

THE FOLLY OF PRAISE: PLATO'S CRITIQUE OF ENCOMIASTIC DISCOURSE IN THE *LYSIS* AND *SYMPOSIUM*

Plato targets the encomiastic genre in three separate dialogues: the *Lysis*, the *Menexenus* and the *Symposium*.¹ Many studies have been devoted to Plato's handling of the funeral oration in the *Menexenus*.² Plato's critique of the encomium in the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, however, has not been accorded the same kind of treatment. Yet both of these dialogues go beyond the *Menexenus* in exploring the opposition between encomiastic and philosophic discourse. In the *Lysis*, I will argue, Plato sets up encomiastic rhetoric as a foil for Socrates' dialectical method; philosophic discourse is both defined and legitimated by way of its opposition to eulogy. In the *Symposium*, Plato offers a much more complex critique. First, he illustrates and comments on the vices that inhere in the encomiastic genre. Second, he juxtaposes Socrates' ironic 'praises' of his interlocutors with traditional encomiastic discourse, thus inviting the reader to explore the relation between Socratic irony and the rhetoric of eulogy (and censure). And, third, the *Symposium* exhibits two untraditional 'encomia' – Socrates' eulogy for Eros and Alcibiades' for Socrates – that illustrate and interrogate the false ontology underlying the rhetoric of praise.

As Plato reveals in a number of places, the discourse of praise was a powerful force in the Athenian polis. In the *Republic*, for example, Socrates suggests that the language of praise and censure is the most effective way of 'educating and moulding' people, young or old, male or female (492a–c). It is for this reason, no doubt, that the only poems he allows into the ideal city are 'hymns to the gods and encomia for good men' (607a).³ Plato drives the point home in the *Phaedrus*: it may seem amusing, Socrates says, if, in the course of a private exchange, a person voices an encomium on a donkey as though it were a horse; but the matter is less funny when a master of oratory wins over an ignorant populace 'not by praising a miserable donkey as being really a horse but by praising something bad as being really good' (260bc).

It is easy to see why Plato was so concerned about the praise and censure voiced in public and political arenas. But in the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, Plato targets branches

¹ One should also note that at *Republic* 358d and again at 589bc, Plato designates the arguments for injustice and for justice as 'encomia' (Socrates makes it clear at 589bc that the encomiast of injustice is a liar and the encomiast of justice a truth-teller). In addition, Socrates suggests retrospectively in the *Phaedrus* that the two speeches he made fall under the category of the rhetoric of praise and censure: at 265c, he says that his discourse passed 'from blame to praise' (ἀπὸ τοῦ φέγειν πρὸς τὸ ἐπαινεῖν); he elucidates this at 266ab, where he points out that his first speech 'abused' (ἐλοιδορήσεν) bad love and his second 'praised' (ἐπῆνεσεν) good love.

² G. A. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton, 1963), pp. 159–60 nn. 50–1, gives a useful survey of the scholarship on the subject. More recently, see G. Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*² (Princeton, 1981), pp. 188–201; C. H. Kahn, 'Plato's Funeral Oration: The Motive of the *Menexenus*', *CP* 58 (1963), 220–34; N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, tr. A. Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 264–74, 311–27 and *passim*.

³ Praise and censure also play a crucial role in controlling the citizens in the city delineated in the *Laws*. See, e.g., 663bc, 801d–802d, 822e–823a.

of the encomiastic genre that are not political in orientation. In the *Lysis*, Plato focuses exclusively on the eulogies that lovers composed for their beloveds and delivered in sympotic contexts.⁴ And in the *Symposium*, the playful eulogies of 'sophists' (such as Prodicus, who wrote an encomium on Heracles) and 'wise men' (such as the one who wrote on salt)⁵ are set up as Socrates' rivals (177b).⁶ Here Plato conjures up that branch of the encomiastic genre constituted by prose eulogies written and delivered by sophists and teachers of rhetoric on mythological or mundane subjects.⁷

Why would Plato bother with these kinds of encomia? Let us consider the social context of these kinds of speeches. The encomia mentioned in the *Lysis* were

⁴ Hippothales, the lover in the *Lysis*, writes in both poetry and prose. Erotic poems of praise in Greek literature were called *paidiká*. B. Gentili, *Poetry and its Public in Ancient Greece*, tr. A. Thomas Cole (Baltimore, 1988), p. 113, lists examples of this kind of poem. The pseudo-Demosthenean *Erôtikos* provides a late example of an erotic eulogy in prose. The first two speeches in the *Phaedrus* appear to be 'paradoxical' versions of the erotic prose eulogy.

⁵ R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge, 1932), p. 19 (and so also K. Dover, *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 88), indicates that the 'wise man' in question is generally agreed to be Polycrates, an Athenian teacher of rhetoric.

⁶ Also mentioned are poetical hymns for the gods and paeans (177a), which occupy a branch of literature quite different from that of the encomiastic pieces of the sophists and teachers of rhetoric. See A. E. Harvey, 'The Classification of Greek Lyric Poetry', *CQ* n.s. 5 (1955), 157–75, for a discussion of ancient conceptions of the 'encomium' and the 'hymn'. Plato himself says that the 'hymn' is characterized by 'prayers directed to the gods' (*Laws* 700ab); this is quite different from the speeches in the *Symposium*, which offer praise, not prayers (cf. Socrates' second speech in the *Phaedrus*, which contains a number of hymnic features). On the generic features of the hymn, see E. L. Bundy, 'The "Quarrel between Kallimachos and Apollonios"', Part I: The Epilogue of Kallimachos's *Hymn to Apollo*, *CSCA* 5 (1972), 39–94; W. H. Race, 'Aspects of Rhetoric and Form in Greek Hymns', *GRBS* 23 (1982), 5–14; R. Janko, 'The Structure of the Homeric Hymns: A Study in Genre', *Hermes* 109 (1981), 9–24. Why, then, does Plato mention hymns in the *Symposium*? Probably because the subject matter of his eulogies is a god. Given that he so carefully identifies the prose eulogies that form his target, and that his own eulogists all speak in prose, it is likely that Plato's primary target in this dialogue is the prose eulogies composed and delivered by sophists and teachers of rhetoric.

⁷ Extant examples are: Prodicus' encomium of Heracles (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34), Gorgias' *Encomium for Helen*, Isocrates' *Busiris and Helen*, and the praise of the non-lover attributed to Lysias in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Many speeches of this kind are attested by ancient authors. Athenaeus, for example, reports several encomia for courtesans: the sophist Alcidas, a pupil of Gorgias, wrote in praise of Nais, and the orator Cephalus eulogized Lagis (13.592c). Alcidas is also said to have written an encomium on death (Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.48.116), and the Athenian teacher of rhetoric Polycrates composed encomia on infamous mythological figures such as Busiris and Clytemnestra (Isocrates, *Busiris* 4; Quintilian, *Inst.* 2.17.4), as well as on trivial mundanities such as pots, pebbles (Alexander, son of Numenius *περί ῥητορ. ἀφορμῶν*, in L. Spengel, *Rhetores Graeci*, iii (Leipzig, 1853), p. 3), and mice (Arist. *Rhet.* 2.24.2, 1401a; 2.24.6, 1401b). The sophist Lycophron, Aristotle tells us, composed a eulogy for the lyre (*Soph. El.* 15.174b = DK 83[0].6), and Zoilus, an orator who studied under Polycrates, wrote an encomium on Polyphemus (Schol. in Platonis, *Hipparchum* 229d in L. Rademacher, *Artium Scriptores* (Vienna, 1951), p. 200; Zoilus' encomium for the people of Tenedos, which Strabo quotes from (6.271), may also have been 'paradoxical'). Finally, Isocrates mentions in his *Helen* (12) encomia composed for bumble bees and salt (cf. Plato's *Symposium* 177b), and Aristotle alludes in the *Rhetoric* to a eulogy of Paris (*Rhet.* 2.23.8, 1398a; 24.7 and 9, 1401b) as well as of mice, dogs, Hermes, and words (*Rhet.* 2.24.2, 1401a). For a discussion of the (extant) prose encomia of the late fifth and early fourth centuries, see G. Fraustadt, *Encomiorum in Litteris Graecis usque ad Romanam Aetatem Historia* (Leipzig, 1909), pp. 42–90, and V. Buchheit, *Untersuchungen zur Theorie des Genos Epideiktikon von Gorgias bis Aristoteles* (Munich, 1960), chaps. 1–2. On the 'paradoxical' branch of the prose encomium, see T. C. Burgess, 'Epideictic Literature', *The University of Chicago Studies in Classical Philology* 3 (1902), 157–66, A. S. Pease, 'Things Without Honor', *CP* 21 (1926), 27–42, and R. L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966), esp. pp. 3–40.

composed by an older male for the boy he loved. As Dover has shown, the erotic relationship between an older and a younger male in the aristocratic circles of ancient Athens included a prominent pedagogical aspect.⁸ This is in fact explicated in Pausanias' speech in the *Symposium* (184b–e): the older man gives the boy practical, ethical and intellectual guidance in exchange for the 'gratification' that he seeks from his beloved.⁹ Given that the older lover assumes the role of educator, all of the language he uses can be seen to have pedagogical import. As we will see, Plato believed that a lover's eulogies cannot be divorced from his pedagogy; they cannot fail to affect the character of the boy.

The encomia targeted in the *Symposium* also played a role in Athenian education. As Kennedy has indicated, the epideictic speeches of the sophists were not merely 'rhetorical displays of ornamentation'. The performances of such speeches by the sophists and rhetoricians, of course, would have served to attract pupils in the first place. But they also functioned as models or 'lessons in method' within the educational context.¹⁰ As remote as they may seem from political discourse, then, the eulogies of the sophists played an important role in teaching students of rhetoric to manipulate the discourse of praise in public fora. When Cicero says that Gorgias 'wrote encomia and invectives because he considered it the peculiar function of the orator to magnify a thing by praising it and to diminish it again by censuring it',¹¹ we are alerted to the fundamental connection between the sophistic 'show pieces' and the political rhetoric of their pupils.

Plato's critique of encomiastic rhetoric in the *Lysis* and *Symposium*, then, is explained at least in part by the role this kind of rhetoric played in educating and moulding young and 'ignorant' people. Plato's polemics against praise in these dialogues, in short, go beyond a mere literary or intellectual squabble: they attack the rhetoric of praise that was enacted or modelled in educational contexts. It is the ethical and, ultimately, political ramifications of praise discourse that provoked Plato to attack the encomiastic genre from so many different angles.

I

At the opening of the *Lysis*, two young men – Ctesippus and Hippothales – accost Socrates and invite him to accompany them into a wrestling-school where some good-looking boys are attending a festival of Hermes.¹² Socrates soon learns that Hippothales is in love with a boy named Lysis. And Ctesippus informs Socrates that Hippothales has 'deluged' his companions with 'poems and prose speeches' (τὰ

⁸ See Dover (n. 5 above), pp. 4–5.

⁹ As K. J. Dover, 'Eros and Nomos (Plato, *Symposium* 182a–185c)', *BICS* 11 (1964), 31–42, shows, Aeschines' speech against Timarchos offers a picture of the homoerotic practices of the wealthy and aristocratic Athenians that is in fundamental accord with that of Pausanias.

¹⁰ Kennedy (n. 2 above), pp. 167–73; so also T. Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore, 1991), pp. 71–94. Cf. Loraux (n. 2 above), p. 225, who suggests (wrongly, in my opinion) that epideictic rhetoric is a kind of 'art-for-art's sake' that is fundamentally apolitical.

¹¹ Cicero, *Brutus* 12.47. Note also Eudoxus' report that Protagoras 'taught his pupils to praise and blame the same thing' (DK 80[74].A21).

¹² On the opening of the *Lysis*, see A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work*, 6th ed. (London, 1949), pp. 65–6; P. Friedländer, *Plato*, ii, tr. H. Meyerhoff (New York, 1964), pp. 92–3; R. G. Hoerber, 'Plato's *Lysis*', *Phronesis* 4 (1959), esp. 15–21; for a more extended treatment, see D. Bolotin, *Plato's Dialogue on Friendship* (Ithaca, 1979), pp. 69–82, who shows how Socrates systematically exposes the selfishness in Hippothales' love.

ποιήματα... καὶ συγγράμματα) for the young Lysis (204d). Socrates asks Hippothales to 'display' (ἐπιδείξει) these compositions and demonstrate that he knows 'what is proper for a lover to say of his beloved either to his face or to others' (204e–205a). But he qualifies this request in an important way: he does not want to hear the actual verses but rather to learn their 'content' (διάνοια). He wishes to discover from Hippothales, as he puts it, 'in what way you deal with your beloved' (205b). Socrates, in short, is concerned with the ethical and pedagogical rather than the aesthetic quality of the compositions.

The scornful Ctesippus gives Socrates the information he seeks. Hippothales' compositions have nothing personal (ἴδιον) to say about Lysis: all he talks about are Lysis' ancestors, their wealth, the horses they owned, and their victories in the Panhellenic contests. Indeed, Hippothales even proclaims that Lysis' forefather, who was descended from Zeus, played host to his 'kinsman' Heracles (205b–d). This is the stuff that eulogies are made of, and Socrates recognizes their encomiastic character immediately: 'my ridiculous Hippothales, are you composing and singing an encomium (ἐγκώμιον) for yourself before you have achieved a victory?' (205d). When Hippothales denies that he has written these encomia 'for himself', Socrates maintains that his eulogies for Lysis are in fact designed for self-glorification, since the compositions will commemorate Hippothales' own victory should he triumph over the boy. But the trouble does not end here. For Socrates adds that Hippothales' encomia are filling Lysis with self-conceit (206a). The compositions are actually damaging the boy and, by making him more proud, cheating the slighted lover of his prize (206b). Though the encomia may appear to exalt both the author and his beloved, they actually serve to harm them both.

Hippothales begs Socrates for guidance, and Socrates agrees to demonstrate in an actual conversation with the boy 'what one must say to him instead of those things' that Hippothales has composed (206c). Socrates' method of handling the young is thus directly juxtaposed with the lover's encomiastic approach.¹³ Socrates proceeds to engage Lysis in a conversation about friendship. He refutes Lysis' ideas on this subject and then hammers home the point of the lesson:

Is it possible, Lysis, for a person have a high notion of himself in matters of which he does not yet have any notion?... For you cannot be high-minded if you are still mindless. (210d)

Lysis, chastened by Socrates' elenctic technique, readily confesses his ignorance. And at this crucial juncture, Socrates turns to address the unnamed person to whom he is relating the entire dialogue. 'When I heard him answer this,' Socrates says,

I looked at Hippothales and almost made a mistake. For it occurred to me to say: 'this is the way, Hippothales, to converse with your beloved, humbling and diminishing him rather than puffing him up and pampering him, as you did.' (210e)

The moral is thus made explicit: Socrates' elenctic method is diametrically opposed to the language of the encomium. It does not aim at gratification or glory, nor does it promulgate falsehoods that instil in the auditor a proud and stubborn ignorance. On the contrary, it encourages self-knowledge in the boy by robbing him of his false conceits.

¹³ Manuela Tecuşan, 'Logos Symptotikos: Patterns of the Irrational in Philosophical Drinking: Plato Outside the Symposium', in O. Murray (ed.), *Symptotica: A Symposium on the Symposium* (Oxford, 1990), p. 243, suggests that Socrates' conversation with the youths in the *Lysis* is 'an example of good courtesy, set in contrast to Hippothales' sympotic fashion of wooing'. I would argue that Socrates is not merely being courteous. The contrast is one of discourse and not merely of behaviour.

While Socrates adverts to the 'content' (*διάνοια*) of Hippothales' compositions, Plato's critique of the erotic encomium does not end here. As I have mentioned, the relationship between male lovers in Athenian society included an important educational dimension: the older man offered the boy ethical and intellectual guidance in exchange for sexual favours.¹⁴ What Plato indicates in the *Lysis* is that a non-philosophical lover cannot in fact play the role of a true educator. For desire drives this kind of lover to pursue his own interests instead of the boy's. Hippothales resorts to encomia, Plato suggests, precisely because he hopes that flattering his beloved will induce him to pay back the favour. Of course, Hippothales is not consciously proposing this exchange; indeed he seems quite ignorant of what is at stake. The reader, however, is clearly meant to recognize the folly of Hippothales' erotic discourse – to see how his flattering encomia serve as the currency which he uses to purchase the things he craves.¹⁵ Hippothales' 'intellectual' offerings and the sexual favours that he expects in return are both reduced to the level of commodities: so far from offering an education in virtue, Hippothales' 'pedagogy' corrupts both him and his beloved by turning their relationship into a commercial transaction.

It is only in the opening scene of the *Lysis*, of course, that Plato critiques the lover's encomia. But this scene has important ramifications for the rest of the dialogue. For, by setting up encomiastic discourse as a foil for Socratic discourse, Plato reminds us to meditate not only on what Socrates says but how he says it and what sort of effect it produces on the young. The dialogue, then, does not simply illustrate the Socratic method by showing the philosopher in action. Rather, it defines and legitimates this method by setting it in opposition to another brand of 'discourse offered to the young'. By creating this opposition, Plato stakes out the territory of philosophic language; he both defines and defends this new mode of discourse.¹⁶

II

The *Symposium* offers a more complex response to the encomiastic genre than the *Lysis*. For it attacks the encomium in a variety of ways: by parody and explicit criticism, by ironic gesture and generic transgression. But perhaps the most distinctive feature of this critique is that Plato allows Socrates to enter into the discourse of eulogy, thus blurring the sharp contrast between philosophical and encomiastic discourse that was so carefully drawn in the *Lysis*.

Let me begin this investigation of praise discourse in the *Symposium* by highlighting some of the overt criticisms that Plato levels against the encomiastic genre. As I have mentioned, the dialogue invites the reader to locate the speeches on Eros within a specific branch of the encomiastic genre (i.e. prose eulogies composed by sophists and teachers of rhetoric).¹⁷ How do the speeches in the *Symposium* reflect the genre and what is Plato's response to their generic features?

¹⁴ See nn. 8 and 9 above.

¹⁵ In the *Gorgias* we find this same exchange operating on a larger scale: the orators flatter the mob with false rhetoric in order to gain power and influence for themselves. Note that Callicles is said to be a 'lover' of the Athenian *demos* (481d).

¹⁶ Cf. G. E. R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge, 1990), who analyses (among other things) the ways in which Greek scientific writers defined themselves in opposition to other writers or modes of writing. Lloyd remarks that this 'rhetoric of legitimation' is a regular feature of historical and philosophical as well as scientific writing (p. 23).

¹⁷ See n. 7 above.

One of the most prominent features of the encomia of the fifth and fourth centuries is the agonistic stance adopted by their authors.¹⁸ In the *Symposium*, the contest of words is initiated when Phaedrus insists on the novelty and importance of his theme: the very act of recalling the poets and prose-writers who have failed to eulogize Eros signals the competitive nature of his enterprise.¹⁹ The speakers who follow Phaedrus – Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes and Agathon – follow suit. Each begins his speech by addressing himself to the speech(es) which preceded his, and claims to be offering a more adequate encomium. Each attempts to outdo the others and win glory in the eyes of his audience. The discourse is a game whose challenge increases with the number of contestants: as Eryximachus indicates at 193e, were Agathon and Socrates not so clever, they might be ‘at a loss for words’ after ‘the many and various things that have been said’. The result is a series of attempts to achieve originality within determinate generic boundaries – to manipulate stock techniques (‘amplification’ and ‘comparison’) and material (the ancestry, accomplishments and virtues of the subject), and yet produce something different from the other competitors.²⁰

Socrates brings to the fore this agonistic feature of the genre by jabbing at the verbal ‘competition’. As he says to Eryximachus at 194a, for example, ‘you have competed beautifully (*καλῶς... ἡγώνισαι*), Eryximachus; but if you were in my present position – or rather in the one I shall be in when Agathon has also spoken – you too would be terrified and in desperate straits, as I am now.’ When Socrates ironically confesses his fear of performing badly (194a; 198a) and so becoming a ‘laughing-stock’ (199b), his pretence exposes the real anxieties felt by his fellow encomiasts in the face of this competition.

Extant prose encomia from the fifth and fourth centuries exhibit another regular feature: a polished and often poetic style that calls attention to the author’s literary prowess. The author celebrates himself as much as his subject matter by his ostentatious use of stylistic devices (most especially that of ‘amplification’, which gives a speech a ‘totalizing’ look). Socrates reacts against the self-promoting style deployed by the encomiasts in his hyperbolic response to Agathon’s *καλὸν... καὶ παντοδαπὸν λόγον*: so ‘stunned’ (*ἐξεπλάγη*, 198b5) was he by the beauty of the words and phrases, he actually considered running away out of shame (198bc). He is ‘at a loss’ (198a7), and lays claim to a gripping panic: ‘I feared that Agathon would end by sending the head of Gorgias – clever at speaking in speeches – against my speech and so turn me to stone by striking me dumb’ (198c). Agathon’s speech, in short, was a stylistic *tour de force* designed to take the listeners’ breath away – to preempt all discourse by striking people dumb.

A genre’s emphasis on style necessarily affects its content. Isocrates admitted quite frankly in his *Busiris* (4) that ‘it is necessary for those who wish to eulogize a person

¹⁸ Examples of the agonistic stance adopted by encomiasts: Isocrates’ *Busiris* 4–6, *Helen* 14–15, *Evagoras* 8–11, 36; Plato’s *Menexenus* 239bc. Loraux (n. 2 above), p. 241, discusses the agonistic aspect of the funeral oration. Cf. M. Griffith, ‘Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry’, in M. Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde (eds.), *Cabinet of the Muses* (Atlanta, 1990), pp. 185–207, who argues that Greek poetry from its very beginnings had a prominent agonistic component.

¹⁹ Compare how Phaedrus initiates a competition between Lysias and Socrates in the *Phaedrus* (see, e.g., 235d, 257c).

²⁰ As D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson, *Menander Rhetor* (Oxford, 1981), p. xiv, observe, the encomium was rapidly systematized by the school of sophistic rhetoric. The rules for composing encomia were explicated as early as Isocrates’ *Busiris*. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (1.9.1–41, 1366a–1368a) and the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (3, 1425b–1426b) offer even more technical outlines of the ‘system’.

to represent him as possessing a greater number of good qualities than he actually possesses...'²¹ This aspect of the genre, which is abundantly represented in the *Symposium*,²² left it especially vulnerable to Plato's attack. As Socrates says at 198de,

For I in my stupidity thought that one should speak the truth about whatever is eulogized ... And I was quite proud, thinking that I would speak well, since I knew the truth about praising any given thing. But now, as it seems, this is not what it is to praise something, but rather to ascribe to the subject the greatest and most beautiful qualities, whether these things hold true or not. If they are false, it does not matter. For it was proposed, as it seems, that each of us would appear to eulogize Eros, not that he would actually eulogize him.

Socrates had initially embraced the encomiastic enterprise because he hoped that each of the speakers had some knowledge about Eros – Eryximachus, Phaedrus, Pausanias and Agathon because they were involved in love affairs, and Aristophanes because Aphrodite was so central to his profession as comic poet (177e). Socrates is thus disappointed when the encomia evince a rhetorical technique – *α τρόπον τοῦ ἐπαίνου* (199a4) – that will have no truck with truth.

A lie, of course, must have some substance. Encomiastic discourse by definition offers value-judgements and prescriptions. This aspect of the encomium was, in Plato's eyes, especially pernicious, for the manipulation of praise (and blame) had the power to indoctrinate the people most in need of instruction – 'the ignorant' (199a). Plato underlines the ideological stakes for which the encomiasts are playing in a number of passages. Take, for example, the way in which Pausanias' notion of 'good' Eros is unmasked later in the dialogue. Pausanias, of course, had proclaimed that the good and 'heavenly' kind of love bond is achieved when the older lover confers virtue and knowledge on the boy and receives sexual gratification in return (181c–185d). Socrates' refusal of Alcibiades' offer of sexual favours in exchange for virtue and knowledge (218c–219d) – an exchange that Socrates (following Homer) dubs 'bronze in exchange for gold' – is also a refusal of Pausanias' recommendation that virtue be exchanged for gratification. Socrates' handling of Alcibiades indicates that knowledge and virtue should not be reduced to a commodity for exchange – indeed, that true virtue and knowledge *cannot* be handed over in any kind of exchange.²³

The encomiasts promote false ideologies, Plato indicates, because they have no notion of the truth. As the short elenctic dialogue that Socrates conducts with Agathon reveals, the encomiasts not only ignore veracity in their quest for eloquence, but are in fact wholly ignorant of the truth. For after refuting Agathon's contention that Eros is replete with virtue, Socrates elicits from Agathon the confession that he did not know what he was talking about: *κινδυνεύω, ὦ Σώκρατες, οὐδὲν εἰδέναι ὧν τότε εἶπον* (199c–201c). Here, Plato has Agathon speak for all the encomiasts.

²¹ Both Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1.9.38, 1368a) and the author of the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (3, 1425b) insist on this aspect of laudatory writing, labelling it (innocuously) 'amplification'.

²² For example, the speakers contradict one another with little concern for accuracy: if Phaedrus can suggest that Eros is the oldest of the deities because he is the most beneficent (178bc), Agathon can counter that Eros, the most beautiful god, must necessarily be the youngest (195a). And numerous inconsistencies can be found even within individual speeches. After dilating on Eros' 'delicacy' (195c,d), 'softness' (195e, 196a), and fondness for flowers and scents (196b), for instance, Agathon insists on his 'temperance' and 'manly courage' (196cd). Agathon's mania for amplification well illustrates the tendency towards untruth that inheres in this rhetorical device.

²³ Socrates says at the very beginning of the party that it would be wonderful if wisdom could be conveyed from one person to another 'like water, which flows from the fuller into the emptier cup when you connect them with a piece of yarn' (175d). Clearly, he does not believe that wisdom can be exchanged according to this physicalist model.

III

Thus far, Plato's criticisms of the encomiastic genre echo his critique of rhetoric in general. But we have yet to address the most fundamental aspect of our genre: its use of praise. In order fully to comprehend the problem of praise, we must advert to the praise discourse in the *Symposium* that transgresses the boundaries of the encomiastic genre: Socrates' singular uses of praise – both in his conversation and his encomium – and Alcibiades' eulogy of Socrates. These untraditional expressions of praise are crucial for an understanding of Plato's allergy to the encomiastic genre.

Let me investigate first the commendation that crops up in Socrates' conversation: the overweening praise of others that goes under the heading of irony. Recent investigations of Socratic irony have centred on the philosopher's disavowal of knowledge.²⁴ But at least as central to Socrates' ironic technique was the extravagant praise that he so often bestowed upon his acquaintances.²⁵ This aspect of Socratic irony was often stressed by Renaissance thinkers: one of them even thought that Socrates' habit of heaping praise upon undeserving people was the origin of the mock encomium.²⁶ Plato's Socrates tends to pour on the praise when he encounters pretentious people such as Euthyphro, Ion, and Hippias.²⁷ But he also makes an obtrusive use of this technique with his companions in the *Symposium*.

At 175e, for example, Socrates claims that his own knowledge is something 'paltry and disputable as a dream' (φαύλη τις ἂν εἴη, ἣ καὶ ἀμφισβητήσιμος ὥσπερ ὄναρ οὐσα), whereas Agathon's, which 'shone so brightly' at the production of his tragedy, is 'brilliant and possessed of a great future (λαμπρά τε καὶ πολλὴν ἐπίδοσιν ἔχουσα). Again, at 194a–c, Socrates remarks upon the 'courage' (ἀνδρεία) and 'high-mindedness' (μεγαλοφροσύνη) exhibited by Agathon at the competition. Even more blatant is Socrates' hyperbolic response to Agathon's flowery encomium (198a–c) – an effusive enunciation containing what is probably the longest speech of praise delivered by Socrates in Plato's corpus (leaving aside the *epitaphios* in the *Menexenus*). Agathon spoke so 'marvellously' (θαυμαστῶς), Socrates says in that passage, that no one would be able to compete against him. The 'beauty of the words and phrases' positively 'stunned' (ἐξεπλάγη) Socrates, who feared that he would be struck dumb and turned to stone. He even considered running away out of shame, he confesses, since he knew that he could never produce anything close to this masterpiece. To cite one final example of Socrates' ironic praise: when Alcibiades tries to seduce the philosopher, Socrates warns: 'you must see in me an incredible beauty – greatly superior even to your own good looks. ... But be more careful, blessed man, for I may

²⁴ See, e.g., E. L. Burge, 'The Irony of Socrates', *Antichthon* 3 (1969), 5–17; W. K. C. Guthrie, *Socrates* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 126–9; G. Vlastos, 'Socratic Irony', *CQ* 37 (1987), 79–96; W. C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago, 1974), esp. pp. 269–76. For more wide-ranging discussions of Socratic irony, see P. Friedländer, *Plato*, i. *An Introduction*, tr. H. Meyerhoff (New York, 1958), ch. 7; M. Gourinat, 'Socrate était-il un ironiste?', *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 91 (1986), 339–53; and C. L. Griswold, Jr., 'Irony and Aesthetic Language in Plato's Dialogues', in D. Bolling (ed.), *Philosophy and Literature* (New York, 1987), esp. pp. 76–82.

²⁵ Note that Theophrastus says that 'praising to their faces people he has attacked behind their backs' is one of the characteristic actions of the ironic individual (*Characters* 1.2). Though Theophrastus' portrait of the ironist is not especially reminiscent of Socrates, his identification of insincere praise as ironic is instructive.

²⁶ D. Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden, 1989), shows the pervasiveness of the notion of irony as 'blame by praise or praise by blame' in medieval and, especially, Renaissance thinkers. The gentleman who (wrongly) derived the mock encomium from Socratic irony was Caspar Dornau (1577–1632); see Knox, p. 105.

²⁷ See, e.g., *Euthyphro* 5a, *Ion* 530bc, *Lesser Hippias* 364ab.

be a mere cipher who has deceived you' (218e–219a). Here, Socrates emphasizes Alcibiades' exceptionally good looks while calling into question his own gifts.

Socrates' effusions in the *Symposium* are all too familiar to readers of Plato. One should note, however, that it is only in this dialogue that Socrates' ironic praises are uttered *in the context of a meditation on praise discourse*. This context demands that the reader take stock of Socrates' ironic flights rather than dismiss them as mere local colour. How should we interpret Socrates' hyperbolic praise? What is the relation between this kind of praise and encomiastic discourse? And, finally, how do we distinguish the dissimulation inherent in Socrates' ironic praise from the lies of encomiastic rhetoric?

It should come as no surprise that the beneficiaries of Socrates' praises often accuse the philosopher of arrogant mockery – of using praise for the purposes of blame. When Agathon hears the comparison of his own brilliant knowledge to Socrates' paltry state of mind, for instance, he calls Socrates a *ὑβριστής* (175e7). Alcibiades, too, accuses Socrates of 'hubris' (215b7, 219c3–5, 222a8): he even appeals to his listeners to act as judges to the 'arrogance' (*ὑπερηφανία*, 219c6) of the philosopher. Alcibiades claims that Socrates' 'ironizing' is at the root of his hubristic behaviour:

For you observe that Socrates is erotically disposed towards beautiful people and is always hanging around them in a state of dazzled admiration; and, in addition, he is ignorant of everything and knows nothing... Believe me, it doesn't matter at all to him if someone is handsome, but he looks down on this more than anyone would imagine, and the same is the case if someone is rich or has some other privilege deemed a blessing by the crowd. He considers all these possessions worthless and all of us mere nothings, I tell you, but is continually being ironic and playing his games with people throughout his life (*εἰρωνευόμενος δὲ καὶ παίζων πάντα τὸν βίον πρὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διατελεῖ*). (216de)

Here, Alcibiades links Socrates' disavowal of knowledge with his admiration for others: both are insincere and therefore 'ironic'.²⁸ According to Alcibiades, Socrates is toying with his companions: he pretends to admire and love them but actually considers them worthless. He does not just look down on the beauty and other external endowments of people, as Diotima suggested a lover must do – he actually considers the people themselves worthless.²⁹ His admiration and praise, as it seems, are a disguise for contempt.

²⁸ I disagree with Vlastos' reading of *εἰρωνευόμενος* in this passage as well as of *εἰρωνικῶς* at 218d (n. 24 above, pp. 87–93). In calling Socrates an 'ironist', Vlastos claims, Alcibiades is not accusing him of wilful deception (the common sense of the Greek word *εἰρωνεία*) but rather of irony in the modern sense of the word. But Alcibiades says at 222b that Socrates has 'deceived' many people by pretending to be their lover (*οὗτος ἐξαπατῶν ὡς ἐραστής*). Since the words *εἰρωνευόμενος* and *εἰρωνικῶς* are put in Alcibiades' mouth, they must be interpreted according to his perception of Socrates. It is precisely the shortcomings of Alcibiades' interpretation of Socrates that invite the reader to seek a different interpretation of Socrates' indirection. Where Alcibiades sees wilful deception, Plato invites the reader to see something different from both sincerity and mendacity.

²⁹ It is crucial to grasp the difference between Diotima's claim (210b) that the lover who ascends the ladder must 'become a lover of all beautiful bodies and slacken his violent love for one boy, looking down on it and considering it a small thing' (*ἐνὸς δὲ τὸ σφόδρα τοῦτο χαλάσαι καταφρονήσοντα καὶ μικρὸν ἡγησάμενον*), and Alcibiades' assertion (216de) that 'it doesn't matter to Socrates if a person is beautiful, but he looks down on this more than anyone might think ... and considers all these possessions [i.e. beauty, wealth, etc.] to be worthless and *all of us to be mere nothings*' (*ἵστε ὅτι οὔτε εἰ τις καλὸς ἐστὶ μέλει αὐτῷ οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ καταφρονεῖ τοσούτον ὅσον οὐδ' ἂν εἰς οἰηθείη... ἡγείται δὲ πάντα ταῦτα τὰ κτήματα οὐδενὸς ἄξια καὶ ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν εἶναι*). Alcibiades thinks Socrates' devaluation of physical beauty, riches, etc. is part and parcel of his contemptuous devaluation of his fellow men. Diotima, however, does not enjoin the lover to reject human beings, but rather to rise above physical beauty and the obsession that it creates.

We should recall that the Athenians considered hubris an offence not against a private individual but rather against the community as a whole.³⁰ If Alcibiades' interpretation of Socrates' behaviour is correct, his 'ironizing' would have to be a threat to the Athenian *demos* – indeed to democracy itself. As Dover explains,

to establish that an act of violence was hubris rather than assault it was necessary to persuade the jury that it proceeded from a certain attitude and disposition on the part of the accused: that is to say, from a wish on his part to establish a dominant position over his victim in the eyes of the community, or from a confidence that by reason of wealth, strength or influence he could afford to laugh at equality of rights under the law and treat other people as if they were chattels at his disposal.³¹

Socrates' irony, then, at least if Agathon and Alcibiades have assessed it correctly, is a wilful assertion of superiority over his fellow citizens – a subtle but unmistakable declaration of pre-eminence that defies the egalitarianism of the democracy.³²

Is this interpretation of Socrates' irony correct? In particular, when Socrates commends or admires a person, is he simply playing a game of scornful mockery?³³ That there is some form of censure in Socrates' extravagant praise cannot be doubted. But does this censure derive, as Alcibiades suggests, from an attitude of superiority and, indeed, hostility towards his fellow human beings? Is Socrates' irony merely a clever way of getting one-up on his associates? If so, then it would be properly classified as a form of invective – the genre of rhetoric diametrically opposed to that of the encomium. As Aristotle explains in the *Rhetoric*, irony is a species of *δλιγωρία* or contempt.³⁴ Contemptuous actions, he says, must be distinguished from those performed for the sake of retaliation or for some other benefit (2.2.5–6; 1378b; 12–13, 1379a). For the contemptuous action is done solely for the sake of pleasure – a pleasure that derives from the thought that, as Aristotle puts it, 'by treating others badly people show their own superiority' (2.2.6, 1378b). As a species of contempt, then, irony must belong to the discourse of invective. This is made explicit in the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, which recommends irony as an ingredient for invective (35, 1441b).

³⁰ K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 35. Cf. M. Gagarin, 'Socrates' *Hybris* and Alcibiades' Failure', *Phoenix* 31 (1977), 22–37.

³¹ Ibid. 35. N. Fisher, 'The law of *hubris* in Athens', in P. Carter, P. Millett and S. Todd (eds.), *Nomos: Essays in Athenian law, politics and society* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 123–38, argues along the same lines: 'the essence of *hubris* is the deliberate attack on the *time* (honour) of another. That is, it is constituted by intentional, often gratuitous action, frequently but by no means always violent, and specifically designed to inflict shame and public humiliation' (p. 126).

³² Agathon and Alcibiades are probably not using the word 'hubris' in its technical legal sense; as Dover observes (n. 30 above, pp. 34–5), accusations of 'hubris' were used for emotional effect in a variety of rhetorical situations. Nonetheless, the repetition of the word 'hubris' cannot fail to remind the reader that Socrates was judged and condemned as a threat to the Athenian *dēmos* and its egalitarian ethos.

³³ It is necessary to handle the question of whether Socrates' disavowal of knowledge is insincere (and therefore 'ironic' in the original sense of the word) separately from the question of whether his effusive praises are insincere. Socrates' use of praise, which is the focus of this investigation, cannot be completely sincere. But this does not entail that Socrates' disclaimer of knowledge is equally insincere. A full analysis of Socratic irony would have to take both of these aspects into account.

³⁴ *Rhetoric* 2.2.3–25, 1378b–1379b (irony is mentioned explicitly in sections 24–5; note that Aristotle identifies hubris as one of the three genera of *δλιγωρία*). In the ethical treatises, Aristotle speaks rather differently of irony, identifying it as the opposite of boastfulness (see, e.g. *N.E.* 2.7.12, 1108a; 4.7.14–17, 1127b; *E.E.* 3.7.6, 1233b–1234a): although both irony and boasting involve dissembling, the ironic individual is more commendable in that he avoids pompousness.

Should we identify Socrates' ironic praise with the rhetoric of invective? Plato provides the answer to this question at the very opening of the dialogue. There we find Apollodorus, the devotee of Socrates who narrates the dialogue, engaging in true invective. He begins by accusing his companion Glaucon of being 'more wretched than anyone' (173a). Though Glaucon asks Apollodorus not to 'mock' him (*μὴ σκώπτ'*, 173a), the would-be Socrates only turns up the volume:

when I listen to other kinds of discourse, and especially that of you rich businessmen, I am annoyed and I pity you, my companions, because you think that you are doing something when in fact you are doing nothing. And perhaps you think that I am a failure, and I think that you think the truth. I, however, don't just *think* that you are a failure, but *know* it for sure. (173cd)

I believe that Plato wanted the reader to contrast Apollodorus' abusive rhetoric not only with the speeches of praise that follow but with the language used by Apollodorus' hero and mentor, Socrates. Note, for example, the pointer that Plato puts into the mouth of Glaucon:

You are always the same, Apollodorus. For you are always inveighing against (*κακηγορεῖς*) yourself and others, and you seem to actually consider all men wretched except for Socrates, beginning with yourself... You are always raging (*ἀγριαίνεις*) at yourself and everyone except for Socrates. (173d)

By reproaching himself, Apollodorus succeeds in imitating Socrates' self-deprecating style; but when he reviles his companions, he fails to emulate the philosopher's ironic handling of others. Apollodorus, in short, opts for invective instead of irony. But his invective is as inflammatory as the encomiasts' rhetoric of praise. By debasing the human race and exalting Socrates, Apollodorus enters into the competitive mode that engulfed the encomiasts. When Apollodorus goes on to challenge Glaucon to call him 'mad' and 'crazy', Glaucon rightly reminds him that this is not the time for a 'competition' (*οὐκ ἄξιον περὶ τούτων... νῦν ἐρίζειν*, 173e4).

If we juxtapose the language of Apollodorus with that of Socrates, we discover that Socrates' ironic treatment of the people he encounters is fundamentally different from Apollodorus' abusive approach. While Socrates' effusions can hardly be taken for true praise, neither can they be identified with invective. For the discourse of invective, like that of the encomium, is essentially combative: the speaker seeks to glorify his own views (and therefore himself) by abusing someone else's.³⁵ But Socrates' ironic praise attempts to move in another direction altogether. This 'praise' does of course call into question other people's claims to knowledge and virtue. But Socrates does not resort to invective – to saying that they are stupid while he is wise. Rather, he insists that he has not achieved knowledge either.³⁶ His ironic praise

³⁵ Apollodorus tries to conceal this by acting as though Socrates, rather than he, is superior to other people. But Apollodorus clearly thinks that his association with and imitation of Socrates lifts him above other people. Cf. Socrates' response to Anytus' claim in the *Meno* that Socrates is 'too ready to abuse people' (94e): '[Anytus] thinks that I am slandering (*κακηγορεῖν*) these men, and he also believes that he himself is one of them. But if he ever discovers what slander really is, he will cease to be angry; as it stands, he is ignorant of this' (95a). Though Socrates does criticize men such as Pericles and Thucydides in this dialogue, he denies that he is slandering them. First, he is speaking the truth rather than maligning them and, second, his critique is not designed to elevate him over others.

³⁶ This occurs in the dialogues (i.e. the early and some early/middle) where Socrates is actually using the 'Socratic' method. In the *Symposium*, of course, Socrates claims that he knows 'nothing except τὰ ἐρωτικά' (177d). As I will suggest in section VI, what Socrates is saying here is that he knows only 'the things to do with desire', i.e. the erotic path towards wisdom – not the body of knowledge that a desire of wisdom can lead to.

challenges others to prove that they are wise. If they take up this challenge, Socrates can use his elenctic method to show them that, like him, they lack wisdom and should inquire again into the matters which they had believed they understood.³⁷ Socrates' ironic praise is, of course, a kind of rhetoric, but it is a rhetoric that clamours for a co-operative dialectical quest. So far from comprising hubristic self-assertion, Socratic irony is designed to expose this arrogant quality in others.

IV

If Alcibiades misses the mark when he labels Socrates' irony 'hubris', what are we to make of the rest of his eulogy for Socrates? This eulogy stands out from the others in its positioning within the dialogue, its subject matter, and its style.³⁸ Indeed, Alcibiades' fevered attempt to get at the truth about Socrates might seem to suggest that he is delivering precisely the kind of eulogy that Socrates himself had hoped to receive from his fellow encomiasts – an encomium that speaks the truth. Does Alcibiades' eulogy, by aiming at the truth, serve as a corrective to the false speeches of the other encomiasts? And is Plato therefore placing his own encomium for Socrates in the mouth of Alcibiades?

Certainly Plato would not be the only Socratic writer to engage in eulogy. Xenophon, for example, says at the end of his *Apology of Socrates*, 'for myself, observing the wisdom and nobility of the man, I am compelled to mention him, and when I mention him I am compelled to praise him' (34.1–4).³⁹ Isocrates refers to a group of writers who 'make it their custom to praise' Socrates (*Busiris* 6), and Athenaeus even suggests that the discourse of *all* the Socratic writers amounted to eulogy and invective: 'for to these men', he concludes after detailing a number of 'invectives' pronounced by Socratic writers, 'no adviser is good, no general wise, no sophist is of any worth, no poet of any use, and no populace capable of reasoning; only Socrates [deserves these epithets]' (*Deipnosophistae* 5.220e).⁴⁰

Plato, I will suggest, resisted the temptation to eulogize Socrates. Indeed, so far from planting his own praise of Socrates in the mouth of Alcibiades, Plato may even have designed this encomium as a warning to other Socratic writers who felt moved to eulogize the philosopher. In creating Alcibiades' encomium, Plato chose to portray

³⁷ Needless to say, Socrates' elenchus does not often succeed. Qualities such as vanity, competitiveness, and complacency often render an interlocutor unable to submit himself to the co-operative enterprise of philosophical conversation: he may take offence (e.g. Callicles, Thrasymachus), or he may simply ignore the force of Socrates' refutation and continue to parade his 'knowledge' (e.g. Euthyphro, Ion).

³⁸ Particularly unusual is Alcibiades' blending of praise and censure in his eulogy. Though it was not uncommon for an encomiast to use an invective against some unworthy subject as ballast for his commendation of his principal subject, to praise and blame the same individual in a single speech is quite another matter. Alcibiades' encomium does cleave to some of the standard features in the genre. Though it makes no mention of Socrates' ancestry, it attributes to Socrates the virtues of temperance (219b–d, 219e–220d), courage (220d–221c), and wisdom (at the beginning and end of the speech). In addition, it exploits the device of 'comparison' to suggest that Socrates cannot be compared to any human being who ever existed (221c–d). On the problem of the genre of the speech, see E. Belfiore, 'Dialectic with the Reader in Plato's *Symposium*', *Maia* 36 (1984), 143.

³⁹ Note also the encomium Xenophon pronounces on Socrates at the end of the *Memorabilia* (4.8.11).

⁴⁰ See also 11.504e–509e, where Athenaeus takes Plato to task for the numerous 'invectives' that he wove into so many of his dialogues. Athenaeus, of course, is hostile to Socrates and his circle, and his statement here must be taken with a grain of salt.

an infamous and ignoble man struggling – and failing – to praise a philosopher. The pleonectic Alcibiades is the last person to understand the ironic Socrates, and his lack of understanding cannot but compromise his praise. Alcibiades misinterprets Socrates, and this misinterpretation must alert the reader not to construe the encomium as proper praise of Socrates. Alcibiades' eulogy is, in part, designed to be a caveat against the ignorant conferral of praise.

Alcibiades insists that he will only tell the truth (214e). He even invites Socrates to contradict him if he says anything false (214e–215a). This encourages the reader to accept his eyewitness reports of the specific things that Socrates said and did.⁴¹ But when Alcibiades puts forth his own subjective views about Socrates – when he begins to *interpret* Socrates – we must prick up our ears. Take, for example, Alcibiades' claim that when 'even a poor speaker' rehearses Socrates' *logoi* before any kind of listener – 'be it man, woman or child' – the audience is invariably spellbound (215d). This is explicitly contradicted at the beginning of the dialogue, where we are told that Glaucon, who comes to Apollodorus for an account of the symposium, had already heard another version which was totally unsatisfying: the speaker, Glaucon says, 'was unable to say anything clear' (172b).⁴² This disparity reminds the reader that Alcibiades' experience and interpretation of Socrates' *logoi* is subjective and idiosyncratic.⁴³

How much credence should we put in Alcibiades' reading of Socrates? Nussbaum has suggested that Alcibiades' interpretation of Socrates is based on a special kind of knowledge – one that contrasts with the philosophical knowledge endorsed by Diotima.⁴⁴ As Nussbaum puts it, Alcibiades 'suggests that the lover's knowledge of the particular other, gained through an intimacy both bodily and intellectual, is itself a unique and uniquely valuable *kind* of practical understanding...'.⁴⁵ To be sure, Alcibiades does appear to have loved Socrates.⁴⁶ He also claims that he has come to understand Socrates through this love affair. But can he really play the role of Nussbaum's 'knowing' lover? Consider her description of the 'know-how' of this individual:

The lover can be said to understand the beloved when, and only when, he knows how to treat him or her: how to speak, look, and move at various times and in various circumstances; how to give pleasure and how to receive it; how to deal with the loved one's complex network of intellectual, emotional, and bodily needs. This understanding requires acquaintance and yields the ability to tell truths...⁴⁷

I have no quarrel with Nussbaum's conception of the 'lover's knowledge' in itself. But I must disagree with her suggestion that Alcibiades possesses this knowledge.

⁴¹ I do not mean to imply that the fictive Alcibiades is necessarily reporting actual facts about the historical Socrates. Rather, within the fiction of Plato's dialogue, some of what Alcibiades says is factual and some subjective interpretation.

⁴² As D. Halperin points out in 'Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (supplementary volume, 1992), p. 115

⁴³ Note that Socrates calls Alcibiades' eulogy into question twice: first, at 214e, where he asks whether Alcibiades is going to 'mock' him by way of praise; and, second, at 222cd, where he says that Alcibiades' eulogy was designed to make trouble between Agathon and Socrates. These remarks warn us not to take everything Alcibiades says at face value.

⁴⁴ M. Nussbaum, 'The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of the *Symposium*', in *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1986), ch. 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 190.

⁴⁶ For the role-reversal of lover and beloved in Socratic dialogues, see D. Halperin, 'Plato and Erotic Reciprocity', *CQ* 5 (1986), esp. 68–72.

⁴⁷ Nussbaum (n. 44 above), p. 191.

While Alcibiades is profoundly stirred by Socrates, he chooses to run away from him rather than take the risky course of understanding, and truly loving, this strange man.⁴⁸

Plato's Alcibiades is a compelling and even seductive figure. But he is also a man of limited imagination, as his encomium abundantly reveals. For Alcibiades betrays his love of power and honour at almost every turn. Ruled by the competitive mentality so pervasive among Athenian élites, Alcibiades is compelled to interpret human interaction in terms of an on-going struggle for power. He claims, for example, that he was 'enslaved' to Socrates (219e3–5, cf. 215e6–7), and says three times that he was constrained to do 'whatever Socrates bid him' (216b3–4, 217a1–2, 218a6–7). Spurning this bondage, Alcibiades turns the tables by playing the 'run-away slave' (*δραπετεύω*, 216b5). But Alcibiades is not simply running away from Socrates; he is running towards something more enticing. As Alcibiades himself admits, he was 'conquered by the honour conferred by the crowd' (*ῥττημένω τῆς τιμῆς τῆς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν*, 216b). As much as he harps on his enslavement to Socrates, he cannot conceal that all the while he loved something else more.

What fuels this story of slavery and rebellion is Alcibiades' desire to get hold of Socrates – to come into possession of his knowledge. Alcibiades had realized, he says, that Socrates was *ἄτρωτος* – unwoundable – by money (219e2), so he decided to bribe him with sex. He believed that 'by gratifying Socrates' desire [he] could hear everything that the man knew' (217a). At first he plays it coy, but soon resolves to 'attack the man by direct assault' (*μοι ἐπιτετόν εἶναι τῷ ἀνδρὶ κατὰ τὸ καρτερόν*, 217c). He tells Socrates that he wants to become 'the best possible' (*ὄτι βέλτιστον*), and he is ready to barter not only his body but the property belonging to himself and his friends (218cd). 'Having sent forth my darts', he says, 'I thought that [Socrates] was wounded' (*τετρῶσθαι*, 219b). Alcibiades 'plots' (217c8, d3), 'attacks' (217c5), 'shoots' (219b3–4), 'wounds' (219b4). This is the language of *erôs*, but it is an *erôs* that seeks to dominate and overpower.⁴⁹ Alcibiades, of course, fails to overpower Socrates, and his account of this failure is telling: Socrates, he says, 'was so much the victor – he looked down on me, he mocked at my good looks, and he committed *hubris*' (*οὗτος τοσοῦτον περιεγένετό τε καὶ κατεφρόνησεν καὶ κατεγέλασεν τῆς ἐμῆς ὥρας καὶ ὕβρισεν*, 219c).

Alcibiades sees the world in terms of winners and losers, victors and victims. Socrates' refusal to be manipulated is therefore interpreted by Alcibiades as an arrogant attempt to dominate. Ironically, Socrates is actually refraining from taking advantage of Alcibiades by rejecting his offer of sex. By refusing both to overpower and to be overpowered, Socrates attempts to cancel Alcibiades' game of cat and mouse. Note how Socrates diagnoses the problem: when Alcibiades has offered his

⁴⁸ Nussbaum (n. 44 above) seems to anticipate this criticism when she notes on pp. 191–2 that 'with the failure of physical intimacy a certain *part* of practical understanding is lost to Alcibiades. There is a part of Socrates that remains dark to him, a dimension of intuitive responsiveness to this particular person, an aptness of speech, movement, and gesture, that he can never develop, a kind of "dialectic" that is missing.' Nevertheless, she claims, 'Alcibiades can tell the truth about Socrates' unique strangeness even though his aims were frustrated' (p. 191). But surely the lack of 'physical intimacy' is not the only thing that limits Alcibiades' understanding of Socrates.

⁴⁹ Socrates himself refers to Alcibiades' violent and jealous behaviour at 213cd (though his claims are no doubt exaggerated). For a good analysis of Alcibiades' 'jealousy', see E. Fantham, 'ΖΗΑΟΥΤΥΙΑ: A Brief Excursion into Sex, Violence and Literary History', *Phoenix* 40 (1986), 47–50. In addition to his (psychological) feelings of jealousy, Fantham notes Alcibiades' tendency towards assault' (p. 50).

favours to Socrates, the philosopher observes that Alcibiades is proposing a commercial transaction (*ἀλλάξασθαι*) that offers bronze in exchange for gold (218de).⁵⁰ Alcibiades, he says, is scheming to get more than his share (*πλεονεκτεῖν*, 218e5). Even in the act of erotic seduction, this is a man who wants to enrich himself at the expense of others.

Alcibiades' attempt to seduce Socrates, I suggest, cannot be disentangled from his passion for honour and power. Alcibiades thinks he sees some treasure underneath Socrates' philosophical conversations – something different from and better than the *logoi* that Socrates engages in. He thinks that Socrates' philosophical life has born fruits that he can hand over – fruits that he is wilfully concealing from his companions. Alcibiades wants to possess Socrates' knowledge, but he does not want to live the philosophical life. Though Alcibiades claims to have a share in 'the madness and frenzy of philosophy' (218b), he does not comprehend that the philosophical life is an end in itself. He says that he stopped up his ears to the siren-voice of Socrates because he was afraid that he would 'grow old sitting next to Socrates' (216a). Here, Alcibiades seems unable even to imagine what a life of philosophical activity would be like, let alone why it would be choiceworthy in itself. We can only infer that he wanted knowledge for private and political ends rather than those of philosophy.

Since Alcibiades' character distorts his perceptions, we must be especially wary when he claims to reveal the 'inner' Socrates. According to Alcibiades, Socrates is like one of those 'silenus' found in statuary shops, which have the figure of an ugly satyr on the outside but contain images of the gods on the inside (215ab). These satyrs have pipes or flutes in their hands, and this links them with Marsyas, the satyr whose musical abilities rivalled those of Apollo. Socrates resembles these satyrs in his physical appearance, but also because his own brand of 'music' has the same power to bewitch as Marsyas' did (215bc). Alcibiades returns to this comparison at the end of his speech, where he adds that Socrates' *logoi* themselves resemble the silenuses (221d–222a). For these *logoi* have a ridiculous exterior that conceals their beautiful core. Socrates, Alcibiades says, appears to be speaking about pack-asses, smiths, cobblers and tanners, and thus he seems laughable to the untutored mind. But these unprepossessing *logoi* must be opened up. For a glimpse at their interior reveals that they are replete with virtue and, indeed, are 'the most divine' of all discourses (222a).

It is tempting to accept Alcibiades' revelation of Socrates' beautiful inner core. But consider what is at stake. Alcibiades' claims fly in the face of Socrates' characteristic denial that he possesses wisdom and virtue. Thus, if Alcibiades is right, then Socrates is lying. Alcibiades in fact makes this perfectly clear in his speech. Socrates seems to be attracted to beautiful people, Alcibiades says, and he claims to be 'ignorant of everything and know nothing' (216d2–4). But this is only Socrates' 'outward appearance' (*τὸ σχῆμα αὐτοῦ*). This is the cloak that he 'puts around himself on the outside' (*ἐξωθεν περιβέβληται*, d4–5). In fact, Alcibiades asserts,

it doesn't matter at all to him if someone is handsome, but he looks down on this more than anyone would imagine, and the same is the case if someone is rich or has some other privilege deemed a blessing by the crowd. He considers all these possessions to be worthless and all of us to be mere nothings... (216de)

⁵⁰ Why didn't Socrates tell Alcibiades this at the start, in plain and unequivocal terms? Gagarin (n. 30 above) sees this (among other things) as a failure on Socrates' part. Cf. Vlastos (n. 24 above, p. 93), who suggests that Socrates took this approach because 'he wanted Alcibiades to find out the truth for himself by himself'.

According to Alcibiades, Socrates possesses a 'divine and golden and perfectly beautiful and marvellous' interior that elevates him over other people (216e–217a). From this lofty position, Socrates looks down on humankind with arrogant superiority – a superiority that he asserts by way of ironic dissimulation. As Alcibiades says to Eryximachus at 214c–d, 'Do you believe what Socrates said just now? Or are you aware that everything is the opposite of what he says?'⁵¹

The logic of Alcibiades' position is as follows: (a) Socrates must be either ignorant or wise; (b) he cannot be ignorant, therefore he is wise; (c) since he is wise, he is therefore a liar; and (d) his lies reveal that he is toying with people whose inferiority he scorns. It is possible to attack each of these claims, but an assault on (a) will nip the problem in the bud. Why must Socrates be either ignorant or wise? Isn't there some third path? Alcibiades' frame of mind, I suggest, is the same as the one exhibited by Agathon earlier in the dialogue. Recall how Socrates said in his speech that he used to be like Agathon – he used to think that Eros was either a god or a mortal, either beautiful or ugly, either wise or ignorant (201e–202e). Diotima dismantled this binary scheme by introducing Socrates to a *tertium quid*: midway between beauty and ugliness, mortality and immortality, ignorance and knowledge, Eros both loves and lacks wisdom. Perpetually striving towards knowledge and goodness, Eros is the quintessential *philosophos*.

In Alcibiades' speech, Socrates is *sophos*, and therefore godlike and lacking in desire, rather than the *philosophos* who restlessly schemes after perfection. Should we imagine that Plato endorsed this view? Would he have wanted to perfect and reify Socrates – to turn him into an immobile statue such as Alcibiades finds on Socrates' inside? Alcibiades' encomium for Socrates cannot be the final word. Its systematic misreading of Socrates invites us to challenge Alcibiades' world of masters and slaves, of the haves and the have-nots, and to explore the region of the in-between. Alcibiades attempts to memorialize Socrates – to catch, kill and stuff his protean subject. But Socrates will not sit still to be praised.

Alcibiades' eulogy for Socrates, in sum, beautifully evinces the folly of praise.⁵² On the one hand, the speaker is ignorant of his subject and can only tell the 'truth' as he sees it. On the other hand, the subject of praise manifestly evades the encomiast. While Alcibiades' account of Socrates' actions does elicit the reader's admiration, his inability to get at the core of Socrates reminds us that we, too, may not have understood this complex figure. By provoking this *aporia*, Alcibiades' speech calls for inquiry rather than idolatry.

V

Let us turn, now, to Socrates' eulogy for Eros. We have seen how Socrates makes fun of the competitiveness of his fellow encomiasts in the *Symposium*. Not surprisingly, he prefaces his own speech with a noisy refusal to contribute his offering in an agonistic manner. As he says at 199b, he is willing to speak 'in his own fashion' (*κατ' ἐμαυτόν*), but not 'in competition with your speeches' (*οὐ πρὸς τοὺς ὑμετέρους λόγους*). Again, when he has succeeded in eliciting a confession of ignorance from Agathon, he will not play the victor: to Agathon's admission that he is unable to

⁵¹ Here, Alcibiades appears to be referring back to Socrates' claim that Alcibiades grows violent when Socrates so much as looks at anyone else. But Alcibiades' statement in this passage represents his general view of Socrates' discourse.

⁵² It is no accident that Plato put this speech into the mouth of a famous (and, indeed, infamous) politician. The ignorant use of the language of praise, he reminds us, poses a very real danger to the city as a whole.

argue against Socrates (σοὶ οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην ἀντιλέγειν), Socrates counters that it is the truth that Agathon is unable to contradict, since Socrates himself can easily be challenged (οὐ μὲν οὖν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ... δύνασαι ἀντιλέγειν, ἐπεὶ Σωκράτει γε οὐδὲν χαλεπὸν, 201c). The real competition, Socrates suggests, is the search for wisdom; he and Agathon are not competitors but team-mates who must meet the challenge together.

How does Socrates' encomium bear this out? Whereas the previous encomiasts began their speeches with criticisms of the other encomia, Socrates commences by putting himself on the same footing as Agathon. He used to believe the very things that Agathon voiced, he claims, and was only disabused of these ideas by a stern teacher. Indeed, so far from using his speech to glorify his own cleverness and skill, Socrates casts himself in the role of the less-than-brilliant student of a mere woman.⁵³ This unlikely teacher must repeatedly condescend to her 'amazed' (208b) pupil: she finds Socrates unable to answer a question that 'even a child' could answer (204b); she chafes at his ignorance (207c); she doubts his ability to grasp the highest mysteries (210a). Socrates for his part treats her as a formidable and all-knowing mentor (206b, 207c), and is quite willing to admit his own ignorance and need of instruction (206b, 207c).⁵⁴ The form of Socrates' eulogy, then, functions to deflate the speaker and defuse the competition that inheres in encomiastic discourse.

The substance of Socrates' eulogy, too, explodes the conventions of the encomiastic genre. Eros is not a god, we are told, and is in fact poor, tough, dirty, barefoot and homeless; though not ignorant or evil, he lacks wisdom and virtue. Conceived in a one-night stand by two not very distinguished divinities (Poros and the beggar Penia), Eros gets his poverty and ugliness from his mother, and his ability to scheme after the things he lacks – beauty, virtue, wisdom, etc. – from his father. Eros, then, is deprived of the ancestry and personal qualities that encomiasts invariably strive to document. To be sure, Eros does have one saving grace: he loves beauty and wisdom and can drive the human soul towards the highest goods. But, since he never achieves knowledge and virtue, he is not praiseworthy in any ordinary sense.

The ugly and barefoot Eros, of course, conjures up Socrates. And the parallel seems apt, since Socrates is so often portrayed by Plato as an intermediary between human souls and the virtue and wisdom he prods them to seek – as gadfly, a sting-ray, a midwife.⁵⁵ But if Socrates is like Eros, then he too must be lacking in virtue and

⁵³ For an extended discussion of Diotima's role in the dialogue, see D. Halperin, 'Why Is Diotima a Woman?' in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York, 1990), ch. 6.

⁵⁴ The Socrates who attends the drinking party is clearly not the person that he claims he used to be. The disparity between the Socrates whom Diotima accuses of being stupidly infatuated with the young boys (211d) and the Socrates who resists Alcibiades' enticements suggests that Socrates has made some headway in his erotic pursuits. But this does not mean that Socrates has made it to the top of the ladder: Diotima actually doubts that Socrates can achieve these heights (210a), and Socrates' claim that he knows 'nothing but *ta erôtika*' suggests that he understands the journey but not the journey's end.

⁵⁵ M. F. Burnyeat, 'Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration', *BICS* 24 (1977), 7–16, suggests that the Socrates of the *Symposium* has a very different style of pedagogy from that of the 'midwife' (which is found in the early dialogues and is articulated in the *Theaetetus*); 'the *Symposium*', he says on p. 9, 'presents a middle period Socrates, argumentative still but with positive doctrine of his own or learned from Diotima'. I would argue that Socrates transmits Diotima's 'doctrines' (rather than 'positive doctrines of his own') in his speech, and that his ironic behaviour at the drinking party is very much in keeping with the Socrates of Plato's early period. Belfiore (n. 38 above) suggests that Plato calls into question the 'truth' of Socrates' speech in a number of ways; if this is on target, then Diotima's 'doctrines' may be no more Platonic than they are Socratic.

wisdom; he too must be situated somewhere between ignorance and knowledge, vice and virtue. Socrates' repeated insistence in the early dialogues that he does not have real knowledge about the things he seeks encourages us to accept the parallel between Socrates and Eros. In the *Symposium*, Socrates claims that he knows 'nothing except τὰ ἐρωτικά'. But, as Lowenstam has suggested, 'when Socrates claims knowledge of *ta erôtika*, he is not asserting that he possesses a certain type of substantive knowledge but that the only thing he knows is how much he lacks and desires knowledge.'⁵⁶ Socrates, in other words, understands that humans are, by nature, needy beings who long for a knowledge that they can never fully attain. He knows that he does not possess knowledge and has dedicated his life to pursuing this. He recognizes, in short, that the truly erotic life is none other than the philosophical life.

To the extent that he praises Eros, then, Socrates celebrates the philosopher and therefore himself. If Socrates does in fact deliver a speech of praise, then he would be praising himself for knowing that he did not know – for knowing 'nothing except *ta erôtika*'. Certainly Socrates suggests in Plato's *Apology* that his consciousness of his own ignorance makes him 'wiser to some small extent' than other people (21d). Here in the *Symposium* Socrates is on the verge of extolling his own *lack* of wisdom.

But can the celebration of a being who lacks wisdom and virtue be dubbed encomiastic? Socrates is careful to mention that his speech may not in fact be a eulogy at all (212c). As we have seen, Socrates transgresses the boundaries of the encomiastic genre in fundamental ways. In addition to these generic transgressions, Diotima's teaching explicitly indicates that human beings are always in flux, and they do not possess any qualities in a stable or lasting way (207c–208b). Even knowledge is something that needs to be replenished by 'practice' (μελέτη, 208a). Humans want to possess the good for ever (ἔστιν... ὁ ἔρως τοῦ τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτῷ εἶναι ἀεί, 206a), she says, but they are unable to achieve this in a straightforward way. Due to their temporality, they cannot possess knowledge and the other virtues for once and for all: the best one can hope for is to conceive and give birth to these things, and to spend one's life rearing and nourishing these children (212a). Virtue and knowledge, in short, are a way of life – a creative process – not objects that can be won like a trophy.

Socrates' 'eulogy' insists upon motion – the motion towards birth-giving in the presence of the Beautiful. This speech challenges encomiastic discourse by refusing to finalize, to reify, to memorialize its subject. To be sure, a stable and unchanging Form shimmers at the summit of the climb. But the vision of the Form of Beauty does not in fact provide an ending to the questing soul's journey. Rather, it plays the midwife for the pregnant philosopher – it brings children into the light that need nurture and sustenance (212a). Human desire cannot be fulfilled for once and for all; human beings cannot escape motion. Socrates' speech, then, calls into question the very possibility of the 'good man' whose perfect virtue is the paradigmatic subject of the encomiastic genre. It thus undermines the genre in its traditional form. It is not, however, a 'mock' or 'paradoxical' encomium, since it does not celebrate a trivial or disreputable subject – it does not, in short, call a 'bad' thing 'good'.⁵⁷ Rather,

⁵⁶ S. Lowenstam, 'Paradoxes in Plato's *Symposium*', *Ramus* 14 (1985), 88. D. L. Roachnik, 'The Erotics of Philosophical Discourse', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (1987), 117–29, comes to a similar conclusion.

⁵⁷ As R. Colie says in her study of paradoxical discourse (n. 7 above, p. 10), the paradoxical encomium issues a challenge to orthodox opinions (a challenge that characterized the sophistic movement as a whole) by way of an implicit assertion of the relativity of all values. Plato, of course, rejects the notion that values are relative; his deviant use of praise discourse is thus diametrically opposed to that of the paradoxical encomia of the sophists and teachers of rhetoric.

Socrates insists on the existence of absolute goodness and on the impossibility of the perfect instantiation of this goodness in the human world. This is an ontology which challenges the binary logic of the rhetoric of praise and blame.⁵⁸

Stanford University

ANDREA WILSON NIGHTINGALE

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