

‘The unity of the *Phaedrus*’: a response

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Something about the *Phaedrus* tempts many who write on this dialogue to hanker after a different role: to be emulators, not commentators. Listening to the echo of the late Professor Winnington-Ingram’s voice as he wrestles with the temptation to deal with his subject according to the ‘madness which is of god’ rather than ‘the sanity which is of man’, I recognize, in this fine lecture delivered in the year I was born, a fellow Corybant¹. The *aulos* -music that buzzes in the ear and draws us on is not simply Socrates’ resonant hymn to love (for the *Symposium* offers an equivalent thrill), but its appearance in counterpoint with a sober, not to say academic, discussion of the rhetorical skill that it exemplifies. It is this mix of scholarship and poetry, not either in isolation, that fascinates the suppressed poet in the scholar. Yet here too is the source of the problem that Winnington-Ingram confronts in his lecture. Once delivered, the hymn to love features in the subsequent discussion only as a sample of successful rhetoric. But readers bowled over by the hymn cannot bear to think that any topic would have served this purpose as well as love. And so we search for an implicit thematic unity to the dialogue, to perfect the merely formal unity that lies on the surface.

I propose to attempt here a cooler, more historical response to this problem than those of either Winnington-Ingram or my earlier self. It is not the response recently given by Malcolm Heath, but it has something of the same spirit². Heath sees no problem here, only anachronism. Such attachment as the Greeks had towards thematic unity is as nothing by comparison to that of modern critics, the heirs to Romantic organicism. For the Greeks, formal unity sufficed; and the superficial unity of the *Phaedrus* would have been unity enough for Plato. But even if Heath were right about the Greeks in general, he is not right about Plato in general. There is nothing in all of Plato to compare to the impression the *Phaedrus* gives that a topic developed for its own sake (in the hymn to love) is simply to be replaced in the reader’s attention by an entirely different topic, equally developed for its own sake (in the discussion of rhetorical method). The digressions with which the

dialogues abound are not comparable³; a digression is always followed by a return to the subject (from which, often enough, it can then be seen not to have digressed very far). And so the problem of explaining the peculiar thematic disunity of the *Phaedrus*, at least within the Platonic corpus, remains.

Better to cast the historical net more narrowly, and consider the *Phaedrus* in the context of early to mid- fourth century Athens. The first point I wish to make is that although both topic and linguistic register change abruptly in the course of the dialogue, and with them the *kind* of excitement that Plato could expect to generate in the reader, he may well have expected to maintain the same *degree* of excitement. Few modern readers can have escaped a sense of let-down in moving from the imaginative clarity and scope of the erotic hymn to the relative confinement and obscurity of the discussion of rhetoric. Winnington-Ingram speaks of the hymn's 'annihilating power', displays qualified sympathy with Hackforth's judgment that the dialogue is unbalanced, and tentatively attributes, as a result, a deeper imbalance or instability to Plato's character, caught between rationality and mysticism. But our sense of let-down may be a trick of time. We all still fall in love, and Socrates' evocation of how it feels still rings true; but even scholars can have only a historical interest, now, in the particulars of the intellectual struggle between Plato and Isocrates that gives sense to the discussion of rhetoric.⁴ Winnington-Ingram works hard to make us appreciate the potentially "'classical" confrontation of antithetical types' here; but whether or not we share his judgment that the confrontation 'misfired', it can provide us at best with an exemplary lesson from history that we may choose to apply to our own situation. This is an austere pleasure by comparison with the direct thrill of the hymn to love. But for the literate public of contemporaries to whom Plato addressed the dialogue his controversy over education with Isocrates would have had all the grip, immediacy, and political excitement that, say, the controversy over 'political correctness' has for its surprisingly wide audience in America of the 1990s. (Think of the *furor* generated by Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.) Plato's public could well have reacted as does Phaedrus, who is represented as, if anything, more extravagantly eager at the prospect of discussing rhetorical method (258e) than he was over Socrates' hymn (243b, 257c).

So much for the question of imbalance of register; what of the supposed disunity of theme? I am going to argue that we should allow it to stand. Winnington-Ingram seeks to minimize it by finding in the mythic hymn an evocation of the metaphysical grounds of the new philosophical rhetoric that is

subsequently proposed. The new rhetorician is to draw his inspiration from a vision of the Forms; and a vision of the Forms is what we get to hear about in the hymn to love.

I see no reason to disagree with this claim; but it seems to me a retreat from the issue which Winnington-Ingram had begun by confronting with admirable clarity: Why is *love* the theme of the mythic hymn? Would any topic have done as well? His claim is a response to a different question: Why is *philosophy* the (or a) theme of the mythic hymn? And so the more puzzling question remains unanswered. It is not enough to allude to the hymn's 'praise of love as the supreme motive power of the human soul'. What motivates the philosopher and genuine rhetorician is love of truth. But the love-madness that Socrates hymns is the same infatuation (however differently explained) that we can find in a thousand love-poems. It is not a hymn to the love of truth; it is a hymn to the love of persons, which Socrates turns to indirect praise of philosophy by showing how the experience of truly falling in love with persons makes philosophers of us all, if only for a while⁵.

One particular expedient by which Winnington-Ingram mitigates the thematic discontinuity that I claim we should in fact preserve is to mention – in the course of explaining, near the beginning of his lecture, the contribution that love can make towards philosophy – only those true lovers who succeed in becoming philosophers. He passes over in silence the fact that the memory of the Forms is enjoyed by all true lovers, not just those who become philosophers – the followers of Ares, Hera, and the other gods no less than the followers of Zeus. (Many later interpreters of the dialogue have also failed to give this point the emphasis it deserves).⁶ Socrates' topic, in other words, is not philosophic love, but true love. But true love is not so clearly relevant to the discussion of rhetoric as is philosophic love.

Another mitigating expedient is the comparison with the *Republic*. In order to explain the connection in Plato's mind between the celestial splendours of the hymn to love and the nitty-gritty of making a political speech, Winnington-Ingram compares the vision of the Form of the Good that completes the education of the philosopher-king, and how it guarantees the beneficence of the rhetoric that he will bring to bear on those he rules. But there are weighty points of disanalogy that he does not place in the opposite pan. The vision of the good is the culmination of a specifically philosophic education; but the true lover's vision (rather, his memory of a vision) comes at the very outset of whatever development it may stimulate, is not limited to philosophic types (as we have just seen), and is the memory of a vision only of Beauty, not a synoptic vision of the Good as the source of all other

Forms. To compare the *Republic* seems in fact to intensify the puzzle of what falling in love has to do with a philosophically grounded rhetoric.

If Plato thought, as Winnington-Ingram claims, that falling in love has a great part to play in the pursuit of philosophy, why does it play no part in the education of the philosopher in the work which most fully describes it, the *Republic*? And if he had some definite conception of love's part in philosophy, why is he happy to give it a quite different part in Socrates' other encomium of love, in the *Symposium* (in which the vision – not memory – of Beauty is a coping-stone – not a stepping-stone)? Perhaps we are ready now to consider the suggestion that Plato set no great store by what falling in love can do for philosophy, and that there is no relationship of 'Platonic love' worth the special name⁷.

Here a close historical perspective can help us once again. We need to place the *Phaedrus* more firmly in the context of such works as Isocrates' *Helen*, *Busiris* and *Panathenaicus*, with their unlikely topics (at least the first two), their intertextuality, their elaborate self-commentary⁸. Rhetoricians writing encomia as display-pieces typically set themselves the challenge of topics for which praise was unexpected or paradoxical; and Plato reminds us of this convention in both the dialogues in which he deals at length with sexual love: in the *Symposium* when Phaedrus mentions rhetorical extravagances such as the praise of salt (177b), and in the *Phaedrus* when he comments on the unexpectedness of Lysias' choice of the non-lover as a topic for praise (227c). Scholars of Plato are, of course, well aware of the rhetorical context in which he wrote; but they too rarely put him directly in its light. Let us assume, then, that Plato in the *Phaedrus* is trying to outdo the rhetoricians (and especially Isocrates) at their own game. In accord with convention, he chooses for the encomium a topic – sexual passion, love-madness – that his audience will be surprised to hear praised. That is, they will be surprised to hear this praised by the rationalist Socrates, in a work by the high-minded Plato.⁹ Nevertheless, love-madness is not chosen just for its shock-value. The unlikely object is to be praised for genuine and important virtues, so that the speaker can then take credit, in his commentary, for the seriousness of his purpose – at least, that is how Isocrates does it. Plato would need, then, an unlikely topic that he could connect, without too much special pleading, to philosophy – to what, for him, was genuinely important. Falling in love fits this bill nicely.

In other words, Plato would on the one hand want to impress his audience – this constitutes his *epideixis* or display of skill – with the fact that he can turn just about anything, even love-madness, into a recommendation for philosophy. For this

impression to succeed, the topic must indeed seem unlikely, and the commentary on how he brought it off must not be concerned with the topic of love-madness for its own sake. So the thematic disunity of the dialogue is a necessity of its genre. We must stop trying to explain it away. On the other hand, if Plato is going to succeed in turning his unlikely topic into a recommendation for philosophy, it had better not in fact be just anything. It had better be something that can be connected to philosophy in what Socrates can look back on as a 'not entirely implausible speech' (265b). And so love both is and is not a topic developed for its own sake in the *Phaedrus*. Plato is not interested in working out a theory of 'Platonic' love; but he is – as who is not? – interested in love all the same.

NOTES

- 1 See my *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1987), esp. 34-6.
- 2 See Malcolm Heath, 'The unity of Plato's *Phaedrus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1989) 151-73 (followed by a response from Christopher Rowe and a postscript from Heath).
- 3 Pace Heath, 'Unity' 167-9.
- 4 E. Asmis, 'Psychagogia in Plato's *Phaedrus*', *Illinois Classical Studies* 11 (1986) 113-28, is a recent interpretation of the dialogue that emphasizes the confrontation with Isocrates.
- 5 For a defence of this position I must refer the reader to my 'Platonic love', in R. Kraut, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge 1992) 248-76 (esp. 266-8). (The volume is reviewed by Stephen Halliwell below, pp.128-34)
- 6 For example, C. Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven 1986) 124; A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford 1989) (see pp.182-3 of my review of this book: 'Moral fecundity', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 9 (1991) 169-84); and myself in *Listening to the Cicadas*.
- 7 For a fuller defence of this controversial issue I refer the reader again to my 'Platonic love'.
- 8 Thomas Cole has recently done just that, in a book which has influenced the view of the *Phaedrus* that I take here: *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1991). An up-to-date study of the *Panathenaicus* in relation to Plato is M. Erler, 'Hilfe und Hintersinn: Isokrates' *Panathenaikos* und die Schriftkritik im *Phaidros*', in L. Rossetti, ed., *Understanding the Phaedrus* (Sankt Augustin 1992) 122-37.
- 9 To some degree they would be surprised to hear it praised at all: see my 'Platonic love', pp.248-9.