable love-relationship between humans in his novel, *The Rainbow*, where the rainbow's two 'legs' represent the (relative) independence and 'autonomy' of the two lovers, while the arc that connects them, stands for the unbreakable bond between them.

<sup>11</sup> Hence the philosophical discipline of hermeneutics – the 'art' or 'science' of interpretation, which takes its name from that of Hermes.

<sup>12</sup> Plato was undoubtedly familiar with Homer's works, and this aspect of Love's character – boldness, cunning, resourcefulness, trickery – clearly resonates with salient traits on the part of Odysseus, hero of Homer's *Odyssey*.

<sup>13</sup> In this respect Love resembles a philosopher.

<sup>14</sup> One may find this affirmative reference to Love as a 'sophist' somewhat disconcerting, given Plato's well-known opposition to the sophists. The ostensible

anomaly disappears if one reminds oneself that, combined with ‘lover of wisdom’, ‘magician’ and ‘alchemist’, ‘true sophist’ implies the character of someone who knows that he or she lacks, and therefore desires, something, for the attainment of which every conceivable technique, method, or art of persuasion (rhetoric) would be resorted to (Melchert 1991: 37-63).

<sup>15</sup> Here again one detects echoes of Dionysus, the Greek god of the cycle of birth, growth, death and resurrection (as well as obvious resonance, from a later historical perspective, with the figure of Jesus Christ).

<sup>16</sup> One cannot help noticing that this characterization of the phenomenon of love by Plato displays unmistakable poststructuralist features, in so far as post-structuralism is recognizable by its logic of the ‘impossible’—a way of ‘thinking together’ things which are usually regarded as being mutually exclusive, according to traditional binary logic (see Olivier 2004). Another instance of this is Plato’s concept of the *pharmakon*—a cure *and* poison at the same time (see Derrida 1981: 97-98).

<sup>17</sup> I should point out that there are several other instances in this dialogue where Plato’s remarkable philosophical insight manifests itself—as where he (Plato 1965: 83-86; 88-89) argues that love is not only love of beauty, but also love of wisdom (one of the most beautiful things), and along this avenue that love is the desire for the uninterrupted possession of the good; and further, that human identity may be described as a kind of ‘self-in-becoming’ (again a proto-poststructuralist, or perhaps proto-Hegelian characterization).

<sup>18</sup> Bernini’s sculpture of an ecstatic (literally ‘out of herself’) St Teresa’s vision of the angel piercing her with a golden arrow comes to mind as a temporal artistic embodiment of such a paradoxical state of affairs (see Clark 1974: Plate 134, p. 190), as does John Fowles’ evocative description of a virtually blind man’s apparent experience of, or ‘meeting’ with God on a moonlit night, standing in a river (Fowles 1983: 308).

<sup>19</sup> In Wim Wenders’ extraordinary film, *Wings of desire (Himmel über Berlin)*, the limitations of ‘dwelling’ beyond the temporal realm of human existence is explored in Nietzschean, contra-Platonic fashion, from the fictional perspective (‘lack of perspective’ is probably more appropriate) of two angels, one of whom decides that their ‘eternal’ angelic view of the human world does not allow him to experience the sensuous pleasures of human embodiment, which he desires to share in. Consequently, he takes the plunge into human history and time, with breathtaking results. See in this regard Olivier 1992.