

“Platonic Irony”¹

Christopher ROWE

A number of writers on Plato have wanted to claim that —if we exclude the letters— he never writes *except* ironically.² The argument seems to go something like this. Plato always remains anonymous, and can never be identified with any of the characters of his dialogues (even Socrates). By the very act of writing dialogues, and disappearing behind his characters, he distances himself from what he writes. If, to quote Johnson, irony is ‘a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words’ —though ‘contrary’ is probably too strong a word in this connection— the result will be to make him necessarily, and permanently,³ an ironist. His meaning is not to be discovered on the surface, but only, if at all, through a probing examination of what is said by his characters in relation to its context: the interplay between one character and another, dra-

¹ This paper represents a slightly revised version of an address given to the 1987 Annual Meeting of the Classical Association, held at the University of Reading. A summary of that address appears in the *Proceedings of the Classical Association* for 1987.

² See, most recently, Charles Griswold’s *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus* (New Haven and London 1986), the introduction to which contains both a full exposition of his own approach (so, e.g.: ‘the whole of the text always exhibits Platonic irony’, p. 13, n. 23) and a useful set of references to scholars who —he claims— have adopted similar lines of interpretation.

³ One can of course accept the first description (‘necessarily’) for Plato, as does F. E. Sparshott, in ‘Socrates and Thrasymachus’, *Monist* 50 (1966), pp. 421-59, without also accepting the second (‘permanently’). Sparshott’s reasoning seems impeccable: ‘the normal implication of dialogue form is that the author is disengaged from his characters. Even if he usually uses one of them as his mouthpiece, we cannot assume that he stands by every word he makes him say, or that he dissents from every word the others say. He is, after all, the author of all their words alike’ (p. 421, quoted by Griswold). But the leap from this to Griswold’s own position is long and perilous; see below.

matic setting and so on. We are perpetually involved, on this account, in a kind of dialogue with the text, which is different from the dialogue between the characters themselves.

There is much that is obviously right about this kind of approach, at least in relation to those dialogues with a high dramatic content. But if it is intended literally to apply to the whole of Plato, it is equally obviously overstated. Are we really meant to suppose that *nothing* of what 'Socrates' says (to restrict the case to him) is *ever* meant to be taken seriously? There are surely many things which he says many times over, in a variety of different contexts; why should we not take it that these are things which the author wants to say, and will say, whatever the context? If it is literally true that he, Plato, says nothing in the dialogues, it does not follow that he cannot express himself, on occasion, through his characters. The *Seventh Letter* says only that Plato never collected together his views in writing, wrote no *syngramma*, not that he never wrote down any of them.⁴ In fact, those who adopt this extreme approach usually seem to do so as a kind of rhetorical riposte to the opposite but equally extreme way of taking the Platonic dialogues—that is, the one which seemingly ignores the *Seventh Letter* and treats them precisely as a set of *syngrammata*, merely disguised as dramatic conversations.⁵

I shall myself in any case assume that Plato intends at least some of the things he puts into Socrates' mouth to be taken seriously (though not, as we shall see, *too* seriously). But at the same time, no reader of Plato can continue for long without recognising that there is frequently movement under the

⁴ Strictly, what the letter says (341 c) is that 'there does not exist any *syngramma* of mine about them, nor will there exist one', where 'them' refers back, past a mention of 'the matter' (*to pragma*, c 3-4), to 'the things about which I am in earnest' (c 1-2). In fact, the kind of view Griswold favours holds that there *are* important truths contained in the dialogues only that they are hidden beneath the surface: '... at each instance of irony in a dialogue a determinate (if complex) covert meaning can be discovered' (Griswold, p. 15, n. 27). (I take it that whether or not Plato himself wrote the *Seventh Letter*, it retains some evidential value.)

⁵ For a different kind of riposte to these same opponents, see Michael C. Stokes, *Plato's Socratic Conversations* (London, 1986).

surface, and that he frequently communicates with the reader in oblique and indirect ways: if you like, irony in various forms. My concern in this paper will be to identify some of these forms of irony, and to relate them to Plato's own explicit views about the nature and value of writing. I refer here chiefly to the famous passage at the end of the *Phaedrus* in which writing is described as a form of play.⁶ This in itself already presupposes a rejection of the first of the extreme views I have mentioned, according to which irony governs every part of every dialogue. The passage on writing in the *Phaedrus* is, in my view, one of the many places in the dialogues where Plato expresses himself directly. Admittedly, this position is not itself without problems, since the passage in question is itself *written*, and therefore itself—presumably—subject to the same considerations which Plato raises in it against writing in general.⁷ But the problems are not, I think, insuperable. What the *Phaedrus* finally tells us is only that any author should be aware that what he writes (necessarily) contains *much that is playful* in it,⁸ not that 'play' is by itself a complete description of the activity of writing; and the grounds which the dialogue advances for its thesis—broadly, that written works are incapable of defending themselves, and (therefore) also incapable of adequately teaching the truth⁹—are not in fact sufficient to justify that reading of it. In other words, what the *Phaedrus* says is entirely consistent with the view that even if written compositions are not to be thought of as 'worth much serious attention',¹⁰ still a modicum of seriousness can be attached to them¹¹—as indeed we might hope, given that Plato himself

⁶ 276 d, 277 e.

⁷ See M. M. Mackenzie, 'Paradox in Plato's *Phaedrus*', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* n. s. 28 (1982), pp. 64-76, with C. J. Rowe, 'The Argument and Structure of Plato's *Phaedrus*', *PCPS* n.s. 32 (1986), pp. 114-15.

⁸ 277 e.

⁹ 275 d-e, 276 c.

¹⁰ *oudena ... logon ... megalēs axion spoudēs graphēnai*, 277 e.

¹¹ At any rate, they can be *useful*, whether as a source of 'reminders'—for the author's own old age, and 'for everyone who follows the same track' (276 d)—or as instruments of persuasion, as opposed to teaching. The main passage on which I rely for the second point is 277 e 8-9: a) in the context

wrote so much. We are merely warned against taking any written statement, including any that is made in the *Phaedrus*, as the last word on the subject. (We may also notice, incidentally, that Plato does not here directly connect the idea of play with that of irony, though he does so elsewhere.¹² I shall later go on to suggest that in the *Phaedrus* at least there is an *indirect* link between the use of irony and what is said in the dialogue about the nature and status of the written word. But that is a different matter. For the moment, I wish merely to rule out what might look like a tempting argument for the band of extremists whose approach I have so far been considering: that because Plato describes writing as play, and because irony is, or can be, a form of play, this by itself gives support to the view that the *whole* of his output is somehow ironical.)

My purpose, then, is to look at some varieties of Platonic irony, where these are understood as contrasting with other, non-ironic forms of expression. My examples, as it happens, will be taken exclusively from the *Phaedrus*: partly because my own interest in the subject has arisen from work on this particular dialogue;¹³ and partly because as a consequence of its self-conscious reflections on its medium (or so at least I claim), it is more pervasively ironic in tone than perhaps any other single dialogue.¹⁴ What I have to say about the *Phaedrus*

the description 'aiming at persuasion (*peithō*) without questioning and teaching' clearly belongs as much to written *logoi* as to live 'rhapsodic' performances; and b) the *Phaedrus*, unlike the *Gorgias*, attaches positive value to methods of persuasion (see C. J. Rowe, 'Public and Private Speaking in Plato's Later Dialogues', presented at the Symposium Platonicum held at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in July 1986, and to be published as part of the *Proceedings* of the Symposium by the University during 1987).

¹² *Symposium* 216 e, which describes Socrates as *eirōneuomenos* and *paizōn* (i.e. *paizōn* by means of his *eirōneia*). On the relationship between Socratic and Platonic irony, see pp. 6-8 below. (If *eirōneia* in the *Symposium* passage is 'mock-modesty', as Dover claims in his commentary (Cambridge, 1980), ad loc., and not 'irony', it is nevertheless a sub-type of Johnson's irony.)

¹³ See especially C. J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus* (text, with facing English translation, and commentary), Warminster 1986.

¹⁴ As Professor G. L. Huxley has pointed out to me, the *Cratylus* offers some stiff competition; but after initial hesitation I am still inclined to award the prize to the *Phaedrus*—that is, of course, given my reading of the dialogue.

will, I think, have implications for other dialogues;¹⁵ but I shall not have time to work out this suggestion here.

We may begin with a notorious problem: how precisely we are to identify when an author is expressing himself ironically, and when not (though it is worth saying that it is a problem which seems to affect classical scholars rather more than it does, say, students of English literature). The problem is delightfully underlined in a passage in D.J. Enright's recent essay on irony, *The Alluring Problem*:

'In *The King's English* the Fowlers make gentle mock of those pessimists who deem it advisable to assist the reader with quotation marks, italics, or question marks inside brackets, as for example Marie Corelli: "Was I about to discover that the supposed 'women-hater' had been tamed and caught at last?" Even so, I have heard of an English teacher in Japan early this century who issued his students with texts of Dickens carrying a marginal sign for "humour" (i.e. laugh here), while D.C. Muecke cites the proposal made in 1899 by a certain Alcanter de Brahm for a special convention, a reversed question mark: †, which he termed "le petit signe flagellateur", to signal the presence of irony.'¹⁶

In one passage in the *Phaedrus* there is just this kind of flagging in the text itself. In the course of his long, ostensibly solemn palinode on love, Socrates tells Phaedrus what the gods call the thing:

'When you hear [it],' he says, 'I expect you will laugh because of your youth. I think some Homeric experts cite two verses from the less well-known poems, the second of which is quite outrageous and not very metrical; they celebrate him like this: "Him mortals call winged Eros, / but immortals Pteros, because of his wing-growing necessity". You may believe this or not...'¹⁷

¹⁵ As indeed we should expect, if part of the story relates —as I suggest— to a general Platonic irony about writing.

¹⁶ D. J. Enright, *The Alluring Problem: an essay in irony* (Oxford, 1986), p. 37.

¹⁷ 252 b - c.

'I expect you will laugh' is surely only a step away from the unnamed English teacher's 'please laugh'; although commentators have often been as slow to take the point as the teacher expected his Japanese pupils to be to see Dickens' humour.

But things are not usually as straightforward as this. It is usually remarkably difficult to *prove* the presence of irony in a passage. The obvious minimum requirement is that we should have good reason to believe that the writer or speaker does not mean all that he says. So when at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* Socrates urges Phaedrus to give him a performance of Lysias' speech, because he is sick with passion for hearing *logoi*, we know, although Phaedrus doesn't, that it's *logoi* of a quite different kind which arouse him.¹⁸ We know, because both the *Phaedrus* itself and any number of other dialogues tell us so. But what if our supposed evidence for Plato's 'real' views comes solely from other dialogues? When Socrates purports to praise the poets,¹⁹ or Pericles and Anaxagoras,²⁰ is it relevant to our interpretation of these passages that he hardly has a good word to say for them anywhere else? Why should not Plato just have changed his mind? In both cases, I think irony is present;²¹ but the ironic interpretation has to be worked for, against the resistance of the generality of commentators, who give credence to Socrates' outward seriousness of tone.

The examples just mentioned belong to a type of irony in Plato which no one misses entirely, namely what is normally labelled as '*Socratic*' irony —used, as J.A.K. Thomson puts it, 'as a weapon for the discomfiture of opponents, ... or as a pleasant engine for extorting the truth'.²² (Enright also has a nice description of it: "Your neighbour having recommended a certain fertilizer, you ask him innocently why it is that a

¹⁸ 228 b.

¹⁹ 245 a.

²⁰ 269 e-270 a.

²¹ On the first passage, see pp. 15-16 below; on the second, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. IV (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 431-3, and Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus* (n. 13 above), pp. 204-5.

²² *Irony: an historical introduction* (London, 1926), p. 171.

small dose of it has ruined your tomatoes.”)²³ Now this sort of irony — which Plato’s Socrates in fact employs as much when he is talking about other people as when he is talking to them — is itself also Platonic, in so far as the character who employs it is under Plato’s control. My concern here, however, is with a different sort of Platonic irony, which we might describe as *self-directed*: directed, that is, by the writer of the dialogues against himself. ‘Socrates’ usually only pretends to be self-disparaging;²⁴ the aspect of Platonic writing that interest me is a kind of irony that in fact serves to deflate the pretensions of the author himself —pretensions that are implicit in the very act of writing. Socrates —the real Socrates— perhaps genuinely claimed to know nothing, and preferred to have others do the talking. Plato, having taken the decision to write, frequently finds himself in the position of expressing opinions, and so giving an appearance that he *does* know. But true wisdom, the *Phaedrus* roundly declares, belongs only to gods.²⁵ Socrates claimed only to know that he was ignorant; Plato seems to claim more than that, but it is still his position that nothing he says, or that any writer says,²⁶ should be taken lying down, or accepted without challenge. The purpose of his special, non-Socratic, genuinely self-disparaging irony is, I think, to make the same point in an indirect way. (I say ‘non-Socratic’: perhaps it too is originally Socratic. But my point is just that it is not the same as what we typically label as ‘Socratic irony’.)

We badly need some examples —although we have already had one, in the shape of the passage about the gods’ name for Love. I shall come back to the particular point and effect of this passage later. For the present, I want to look at another case, which will help to establish my thesis more directly.

²³ Op. cit., p. 3.

²⁴ Alternatively, his ‘failure’ is in relation to a set of standards which no ordinary person would dream of setting for themselves.

²⁵ 278 d.

²⁶ If, again, we may assume that Plato means ‘Socrates’ strictures on writing to apply straight-forwardly to his own written products: cf. p. 3 above, and —for a comprehensive treatment of the whole question— Thomas A. Szlezák, *Platon und die Schriftlichkeit der Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu den frühen und mittleren Dialogen*, (Berlin, 1985), especially Anhang I.

The discussion of writing begins with the story of Theuth and Thamus, the Egyptian counterparts of Prometheus and Zeus.²⁷ Theuth has discovered number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, draughts and dice-playing, and the art of writing; and he displays his discoveries to Thamus. Writing he describes as an 'elixir' or *pharmakon* of wisdom and memory: it increases the reader's wisdom, and improves his capacity for remembering. But Thamus retorts that it will have the opposite effect: if someone can rely on 'alien marks' he will not have to remember anything himself, and what he reads will give him only the appearance of wisdom, not real wisdom—he will seem to know much, but will actually know nothing worth speaking of. There then follows this exchange:

Phaedrus: 'Socrates, you easily make up stories from Egypt or from anywhere else you like.'

Socrates: 'Well, my friend, those at the sanctuary of Zeus of Dodona said that words of an oak were the first prophetic utterances. So the men of those days, because they were not wise like you moderns, were content because of their simplicity to listen to oak and rock, provided only that they said what was true; but for you, Phaedrus, perhaps it makes a difference who the speaker is and where he comes from: you don't just consider whether what he says is right or not.'

Phaedrus: 'You rightly rebuke me, and it seems to me to be as the Theban says about letters.'²⁸

The reference to 'oak and rock' is a reminiscence of *Odyssey* 19. 162-3, where Penelope is addressing Odysseus, before she knows his identity: 'But even so, tell me who you are, and the place you came from. You were not born from any fabulous oak, or a boulder'²⁹ — i.e. not just from anywhere. Socrates turns the passage upside down: truth *may* come from anywhere; you shouldn't ask who the speaker is and where he

²⁷ 274 c ff.

²⁸ 275 b - c.

²⁹ The translation is Lattimore's.

comes from.³⁰ But such a view is mere simple-mindedness to clever moderns like Phaedrus.

Straightforward 'Socratic' irony, of course, though unusually for him, Phaedrus recognises it. But there is a further, hidden aspect to the passage. Phaedrus accepts Socrates' rebuke — or does he? 'You rightly rebuke me', he says; but then he adds 'it seems to me to be as *the Theban* says about letters'. On the literal level, 'the Theban' is Thamus, from Egyptian Thebes. Phaedrus is saying: you tell me not to ask where a speaker comes from — so I'll accept even what a *Theban* says. He is perhaps replying with an irony of his own: 'the Theban' suggests *Boeotian* Thebes, and as Plutarch later tells us, the inhabitants of Attica regarded Boeotians as 'dense, stupid, and silly'.³¹ 'I must accept what you say', Phaedrus says, but in reality he reserves his position — as he must, as a devotee of the writer Lysias. But neither does *Socrates* mean quite what he says about oaks and rocks. At the beginning of the dialogue, he is found explaining why he never leaves the city: it is because the country-places and the trees are not willing to teach him; only the people in the city can do that.³² Putting the two passages together, we get the following conclusion: that the route to understanding is by conversation and dialogue, not by listening to the trees, or to stories — including my own. Listen, by all means, Plato says. But then the real business begins, of considering whether or not what has been said is true. No doubt he thinks that the Theuth/Thamus story *does* tell the truth. But simultaneously he warns us that it is not to be taken as gospel, which is what he later makes Socrates say explicitly about *any logos*. We cannot rely on the authority of the speaker: any *logos* he utters must be questioned and tested. As it happens, Socrates chooses to accept Phaedrus' response — 'you rightly rebuke me' — at face value, in order to be able to go on expounding his position. But the point has already

³⁰ Cf. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus*, p. 210.

³¹ *On the Eating of Meat*, 995 e. (The same suggestion is made, but with greater hesitation, in Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus*, loc. cit.)

³² 230 d.

been made that that too will need to be questioned and examined for its truth value.

But all this ought then also to apply to everything else that Socrates says, including his famous palinode: that too is one of his stories, and —for all its apparent solemnity— will itself have to be taken with a pinch of salt. He in fact tells us as much when he later reflects on the speech. We distinguished four kinds of madness, he says:

‘the madness of love we said was best, and by expressing the experience of love through some kind of simile, which allowed us perhaps to grasp some truth, though maybe also it took us in a wrong direction, and mixing together a not wholly implausible speech, we sang a playful hymn in the form of a story. . .’³³

The ‘playfulness’ of the speech³⁴ is further emphasised a few lines later on:

‘To me it seems that the rest really was playfully done, by way of amusement; but by chance two principles of method were expressed’ (i.e. the principles of collection and division: *that* part at least, in which madness was subjected to proper dialectical analysis, *was* serious and useful, just in so far as it illustrated a useful method).

Now why is the speech described as playful? Apparently because it was a *muthos*, and worked by means of a simile (the chariot of the soul), which may have been as misleading as it was helpful. This again is wholly in line with the conclusions of the last part of the dialogue, which are applied to set speeches —ones which are, as Socrates puts it, ‘spoken. . . to produce conviction without questioning and teaching’, like his own³⁵— as much as to written works.³⁶

³³ 265 b-c.

³⁴ Or, now, of *both* Socrates’ speeches, taken together (see 265 c 5-6).

³⁵ The connection is not made explicitly; but his speech, or speeches, are in fact ‘without questioning’, and therefore also, if questioning is a condition of teaching, ‘without [the capacity for] teaching’.

³⁶ 277 e 8-9 (cf. n. 11 above).

This explicit statement, that the speech is 'playful', should not be written off as disingenuous. Apart from the fact that it is consistent with the formal teaching of the dialogue, I believe that it represents at least a partially accurate description of the speech itself. But let me begin a little further back, with a passage in the conversation preceding the speech. Having delivered his *first* speech, in which he attacked love in competition with Lysias, Socrates prepares to go off home across the Ilissus. But he is held back, as he proceeds to explain.

'When I was about to cross the river, my good man, I had that supernatural experience, that sign which I am accustomed to having —on each occasion, you understand, it holds me back from whatever I am about to do— and I seemed to hear a voice from the very spot, which forbids me to leave until I have made expiation, because I have committed an offence against what belongs to the gods [i.e. love]. Well, I am a seer; not a very good one, but like people who are poor at reading and writing, merely good enough for my own purposes; so I already clearly understand what my offence is. For the fact is, my friend, that the soul too is something which has divinatory powers; for something certainly troubled me some while ago as I was making my speech, and I had a certain feeling of unease, as Ibycus says (if I remember rightly), "that for offences against the gods, I win renown from all my fellow men". But now I realise my offence.'³⁷

This passage is usually treated on the same footing as the more famous description by Socrates of his divine sign in the *Apology*;³⁸ and indeed the language used in the two contexts is very similar. But there are real differences. Most importantly, whereas the *Apology* passage purports to explain Socrates' experience as a plain biographical fact, here in the *Phaedrus* it appears as more of a simple dramatic device. Later on, the speech which Socrates now pretends to repent of is rehabilitated, and treated together with the palinode as part

³⁷ 242 b-d.

³⁸ 31 c-d.

of an entirely proper account of love in all its aspects.³⁹ What *it* told us about is ordinary, human, 'left-handed' love; the palinode then went on to describe that other, better kind of love which comes to us as a gift from the gods. All that Socrates genuinely has to repent of is the suggestion that *all* love is of the left-handed sort, which Plato deliberately underlines by having him get up to leave after finishing his piece. *Eros* is madness, he has said; the kind of madness in which reason is overcome by sexual appetite —and what is that, if it is not an evil? So let my story fare as it should; now I'm off. But we know, and Plato knows we know, that he cannot leave at that point. How could this self-acknowledged expert in things erotic⁴⁰ go off after disparaging his master and teacher like that? Moreover, if he did, he would appear just as another expert in oratory, no doubt superior to Lysias, but nevertheless in the same business as him. That is the role that he has had so far, but all along any reader worth his salt must have been wondering just how long it will be before the ugly duckling emerges as the swan.

The transformation is effected in the present passage, through the trundling on of one of Socrates' best known aspects: the divine sign. His true *persona* is at last revealed; and we expect to move on to a higher, more serious level. And so, in a sense, we do. There is no doubt that the palinode which follows is more elevated in tone than anything in the first part of the dialogue. But at the same time it is lightened by flashes of ironic humour, as in the passage I referred to earlier, on the divine name for *Eros*. This mixture of the serious and the playful —of which more in a moment— is, I think, prepared for in Socrates' introduction of his divine

³⁹ 264 e ff. (cf. p. 9 above).

⁴⁰ Admittedly this side of Socrates is properly revealed, in the *Phaedrus* itself, only later (257 a). But I believe a) that the *Symposium* (see 177 d) predated the *Phaedrus*; b) that in any case the historical Socrates' eroticism was well-known; c) that Plato would have expected any reader of the *Phaedrus* to have known about it (whether or not he had read the *Symposium*); and d) that this is shown by a line like 227 c 3, which I claim is intelligible only as an implicit reference to it.

sign, which begins the lead into the palinode itself. As I say, we know he must stay in any case. And *Socrates* knows, too; he 'felt a certain unease' about what he was saying, even while speaking. By having him admit that, Plato half confesses on his own account that the reference to the divine sign is superfluous. He is openly manipulating, playing with, the character of *Socrates*. A more obvious instance of the same thing recurs earlier, at 229 a, when *Socrates* and *Phaedrus* arrive at the *Ilissus*: 'it seems it's just as well', *Phaedrus* says, 'that I happened to be barefoot; you always are'. *Socrates*' habit of going barefoot is elsewhere associated with his poverty, which results from his addition to philosophy, and his consequent neglect of his private affairs. But here it means merely that he's ready for a paddle in the river. In both cases, something which is otherwise treated as deadly serious is now simultaneously located on a different and less serious plane. This too, I take it, can be called irony: a form of expression which, when taken with its context, tends to undermine itself. The reason why Plato uses it is, again, connected with his formal doctrine about the value of writing. *Socrates*' description of written works, that they pretend to be serious,⁴¹ but contain much that is playful, here applies to part of the *Phaedrus* itself, as it does to large stretches of the dialogue as a whole. But what makes the present passage — *Socrates*' experience of his sign — particularly interesting is that it focusses the attention of the reader directly on the role of the author as manipulator. We are taken momentarily backstage, as it were, and shown the puppet-master at work. On one level, we are expected to believe the performance; on the other, we are temporarily allowed to see it *as* a performance, which qualifies our understanding of it on the first level.

Now it is true that the dialogue would still be 'playful' (or 'contain much that is playful') according to the criteria that *Socrates* lays down at the end, even if it were wholly straight-faced.⁴² Written works, *Socrates* says, are playful just

⁴¹ See especially 275 d.

⁴² Cf. Rowe, 'Argument and Structure' (n. 7 above), p. 120.

because they are not an adequate instrument of teaching. (Somewhere here there may well lurk an explanation of Plato's choice of the dialogue form from the beginning: just by expressing himself through conversations tied to particular times and places, and between particular individuals, he perhaps means to emphasise the point which he frequently has Socrates make in an explicit way, about the provisionality of any conclusions reached.) My claim is only that the ironic playfulness of the *Phaedrus* is consistent with the attitude of a writer who says that writing is, after all, a kind of play, and that real intellectual advance is to be made by other means. Irony, we should again notice, is peculiarly adapted to the lesson which is to be taught —that books are not all that they seem to be.

The same, to repeat an earlier point, is supposed also to be true of set speeches; and so it turns out with Socrates' palinode. That it is not a straightforward exposition of doctrine —despite the determination of generations of interpreters to take it as such— is already guaranteed by the fact that the larger part of it is cast in the form of a myth. That might in itself provide a sufficient basis for Socrates' own explicit description of it as 'playful'.⁴³ But as I have already said, it is also 'playful' in another way: that is, in that it combines serious matter with elements that are playful in a quite literal sense. I began with one such case, the passage which derives the name Eros from the divine original, Pteros. Here I shall content myself with a single further example, though a fairly central one. The speech begins by listing three forms of beneficial, god-given madness, and proposes to show that love is a fourth. One of the forms in the list is that of *poetic* madness. Now as I have said, the interpretation of this apparently complimentary reference to the poets depends on how far it is thought legitimate to read one dialogue in the light of others: why should Plato not have changed his mind, and proposed after all to regard the contribution of

⁴³ See p. 92 above.

the poets as useful? ⁴⁴ Our suspicions should be aroused, however, by Socrates' treatment of the first form of madness, that of the seers. There is no need, he says, to spin out the story by mentioning all the benefits that the seers have bestowed on mankind. 'But it is worthwhile to adduce the point that among the ancients too those who gave things their names did not regard madness as shameful or a matter for reproach; otherwise they would not have connected this very word with the finest *technē*. . .'⁴⁵ At this point even the least sceptical reader must be brought up short; for the idea that *mantikē* —as a *form of madness* ⁴⁶— will count as a *technē* at all contradicts everything that Plato says about *technai* anywhere, whether in other dialogues or in the *Phaedrus* itself. A *technē* is nothing, for Plato, if it is not a *rational* capacity. So can Socrates really mean what he says? Or should we discover here —and

⁴⁴ In fact, I think that there *is* evidence against this, of a kind, in the *Phaedrus* itself (see Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus*, p. 170; repeated in 'Argument and Structure', p. 118). But a) it is circumstantial, or might be claimed to be so (since it strictly concerns Socrates' own relationship with the poetic Muses, rather than his view of the poets); b) it partly depends on the detection of irony in yet another passage (Socrates' invocation of the Muses at 237 a-b); and c) so far as I know it has not yet impressed any other interpreter: the standard view remains that Socrates' praise of the poets is to be taken at face value (for the most recent, and most exuberant, statement of this view, see chapter 7 of Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge, 1986).

⁴⁵ 224 b-c.

⁴⁶ In my 1986 volume, I translated *tēi kallistēi technēi* as 'the finest of the sciences', and commented 'doubly ironic, since [*mantikē*] is neither "finest" (284 d-e) nor even a science (*technē*) at all' (similarly in 'Argument and Structure'). Professor Walter Leszl has shown me that this is obviously wrong: *tēi kallistēi technēi* need mean no more than an honorific 'that very fine science'; *Symposium* 202 e-203 a also implicitly treats *mantikē* as a superior kind of skill, and without any trace of irony (although since the speaker is herself a *mantis*, that is by itself scarcely conclusive; most importantly, the very word *mantikē* implies *technē* as its complement, so that 'the finest *technē*' is precisely what anyone might naturally say if he wanted genuinely to praise the thing. I therefore now rely on a point which I made merely subsidiary in 'Argument and Structure', that someone who wanted to do that, who had decided views on the *technai*, as rational dispositions, which he intended to develop in the sequel (and who was known both by repute and in practice as the most careful of writers) would hardly call it 'finest *technē* while simultaneously stressing its nature as *madness* —and then going on to contrast it favourably with its rational counterpart just on that basis (244 c 5 ff.).

so perhaps elsewhere in the same stretch of argument— what Thomson calls ‘the grace of Irony’?⁴⁷

The general effect of this sort of passage⁴⁸ is, I suggest, to qualify the tone of its surrounding context (and the context here, we should remember, is one which is specifically designed to set out the programme for Socrates’ great speech as a whole). I have argued the case for this in another paper,⁴⁹ with reference to A.W. Schlegel’s concept of irony as

‘a sort of confession interwoven into the representation itself, and more or less distinctly expressed, of its overcharged one-sidedness in matters of fancy and feeling, and by means of which the equipoise is again restored.’⁵⁰

By the introduction of actual elements of *paidia*, Plato cuts himself down to size: despite appearances, we are not meant to follow him all the way in his flights of imagination as he later makes Socrates tell us directly.

But how far, then, *are* we to follow him? How much, or how little, of the speech are we supposed to accept? It is tempting at this point to turn to interpretations of an allegorical sort, and to try strip of to the inventive fancy in the hope of finding solid meaning beneath. But we seem to be warned against this approach by another passage earlier in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates explains his attitude towards traditional stories like that about Boreas and Oreithuia.⁵¹ Other, cleverer people, he says, try to give rational explanations of such stories:

‘But, Phaedrus, while I think such explanations attractive in other respects, they belong in my view to an over-clever and laborious kind of person who is not altogether fortunate; just because after that he must set the shape of the

⁴⁷ Op. cit. (n. 22 above), p. 194.

⁴⁸ Or, perhaps more obviously, the deliberately fanciful etymological play which follows (see my commentary ad loc.).

⁴⁹ ‘Argument and Structure’, pp. 116 ff.

⁵⁰ *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808), tr. John Black (London, 1861), p. 227 (quoted by D. C. Muecke, *Irony* (London, 1970), p. 18).

⁵¹ Cf. ‘Argument and Structure’, p. 120.

Centaurs to rights, and again that of the Chimaera, and a mob of such things — Gorgons and Pegasuses — and strange hordes of other intractable and portentous kinds of creatures flock in on him. . . For myself, in no way do have leisure for these things.

He thinks it absurd to occupy himself with such alien inquiries, while he does not know himself.

'So then saying goodbye to these things, and believing what is commonly thought about them, I inquire —as I said just now— not into these but into myself.'⁵²

If we apply this attitude of Socrates' in the case of his own 'mythical hymn to Love', we will precisely not involve ourselves in attempting to demythologise it. The appropriate parallel in this case to 'believing what is commonly thought' about traditional stories will perhaps be to accept it as a possible way of describing things as they are; or, more precisely, of describing the nature of the soul and of human beings, since that is the real subject of Socrates' speech. It is also what his favoured question is about: 'who am I?', or 'what am I?' His speech —or rather, both of his speeches together— give an answer to that question. In its expanded form, given in the same passage about the Boreas myth, the question is 'am I a beast more complex and more violent than Typhon, or both a tamer and a simpler creature, sharing some divine and un-Typhonic portion by nature? His answer is that he, and we, are potentially both: A Typhonic, many-headed monster if we give in to our desires and lusts, but a tame, simple, god-like creature if the divine portion in us wins ascendancy.⁵³ But the whole lesson of the dialogue is that no speech, and no written composition, should be expected to provide any final answers. The real way to tackle Socrates' question is through dialectic, living conversation, in which the speaker is challenged by his pupil

⁵² 229 d - 230 a.

⁵³ For an exploration of these aspects of the *Phaedrus*, see C. J. Rowe, 'Philosophy, Love, and Madness', forthcoming in *The Person and the Human Mind: Issues in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, edited by C. J. Gill.

to defend his statements, and both move on together towards the receding goal of truth.

Still, Plato says, if I am to be an orator, and if I am to write, *that* is how it is to be done. Or at any rate, that is how it is to be done for a particular kind of audience. The long discussion of rhetoric which precedes that of writing refers to the need to adapt one's mode of expression to fit the souls of one's hearers: colourful, variegated speeches will be required for colourful, variegated souls —and Socrates' main speech is perhaps of this type, adapted to the unphilosophical soul of Phaedrus.⁵⁴ Other, simpler souls —that is, more rational souls— will require simpler, more straightforwardly logical speeches.⁵⁵

On the face of it, this may seem to contradict my conclusion about the interpretation of the great myth. If that is a colourful version of something which can also be expressed in more rational terms, doesn't that suggest just that it *can* be demythologised? Why won't the second version be exactly the sober, truthful account which Socrates seemed to tell us not to look for? And won't the approach of the clever rationalisers after all be justified? The answer is that the second, 'simpler' *logos* will be more sober, and in more rational terms; but it will in principle be no less open to challenge than the first. There are different ways of speaking and of writing —just as the *Phaedrus* itself gives us two different descriptions of the relationship between the dialectician and his partner: one, in the myth, in terms of lover and beloved, the other in the course of the discussion of writing, in terms of teacher and pupil. Both descriptions catch something of the relationship, but neither is complete by itself. But then, as both the *Phaedrus*⁵⁶ and the *Seventh Letter*⁵⁷ say, in their different ways, reality is something which ultimately eludes verbal expression.

⁵⁴ See 'Argument and Structure', pp. 109, 112-13, which attributes the suggestion to W. H. Thompson, *The Phaedrus of Plato, with English notes and dissertations* (London, 1868); and 'Public and Private Speaking' (n. 11 above).

⁵⁵ 277 b-c.

⁵⁶ 247 c.

⁵⁷ 341 c-d.

It is this point which is reflected in Plato's use of what I have classified as self-directed, or self-disparaging, irony. Platonic irony, in this sense, is an integral part of Platonic poetics.

I conclude with a last quotation from Thomson, which quite nicely encapsulates the kinds of things I want to say about Plato in the context of this discussion, though as it happens Thomson says them about *Socrates* from whom he thinks Plato got his habit of irony:

'... I have come to side with those ... who are unwilling to look upon Socrates as either a mystic or a realist. If anyone tells me that Socrates was a realist—using the word in its untechnical literary sense to mean the opposite of the mystic or idealist—my answer must be, "then I cannot understand at all the mystical element in his nature." And if I am told that he was a mystic, I can only reply that this was a mystic who was always *making fun of mysticism*. Surely he was neither and he was both. That was where the Irony of his temperament came out in his opinions. Emotions tempered by common sense, common sense transfigured by emotion—that will serve equally well as rough definition of Irony and a rough description of Socrates' attitude to the problems he discussed.'⁵⁸

I should add that Thomson makes these remarks in relation to the *Apology*, not the *Phaedrus*; and that raises again the question of the applicability of my own conclusions to other Platonic works. But this is a subject for another occasion.

⁵⁸ Op. cit. (n. 22 above), pp. 182-3.

