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Admiration's Double Labor: Phaedrus in the Mirror

"Where is that boy I was talking to?," asks Socrates at the beginning of the most roundabout reversal of the *Phaedrus*, the narrative climax at which his defense of love begins.¹ "He must listen to me once more, and not rush off to yield to his nonlover before he hears what I have to say" (243e). Socrates' leading question operates, first of all, as the apostrophic reinvocation of debate, for his previous mock-argument against love addressed a hypothetical beautiful boy. Socrates again summons this ideal presence, a spectator whose absence suggests that he stands in for the future reader of Plato's dialogue. More slyly, though, the question refers to Socrates' interlocutor, the boy Phaedrus, and their provocative ongoing encounter in the woods outside of Athens. In the (at least) double scene of discourse the *Phaedrus* stages, philosophical demonstration receives its dramatic enactment in dialogic form.² Phaedrus and Socrates embody the subjects of argument, the beautiful boy and his lover. In a dialogue bustling with sexual double-entendres, Plato uses multiple means to claim the superlative value of love. If this superbly handled situation demonstrates literary mastery, however, it also displays the insistent textual repetition that haunts Plato's philosophy of ideal forms. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates serves both to define and to exemplify the quality of the singular ideal, love; yet he constantly resorts to love's false simulacra in order to sustain his argument. Thus, the mimetic operation Plato elsewhere condemns inhabits his dialogue's rhetorical strategies. Within this structured universe of ideal forms, good copies, and simulacra, it would appear that, in every instance, the philosopher must have recourse to the discredited simulacra in order to define the ideal.

The definition of love in the *Phaedrus* depends upon the doubling play of the mirror for its very constitution. Appar-

ently, no human contact with the divine ideal is conceivable without the mirror of mimesis, a mirror that inevitably distorts. Describing for Phaedrus the ideal interaction of true lovers, Socrates says that, when the boy

comes close to his lover in the gymnasium and elsewhere, that flowing stream which Zeus, as the lover of Ganymede, called the ‘flood of passion,’ pours in upon the lover. And part of it is absorbed within him, but when he can contain no more the rest flows away outside him, and as the breath of wind or an echo, rebounding from a smooth hard surface, goes back to its place of origin, ever so the stream of beauty turns back and reenters the eyes of the fair beloved. (255c-d)

Reflection takes on both fluidity and sound as it begins its circular course. Love involves “a flood of particles” (251c). Material metaphors enable Socrates to figure passion as unboundable excess, as a ‘something-more’ that overwhelms its container. The scene of passion is rewritten as the passive influx of inspiration. Socrates continues,

And so by the natural channel it reaches his soul and gives it fresh vigor . . . whereby the the soul of the beloved, in its turn, is filled with love. So he loves, yet knows not what he loves; he does not understand, he cannot tell what has come upon him; like one who has caught a disease of the eye from another, he cannot account for it, *not realizing that his lover is as it were the mirror in which he beholds himself.* (255c-d, *my emphasis*)

It is curious that love’s imitative operation is sustained only in the boy’s ignorance; Socrates reiterates his statement for emphasis.³ And reiteration serves precisely as the mirror movement by which the beloved is “captured” (253c).

This passage suggests that, were the boy to see the illusion as illusion, were he to discover the mirror, its efficacy would vanish. The transference cannot be dissolved. Love, then, would be none other than a nurturing false image or benefi-

cent disease,⁴ a simulacrum working only when its double status goes unnoticed. To believe in the reflection, the boy (and, perhaps, the lover, also) cannot recognize the work of the reflector. The oblivious boy, then, possesses “that counterlove which is the image of love” (255d-e), little aware that he worships only a simulacrum, the reversed mirror image of himself. Like the speech-makers Socrates makes fun of throughout the *Phaedrus*, the beloved boy is taken in by the splendid array of his own beauty. Like the soul falling from highest heaven, the boy feeds “upon the food of semblance” (248b). How, then, will he be able “to live for Love in *singleness* [*aplos*] of purpose” (257b, *my emphasis*)?

The recognition (or recollection) of “true beauty” (249e) appears to require deception. Socrates later states, in reference to the sophisticated work of speech-makers, “when people hold beliefs contrary to fact, and are misled, it is plain that the error has crept into their minds through the suggestion of some similarity or another” (262b). What separates this kind of error from the sanctioned mistake the beautiful boy makes? Is a good copy anything but an approved simulacra? True beauty, by Platonic definition, would have to devolve, somehow, from the ideal form of beauty.⁵ Yet Plato never explains the process by which the perfect original duplicates itself and, in doing so, makes its duplications other than, and necessarily inferior to, itself. “[A] cautious man,” says the Stranger in the *Sophist*, “should above all be on his guard against resemblances; they are a very slippery sort of thing” (231a). As in the *Cratylus*, “wisdom and enchanting ravishment” (396d) can mix in ways that leave neither term secure. Words, too, are elusive. The task of separating appearance from reality, of discovering the truth behind its more or less counterfeit images, reaches a new level of problematicity when the truth sought—in this case, the truth of love—is itself generated through subterfuge.

Defending love, Socrates, in a gesture that recalls the banishment of poets from the *Republic*, excludes the physical from the perfect earthly companionship: opposed to “consorting with wantonness” (250e), Socrates’ model lover, “moved by reverence and heedfulness” (256a), resists sexual consummation:

And so, if the victory be won by the higher elements of mind guiding them into the ordered rule of the philosophical life, their days on earth will be blessed with happiness and concord, for the power of evil in the soul has been subjected, and the power of goodness liberated; they have won self-mastery and inward peace. (256a-b)

Here, perhaps, Plato attempts to halt imitation's "wantonness": the physical affirmation of spiritual love threatens to debase it through ugly parody, and such a dramatization Plato will not permit. I have attempted to demonstrate, however, that promiscuous reflection defines love in the *Phaedrus*. A closer look at the imagery Plato employs to describe spiritual love reveals its unabated dependence upon physicality. To enlist authority for his spiritual metaphors, Socrates cites the supposedly "unpublished works" (252b) of Homer. According to these verses, the gods name love differently than humans:

Eros, cleaver of air, in mortals' speech is he named,
But, since he must grow wings, Pteros the celestials call
him. (252b)

Throughout his dialogues, Plato makes his reader suspicious whenever Socrates calls upon a poet to back his claims. Poets, after all, as Socrates explains in the *Ion*, possess neither art nor knowledge: they cannot serve as sources for philosophical understanding. When Socrates relies upon poetry, this usually signals that the discourse so garnished needs to be taken ironically; in the mock-discourse in favor of the nonlover, for instance, Socrates repeatedly invokes poetry, calling upon the lyric poets Sappho and Anacreon, "ye clear-voiced Muses" (237a), and a "divine presence" (238d). He even breaks parodically into verse.

Yet no such irony appears to attend the wing metaphor Socrates takes up to delineate the true, spiritual love. Or does it? The lovers water "the roots of the wings" and quicken "them to growth" (255c-d). If this is not sufficiently evocative, Socrates also says,

Next, with the passing of the shudder, a strange sweating and fever seizes him. For by reason of the stream of beauty entering through his eyes there comes a warmth, whereby his soul's plumage is fostered, and with that warmth the roots of the wings are melted, which for long had been so hardened and closed up that nothing could grow; then as the nourishment is poured in, the stump of the wing swells and hastens to grow . . . Meanwhile she throbs with ferment in every part, and even as a teething child feels an aching and pain in its gums when a tooth has just come through, so does the soul of him who is beginning to grow his wings feel a ferment and painful irritation. (251a-c)

Every time he invokes the wings, an analogy to the penis comes vividly into view. Is this a veritable return of the repressed, or an intended effect? What purple prose! Such intimate innuendo may lead the reader to question whether the penis is not, indeed, the necessary metaphorical precondition for (or supplement to) Socrates' spiritual demonstration, just as the lover depends upon the beloved. Perhaps the wing requires the leverage of the not-so-concealed penis, in much the same way as the deception of love hangs upon non-recognition of the mirror. The wing analogy goes on, here and throughout the dialogue, always carrying a sexual implication.⁶

Sexual double-entendre also frames the opening of the *Phaedrus*: Socrates and Phaedrus' encounter takes the shape of a lovers' rendezvous, where, as it turns out, discourse replaces physical sex. Leo Bersani succinctly states, in "Pedagogy and Pederasty," his review of Michel Foucault's work on the Greeks, that "in the case of the philosopher-teacher, the deceptively de-erotized study of truth legitimates the teacher's claim to mastery and involves an extraordinary simplification of [the] play of desire and resistance in teaching" (Bersani 1985, 19). This precise summary of what Foucault says about Plato is not adequate to the Greek philosopher himself. It is Foucault's reading that reduces Plato's complex textual dynamics to a simplified dialectic of sex and truth. Seeking, as Bersani notes, an alternative to the repressive model that governs modern

understandings of sexuality and knowledge, Foucault too easily polishes Plato into the mirror of his own postmodern philosophy. Foucault finds “an esthetics of sexual asceticism” in Plato, which Bersani suggests is “quite personal” (14). Such asceticism requires passing over the bewildering dynamics of Plato’s dialogues.

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault argues that, across Greek philosophy, “[i]n the domain of pleasures, virtue was not conceived as a state of integrity, but as a relationship of domination, a relation of mastery” (1990, 70). Foucault enlists the chariot image of the *Phaedrus* to explain this dynamic; one result of the mastery model is a “principle of dissymmetry of age, feelings, and behavior between the lover and the beloved” (232). Within this scheme, only the active lover attains pleasure; the passive boy, to use contemporary slang, must grin and bear it. If, as Bersani understands, the boy must not “share any sensations” (1985, 16) with his lover in order to maintain his honor, then the boy’s pleasure is eliminated from the sexual relation. There would be, as Foucault stipulates in *The Care of the Self*, no “reciprocity of pleasure” (1998, 220).

According to Bersani, Foucault’s Plato turns this unequal situation to the advantage of philosophy, whereby the lover discovers

that he loves truth instead of (or rather, through) boys, a revelation which, by no means incidentally, has the enormous strategic benefit of making *him* the object of the boy’s pursuit. The adult lover has been transformed from the suppliant pursuer to the master of truth. Boys anxious to see truth will turn to him, will love truth through him . . . The pursuit of truth depends on a sexual aestheticism by which the master of truth controls his student lovers. . . . the elimination of sex has transformed a relation of problematic desires into a pure exercise of power (Bersani 1985, 17).

Bersani implicitly introduces the mirror motion of psychoanalytic transference as the mechanism through which sexuality translates into power: because the lover withholds what the boy

wants, the boy wants it even more. (The situation receives most thorough enactment in the interaction of Socrates and Alcibiades in the *Symposium*.) A similar relation may apply to Foucault's reading of Plato, wherein Plato is invested with the asceticism Foucault espouses. Foucault would hardly be the first reader to transfer to Plato the authority of his own discourse; such gestures might be said to characterize the entire Western philosophic tradition. For me, the interesting, if unanswerable, question concerns whether Plato is not the very instigator of transference, through the mode of interpersonal relations he sets up between Socrates and Phaedrus, and indeed suggests wherever Socrates appears to speak for him. The *Phaedrus* presents the rudiments of scientific inquiry, bringing "dispersed plurality under a single form" and, through diaphoresis, dividing reality "into forms, following the objective articulation" (265d-e). Might it not also mark the theoretical foundation of the transference structure of textual authority, as it still operates today?⁷

Foucault's interpretation moves too quickly from problematic desire to pure power, neglecting the intricacies of Plato's writing. While, obviously, at some level, Plato wishes to purge the physical, his playfulness with language repeatedly calls the idealizing motive into question. Plato will not give up the rhetorical force of the sexual, no matter how ethereal his topic is. Before the discourses on love in the *Phaedrus* begin, Socrates coyly says to Phaedrus, "[v]ery well, my dear fellow, but you must first show me what is that you have in your left hand under your cloak, for I surmise that it is the actual discourse." (228d) Socrates describes the concealed speech of Lysias as though it were Phaedrus' penis. The extended analogy links writing to masturbation, at the same time suggesting that Lysias himself is to be found under Phaedrus' cloak: "much as I love you I am not altogether inclined to let you practice your oratory on me when Lysias himself is here present. Come now, show me" (228e). Here, Socrates de-eroticizes nothing.⁸

At no point in this discourse does Socrates neglect Phaedrus' pleasure, as this suggestive request evidences. Nor does Phaedrus disregard Socrates. Quite to the contrary, it is

the dispassionate stance of the nonlover that Socrates rebukes in the dialogue's recognition scene. The nonlover (whose pleasures very well may be ascetic) does not search for "true beauty" (249e). His position of pure power is blasphemy:

If Love is, as he is indeed, a god or a divine being, he cannot be an evil thing; yet this pair of speeches treated him as evil. That then was their offense toward Love, to which was added the most exquisite folly of parading their pernicious rubbish as though it were good sense. (242e)

Foucault fails to explain the positive madness of love that Socrates advocates, an abandon impossible to reconcile with the stoic discipline of power:

'False is the tale' that when a lover is at hand favor ought to rather to be accorded to the one who does not love, on the ground that the former is mad, and the latter sound of mind. That would be right if it were an invariable truth that madness [*manian*] is evil, but in reality, the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of a madness that is heaven-sent. (244a-b)

That this doubling of madness follows the general mirror scheme of the *Phaedrus* hardly merits noting; my point is that Socrates here places the highest value not upon the self-mastery that philosophy would supposedly offer, but upon an utter loss of control. That is, upon the *reality* of divine mania, "the superiority of heaven-sent madness over man-made sanity" (244d). In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault concludes that "the Greeks developed arts of living, of conducting themselves, and of 'using pleasures' according to austere and demanding principles" (249). Such self-controlled conduct could not be farther from the "Love" Socrates champions.

It could be argued that, in the last analysis, constrained principle wins, as Socrates' ideal lovers, like Phaedrus and Socrates, never enjoy physical consummation. I am not sure, however, that Plato manages to fly above the sexuality of the

exchange. Socrates' distinction at the end of the dialogue, between written speeches and writing on the soul, allows the metaphorical connection of Lysias's speech to the crassly physical penis. By this reading, true philosophy, as rendered by Socrates, is written only on the soul, and not between the legs. I must ask, then, whether writing on the soul exhibits some special quality that distinguishes it from inscription's more mundane manifestations. The charge against ordinary writing is that it "implant[s] forgetfulness" (275a) in the soul, and leads the foolish to mistake it as something "reliable and permanent" (275c). By its very nature, it is incapable of handling rhetorical situations: written words

seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it be, drifts into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (275d-e)

Plato thus refuses to written discourse the prerogative he grants his own dialogues, for, although he writes so as to involve his reader necessarily in the work of determining significance, here he has Socrates dismiss the constructive role of reading. The reader has no creative part—or, at least, none that Socrates validates. Furthermore, if Plato also wishes to align written texts to the penis and to masturbation, he fails to account for the disparaged organ's oft-noted responsiveness.

The negation of creativity in Plato has broader ramifications than the situation of reading and the snag of false analogies. Because Plato's dialogues present no theory of the constructive imagination he so deftly employs, he reduces every act of invention to the mimesis of the mirror: creation is always copying. Like everything written, love and philosophy

occur only through imitation. Plato's theory of knowledge depends upon mimesis, no matter how often he disparages it. Even his ideal forms operate mimetically; the universe of material copies could not exist, otherwise. When Plato attacks the poets in the *Republic* for perpetrating false acts of imitation, he fails to establish the grounds upon which his writing could be separated from theirs. It is never clear how to distinguish true philosophy from balderdash, no matter how often the dialogues attempt to set such perimeters. The attacks on mimesis invalidate his own theory, for the philosopher, too, must form representations and examples. The passive mode of constitution Plato recognizes, in which knowledge is ultimately recollection and the only mode of production is copy-making, is completely inadequate to explain how his dialogues could come to be.⁹

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Wallace Stevens cautions against what can happen when the criterion of truth attempts to dominate the imagination.

In its ultimate extension, the truth about which we have been insane will lead us to look beyond the truth to something in which the imagination will be the dominant compliment. It is not only that the imagination adheres to reality, but, also, that reality adheres to the imagination and that the interdependence is essential (1942, 33).

It is precisely this interrelation that seems lost on Plato. He does not grasp the dependence of the truth upon imaginative reality, because within his theory the imagination, by definition, possesses no reality. Stevens begins his essay with a lengthy quotation from the *Phaedrus*:

Let our figure be of composite nature—a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the winged horses and the charioteer of the gods are all of them noble, and of noble breed, while ours are mixed; we have a charioteer who drives them in a pair, and one of them is noble and of noble origin, and the other is ignoble and of ignoble origin; and, as might be expected, there

is a great deal of trouble in managing them. I will endeavor to explain to you in what way the mortal differs from the immortal creature. The soul or animate being has the care of the inanimate, and traverses the whole heaven in divers forms appearing; —when perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and is the ruler of the universe; while the imperfect soul loses her feathers, and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground. (1942, 3)

Stevens calls Plato's chariot figure both "pure poetry" and "gorgeous nonsense" (3). It does not, in Stevens' terms, succeed:

The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it attends to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have. In Plato's figure, his imagination does not adhere to what is real. (6)

The rhetorical coercion, in effect, does not last. Plato's stern search for truth, blind to its own imaginative status and contemptuous of its materiality, fails to transport Stevens back to the reality he esteems. Yet Stevens' dismissal does not account for the continuing hold Plato's dialogues have on the Western imagination.

Perhaps Sigmund Freud supplies a critical model that better describes the literary force of the *Phaedrus*. In "The Uncanny," Freud defines his titular term as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (1974, 220). The uncanny is produced precisely when "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced" (244), when one can no longer be sure of where to set the boundaries. The uncanny often occurs in relation to "the phenomenon of the 'double'" (234): a narcissism that recognizes others as itself becomes horrified when separate versions of itself begin to proliferate. The insistent feature of this doubling "is the constant recurrence of the same thing" (234), a phenomena my reading traces throughout the *Phaedrus*.

Where Plato figures such doubling as love, and as the breakthrough of the divine, the less sanguine Freud characterizes the double as “the uncanny harbinger of death” (235). Freud’s uncanny, as a “repressed which *recurs*” (241), involves “involuntary repetition” (237). Here, Freud recognizes

the dominance in the unconscious mind of a ‘compulsion to repeat’ proceeding from the instinctual impulses and inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic power. (238)

Freud identifies repetition compulsion as the manifestation of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. I would argue that part of the power of the *Phaedrus* derives from just such *unheimlichkeit*, and further, that, as I will show, its deathly aspects also come into play in Plato.

Plato seems aware of the bullying quality of his rhetoric, as coercion runs through the *Phaedrus* as a recurring motif. Phaedrus obliquely raises the question of sexual assault when he asks Socrates whether the scene of their encounter is not where “they say Boreas seized Orithyia from the river?” (229b). This invocation of a wind god suggests not only rape, but also a glance at the “windiness” of rhetoric. Soon after deferring the question, Socrates evokes the sensuous qualities of their “delightful resting place” (230b): it is “ever so fragrant” and “cool to the feet,” possessing “freshness” and “music” (230b-c). Again, a seduction scenario comes into play, immediately preceding the first discourse on love. After Phaedrus finishes Lysias’ speech, he goads Socrates into delivering a better speech through a mock-threat:

We are by ourselves in a lonely place, and I am stronger and younger than you, for all which reasons ‘mistake not thou my bidding’ and please don’t make me use force to open your lips. (236c-d)

Later, Socrates, wishing to end his speech, reproaches Phaedrus for making him continue involuntarily: “[d]on’t you see that I

shall clearly be possessed by those nymphs into whose clutches you deliberately threw me?” (241e), thus recalling the Boreas myth he earlier disavowed. And in his second speech, Socrates privileges love in terms that suggest less consensual engagement than divine rape. This sort of madness “seizes [*labousa*] a tender, virgin soul and stimulates it to rapt passionate expression” (245a).

Violence also plays a prominent role in prohibiting consummation. In his elaborate conceit of the chariot of the soul, Socrates describes how the “crooked” (253e) horse—the stand-in for physicality—is curbed. The bad horse attempts to fulfill his lust,

But the driver, with resentment even stronger than before, like a racer recoiling from the starting rope, jerks back the bit in the mouth of the wanton horse with an even stronger pull, bespatters his railing tongue and his jaws with blood, and forcing [*ereísas*] him down on his legs and haunches delivers him over to anguish. (254e)

The rhetorical gusto of this metaphorical castration deserves scrutiny. Although a bloody tongue is not the same thing as a castrated penis, Plato’s quick move from tongue and jaws to legs and haunches suggests the connection. In “The Uncanny,” Freud observes that the uncanny, like the double, “springs from its proximity to the castration complex” (244). Condemning physicality, Socrates nonetheless gives it a most vivid enactment. What does the exuberant evocation of bodily violence have to do with spiritual love? Does it suggest a masochistic subtext? Can it leave the beautiful boy untouched? Why should Socrates value castration? Perhaps the passage shows what Bersani terms, in *The Freudian Body*, “the syntactic or rhetorical violence by which desiring fantasy shatters discursive structures and discursive logic” (1986, 9). Yet Plato’s mirror appears quite intact.

If the dramatic staging of the dialogue mirrors the discourse of love, it seems all but impossible to determine where the reflective play will end. Compulsive repetition, according

to Freud, is not the easiest thing to stop. Socrates and Phaedrus model each other. Socrates states,

I know my Phaedrus. Yes indeed, I'm as sure of him as of my own identity (228a).

Phaedrus, in another context, retorts,

Beware. Do not deliberately compel me to utter the words, 'Don't I know my Socrates? If not, I've forgotten my own identity' (236c).

Identity, in congruence with the rest of the dialogue, operates as a mirror. The quotation marks that surround Phaedrus' question point to their reiterability. Again, with mirroring comes the thematic of compulsion.

Compulsive reiteration is also a criterion for tragedy. Indeed, many aspects of the *Phaedrus* lend themselves to tragic scrutiny. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that "the most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy" are "*peripeteia* or reversal of situation, and recognition scenes" (VI, 13). Both of these are prominent characteristics of the *Phaedrus*: the entire dialogue turns around when Socrates realizes that he has blasphemed love, and sets out to reverse the fortunes of the nonlover and the lover. Aristotle asserts that

Every tragedy falls into two parts—complication and unraveling or dénouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with the action proper, to form the complication; the rest is the unraveling. (XVIII, 1)

This works fairly well as a 'skeletal key' to the *Phaedrus*. If tragedy should "confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly exceed this limit" (V, 4), then all of Plato's dialogues—including the *Republic*, which goes overnight—match the requirement. In the action of the dialogues, as Aristotle dictates, "nothing irrational" (XV, 7) takes place; such events are described, but not presented. The poetic genius

should possess “an eye for resemblances” (XXII, 9) and “speak as little as possible in his own person” (XXIV, 7). Poetry, Aristotle says, involves “the art of telling lies skillfully” (XXIV, 9), and it is obvious in the *Phaedrus* that only the clever untruth will fool a beautiful boy.

Aristotle names catharsis as the other important aspect of tragedy’s emotional charge, and this criterion not only fits uneasily into the structure of diatesis he uses in the *Poetics*, but is also not exactly appropriate to describe the effect of the *Phaedrus*. In a good tragedy, “pity and fear” bring about “the proper purgation” of emotions (Aristotle VI, 2). In the *Phaedrus*, purgation figures differently. Socrates, in an effort to remove the bad spell of false discourse (his speech in favor of the nonlover), requires it:

I have to purify myself. Now for such as offend in speaking of gods and heroes there is an ancient mode of purification, which was known to Stesichorus, though not to Homer. When Stesichorus lost the sight of his eyes because of his defamation of Helen, he was not, like Homer, at a loss to know why. As a true artist he understood the reason, and promptly wrote the lines:

False, false the tale.
Thou never didst sail in the well-decked ships
Nor come to the towers of Troy.

And after finishing the composition of his so-called palinode he straightway recovered his sight. Now it’s here I shall show greater wisdom than these poets. I shall attempt to make my due palinode to love before any harm comes to me for my defamation of him, and no longer veiled for shame, but uncovered. (243a-b)

Explicitly, Socrates’ philosophy offers a better antidote to the wrath of the gods than poetry, because Socrates does not even begin in falsehood.

To allude to blinding, whether Plato intends it so or not, strongly suggests to the reader the climax of Greece’s most

famous tragedy, dear to both Aristotle and Freud, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, who previously enjoyed not only physical sight but also an extraordinarily penetrating intellect, recognizes the dark meaning of his acts and stabs out his own eyes. As he comes out to show his damaged face in public, the Chorus ask him, "[w]hat divinity raised your hand?" (Gould 1970, 150). Oedipus replies,

It was Apollo there, Apollo, friends
 who brought my sorrows, vile sorrows to their perfection,
 these evils that were done to me.
 But the one who struck them [the eyes] with his hand,
 that was none but I, in wretchedness.
 For why was I to see
 when nothing I could see would bring me joy? (150-51).

Oedipus handles his shame at having killed his father and slept with his mother in this manner; he recognizes that, whatever sight he thought he possessed, he had been blind all along. For Oedipus, then, purification neither avoids blindness, nor seeks to heal it. Rather, he achieves an entirely different level of insight.

It is, of course, from this scenario that Freud derives the Oedipus complex, which he also terms the castration complex. Freud consistently links blindness to castration; in "The Uncanny," he writes,

A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough the substitute for the dread of being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration (231).

The threat of castration implicit in blindness "excites a peculiarly violent and obscure emotion" (231), an emotion that obviously bears some difficult-to-determine resemblance to Aristotle's catharsis.¹⁰ It bears repeating that such violence is what Socrates wishes entirely to avoid in his overture on

Stesichorus, but seems to welcome in his illustration of the bridling of the bad horse. Is this ambivalence about castration?

Another sort of purification/catharsis/castration, it seems to me, takes place in Socrates' description of the consequence of ideal love: "glorious and blissful is the endeavor of true lovers in that mystery rite, if they accomplish what they endeavor after the fashion of which I speak, when mutual affection arises through the madness inspired by love" (253c). The "natural channel" (255c) of love recharges both lover and beloved with "fresh vigor" (255c), presumably washing away whatever had kept them from the "victory" of eternal life (256a). Thus, while the pair gain their phallic wings, they ultimately relinquish all physicality; if this can be figured as a sort of castration, it would be, in Freudian terms, simultaneously castration's denial and affirmation. In other words, the logic of the fetish.

The reversals that constitute mimesis, that frame Plato's dialogue and provide the only discernible definition of love the *Phaedrus* offers, carry the threat of violence. It is a violence, however, whose exact activity and effect are difficult to describe. At the conclusion of the dialogue, Socrates claims the existence of "another sort of discourse, that is brother to the written speech" (276a). How can such a discourse, then, deny its consanguinity with writing on the page? In Oedipal fashion, will it mistakenly kill its father; or is the written itself the precursor, as Derrida argues?

PHAEDRUS: What sort of discourse have you now in mind, and what is its origin?

SOCRATES: The sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner, that can defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing.

PHAEDRUS: You mean no dead discourse, but the living speech, the original of which the written discourse may fairly be called a kind of image. (276a)

As Derrida points out, Plato must take recourse to the figure of writing in order to describe the operation of the soul. The

controversy of which came first, writing or the soul, may be, in the final analysis, less interesting than the question of whether this mimetic, transferential model adequately settles the central issue of the *Phaedrus*. Does Plato define love satisfactorily, or would a more complete definition need to include creativity and the imagination? What gets left out when love and wisdom become a matter of transcription? In *The Freudian Body*, Bersani argues that “[t]he mythologization of the human as a readable organization is a fundamental political strategy” (83) which reveals a willingness to predict and control the human. It reveals “symptomatic violence” (115). The evil double, the bad brother, must be purged.¹¹ Socrates has to purify himself. This model of family relations, the fraternity Plato evokes, thus again recalls the tragic family of Oedipus.

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Notes

1. Instead of page numbers, which vary from edition to edition, this essay employs the standardized reference system for all Platonic dialogues (as well as the similar system for Aristotle’s *Poetics*), with reference numbers located conveniently after each quote.
2. I borrow the term, “double scene,” from Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination*. In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida suggests that certain doubling effects may “escape Plato’s notice,” because “[i]t is in the backroom, in the shadows of the pharmacy, prior to the oppositions between conscious and unconscious . . . that these textual ‘operations’ occur” (Derrida 1981, 129).
3. The reader of the *Phaedrus* should note that, earlier, Socrates ironically praises—that is, slyly disparages—just such rhetorical repetition in regard to Lysias’ speech: “In fact it struck me as an extravagant performance, to demonstrate his ability to say the same thing twice, in different words but with equal success” (235a).
4. On the problematic status of the beneficent disease, see “Plato’s Pharmacy.”
5. It makes little difference whether the emanation involved is a one-to-one correspondence, as suggested in the *Republic*, or an alphabetic conjugation, as in the *Sophist*; the ideal, either way, must transcribe itself as the real.
6. Such ‘carrying’ might be compared fruitfully to the soul’s charioteer, pulled along by his two horses. In my analysis, the bad horse takes the seat of honor.
7. In *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul*, Jonathan Lear interestingly argues that an important mistake of the Socratic method is to “ignore transference” (Lear 1998, 57). Lear nonetheless finds Plato working toward a theory of transference, especially in the *Republic*. His reading of the relation of Plato to psychoanalysis is more conciliatory than mine, though there are parallels.
8. It is also worth remarking that Socrates, in this instance, appears to favor written discourse over whatever Phaedrus has learned “by heart” (228a). This seems to contradict his later privileging of discourse “written in the soul of the learner” (276a). Writing, Socrates suggests, comes first and merits priority.

9. To say that Plato's theory is invalidated, however, implies that Plato *has* a straight-forwardly articulated theory of the forms to nullify. But because, in the dialogues, it is never the voice of Plato himself that delivers philosophy, there is no fail-safe way to ascertain that this or that saying of Socrates, or anyone else, constitutes the definitive statement of Platonic theory. And one might search for an implicit theory of creativity in the rhetorical operations of Plato's dialogues, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of investing Socrates with philosophical authority. Plato, however, never explicitly directs the reader to proceed in such a manner. It usually seems a reasonable assumption that Socrates, as the hero of the discourse, carries authority.
10. In "Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psycho-Analysis," Freud counsels that would-be practitioners should seek "psycho-analytic purification" (Freud 1974, 116).
11. In "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," Gilles Deleuze claims that the purpose of Plato's divisions between simulacra and copies "is not at all to divide a genus into species, but, more profoundly, to select lineages: to distinguish pretenders; to distinguish the pure from the impure, the authentic from the inauthentic" (Deleuze 1990, 254). Therefore, "the Platonic dialectic is neither a dialectic of contradiction nor of contrariety, but a dialectic of rivalry" (254). It is my contention that just such rivalry inheres to the Platonic definition of love.

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