

## PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM* AND COMMENTARY FOR LOVE

David Hancock

The following is not a commentary on Plato but a commentary on two readers of Plato, a commentary on commentaries: Leo Strauss's *On Plato's Symposium*,<sup>1</sup> a transcription of a series of lectures, and Allan Bloom's (Strauss's own student) essay *The Ladder of Love*.<sup>2</sup> For reasons of space this commentary will focus on the speech of Socrates only. Reading the commentaries of the master and student together can produce a third symbiotic commentary that allows the two to work on and feed off and through each other. The commentaries develop love with a double meaning and a double usage. Firstly, it is one part of Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction as the love of one's own, the love of the city or the state, to love a friend and the opposite, to hate one's enemies. To kill and be killed by one's enemies for the love of one's own. Without this love the human somehow lacks its humanness; Strauss will say that "it is somehow the contention of Plato that the nature of man, in a way, the nature of the whole is Eros" (PS, 10). But the first, political, love is superseded by another, perhaps more than human, love. The experience of Socratic or philosophic Eros goes beyond the mere love of one's own and will in fact challenge it. The two cannot exist together so philosophy becomes the enemy of the state. The true experience of love, be that of the philosopher or of the lovers, cannot exist within the narrow confines of the love of one's own; they cannot be constrained. This then is reason for the execution of Socrates and from this, for Strauss, is the reason for commentary. *Commentary is not the love of the text. The text is merely the means to practice, to have or be in love.* This is done by

---

<sup>1</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, University of Chicago Press, 2001 (Hereafter abbreviated in the text as PS).

<sup>2</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Ladder of Love*, in, *Love and Friendship*, Simon and Schuster, 1993 (Hereafter abbreviated in the text as LL).

means of an erotic hiding, the commentator can hide within the text, between its margins. Hiding allows the commentator to pursue what is his true love without that love or the fruits of that love being seen, but also this hiding is crucial to the existence of the love.

The first part of this paper is focused on the first two chapters of Strauss's commentary and includes his introductory remarks and his reading of the setting of Plato's dialogue. The second part is focused on the three chapters that constitute the commentary on the speech of Socrates (chapters nine, ten and eleven of twelve). Bloom's commentary mirrors Strauss's in its organization (though is much shorter) and I have used it to complement Strauss's reading.

\*

1. THE SYMPOSIUM – *The setting and context of Strauss and Bloom's commentaries. Referring to chapters one and two of Leo Strauss's On Plato's Symposium and Plato, The Symposium, 172a-176e3.*)<sup>3</sup>

I am becoming more and more 'Platonic'. One should address the few, not the many. One should speak and write as little as possible.<sup>4</sup>

Strauss's reading of the *Symposium* was delivered as a course at the University of Chicago in 1959 but was not published as a book until 2001. The course was twelve weeks in length and each week represents a chapter in the book form. The first week is given over to an introduction to the dialogue and the course; the second is a commentary on the setting of the dialogue and focuses on the events that lead up to the speeches. Each subsequent week was dedicated to each of the nine speeches, apart from that of Socrates for whom three weeks were given. In his introduction, Seth Bernadette tells us that in 1966 when he first read the manuscript Strauss was not entirely happy with it and that only after a second reading did he agree to its publication. As the transcript of a course this book should be considered in a different light to other published texts by Strauss; it

---

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, trans, Howatson, M. C.

<sup>4</sup> Extract from a letter written by Alexandre Kojève to Leo Strauss, 30/1/1962. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, page 308.

was not written as a book to be published widely but was spoken to students in a classroom. Strauss's reading here can then be thought of as more private than public, in this sense it will also mirror the conversation in the *Symposium*, a private dinner party for invited guests and not a public dialogue in the market place. Bloom's essay *The Ladder of Love* was dictated by Bloom while he was partially paralyzed in hospital and was only published posthumously in 1993. It thus also mirrors another of the themes of the *Symposium*: the knowledge of mortality and the human desire for immortality.

Strauss begins his course by situating the Platonic text within the subject matter of political philosophy. For Strauss, the *Symposium* is a text on (or of) political philosophy. Its subject matter is not, strictly speaking, love. The text will be shown to be a Platonic alternative to positivism, historicism and relativism, the forms of modern thought that, for Strauss, constitute the 'crisis of modernity'. Plato will show us an alternative to these value free forms of thought. But valuing is not straightforward. He tells us that Plato's position is similar to that of Nietzsche: we do not possess the truth and neither does society, but philosophy is the love of truth as a quest, as a way of life.

Strauss goes on to say that "Plato knew that men cannot live and think without finality of some sort" (PS, 5). This is the political problem for Strauss, the lack of but need for truth. This desire for truth or finality when manifested in the philosophic love of wisdom puts the philosopher in a difficult position regarding the state. Bloom tells us "Eros is connected with pleasure, and this would account for the philosopher's continuing in his uncompleted quest" (LL, 432). The philosopher's quest is ultimately about his own pleasure and it is not concerned with moral virtue or the polis. "Eros is pure, ranging free, without benefit of law or teleology. It is for its own sake, not for the city or family" (LL, 436). Eros is presented by Bloom as beyond law as a -instrumental and a purely excessive form; however, it will be shown that although eros tends beyond *nomos* the former is not entirely separable from the latter and that eros needs *nomos*.

#### THE STRAUSSIAN COMMENTARY

The form of composition and style of writing has something to do with the political problem. Strauss tells us that "the dialogic character of the Platonic writings has something to do with the particular openness of the Platonic inquiries." (PS, 5) As we know, Plato does not write in his own voice and it is not enough to simply assume that Socrates is his mouthpiece. This form of writing is a

choice and this choice will ultimately have something to do with the political tension just introduced. But further than this we should also consider Strauss's method because he does not write a system of philosophy but writes commentaries on texts. The choice of writing style will have something to do with this political tension. The dialogue lacks an obvious position, for example, we do not know Plato's true position because he does not make declarative statements in his own voice. Plato's voice exists within the relationships and tensions between the characters and settings. In Strauss's work the commentary similarly hides the voice of the writer behind the subject of the commentary. In these methodologies the political is thereby avoided or tunneled under. It is not disturbed but neither does the political come into conflict with the movement of a thought; the mode of writing keeps the political and the erotic separate by a hiding of the erotic.

It is worth considering this methodological approach for a moment. In an essay entitled *How Farabi Read Plato's Laws*, Strauss focuses on Al Farabi's retelling the story of the pious ascetic.<sup>5</sup> The pious ascetic one day aroused the hostility of the ruler of his city. The ascetic, fearing for his life, decided to flee but, unfortunately for him, the ruler had already ordered his arrest. The pious ascetic obtained some clothes for a disguise. He dressed up with a cymbal in one hand and started singing, pretending to be drunk. At the city gates the guard asked who he was, "I am that pious ascetic you are looking for" he replied. Thinking that he was only making a joke the guard let him through. The ascetic lied to the guard in deed but not in speech, this is an important distinction, speech and deed are not the same. Strauss tells us that "the story shows, among other things, that one can safely tell a very dangerous truth provided one tells it in the proper surroundings."<sup>6</sup> Farabi is writing a commentary on Plato, the same methodology that Strauss and Bloom employ, he uses "a kind of secretiveness which is mitigated or enhanced by unexpected and unbelievable frankness."<sup>7</sup> Farabi, who was writing in the tenth century, "may have written the laws, as it were, with a view, to the rise of Islam or of revealed religion generally" and "he may have

---

<sup>5</sup> See also Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

<sup>6</sup> Leo Strauss, *How Farabi Read Plato's Laws*, in *What is Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press 1959, page 136.

<sup>7</sup> *How Farabi Read Plato's Laws*, page 137.

desired to ascribe his revised version of Plato’s teaching to the dead Plato in order to protect that version or the sciences generally.”<sup>8</sup> Strauss thinks that Farabi’s Plato is not, as is often said, a neo-Platonic one but a protected one, he willfully misread Plato in order to protect the teaching, he told the truth but we have to understand the context; the struggle here was between Platonic and Islamic law. “Not everything Farabi says in characterizing the content of Platonic dialogues is meant to be borne out by the text of Platonic dialogues.”<sup>9</sup> *The method of commentary is used to change the surroundings of a teaching; a commentary can willfully misread a text to produce a subtle new reading.* There are two reasons presented here as to why one would do this. The first is to protect oneself, if the teaching in question is dangerous to the rulers of the city; the second is to protect the teachings themselves “lest they lose their character or be misused.”<sup>10</sup> Both of these themes are brought up here regarding the *Symposium*.

This is part of what Strauss calls a ‘forgotten kind of writing’ or the ‘art of writing’.<sup>11</sup> Philosophy and science in their quest for ‘truth’ tend to undermine the common opinion of the particular society and this produces a need for this art of writing. Strauss’s critique of what he calls ‘modern social science’ is that it fails to see the tension between the “requirements of social science . . . and the requirements of society.”<sup>12</sup> Such a misunderstanding would lead to what Irving Kristol would call the ‘adversary intellectual’, the radicalized college graduate that appeared in large numbers during and after the 1960s, whose education puts him at odds with the culture that he lives in.<sup>13</sup> For Strauss, Bloom and Kristol (who I take here as paradigmatic of neo-conservatism), this adversarial nature is damaging to society, the protection of which is the root of their conservatism.

To protect himself and also society the philosopher should engage in ‘political philosophy’, and Strauss has a particular meaning here: “the adjective ‘political’ in the expression ‘political philosophy’

---

<sup>8</sup> *How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws*, page 144.

<sup>9</sup> *How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws*, page 154.

<sup>10</sup> *How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws*, page 136.

<sup>11</sup> See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* and also Irving Kristol’s review, *The Philosopher’s Hidden Truth*, in *Commentary*, October 1952.

<sup>12</sup> Leo Strauss, *On a Forgotten Kind of Writing* in *What is Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press 1959, page 222.

<sup>13</sup> Irving Kristol, *The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals*, in *Neo-Conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, The Free Press, 1995, page 106.

designates not so much a subject matter as a manner of treatment.”<sup>14</sup> The philosopher must think politically, in the ways mentioned above, to ensure the safety of his teaching and himself – in this then both Strauss and Bloom are privileging the particular teaching, ‘it’ must be defended. The philosopher should be aware of or at least consider the affects of a teaching on the particular society within which it occurs. Strauss’s teaching here, as a conservative, is one of caution because of the complex and unknown nature of those effects; this caution produces an aversion to any form of political radicalism.

### PHILOSOPHY AND THE POLITICAL

Strauss will frame his reading as an encounter between philosophy and poetry, in particular between Socrates and Aristophanes. The philosopher, Strauss says, is “blind to the context within which philosophy exists, namely political life” (PS, 6). The philosopher is unable to communicate the philosophic teaching to the non-philosopher. This, at least, is Socrates as he appears in Aristophanes’s comedy *The Clouds*. Poetry on the other hand manages to “integrate purely theoretical wisdom into a human context.” Poetry has a political understanding that philosophy lacks, but what is meant by political here? “What is the core of the political? Men killing men on the largest scale in broad daylight and with the greatest serenity” (PS, 8). In this formulation, of happily killing and being killed, we can discern an echo of Strauss’s earlier work on Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, for something to be constituted as political, it must entail the friend/enemy distinction. It seems that philosophy is unable to produce the political and that this is a problem for it in its relationship with the polis. Poetry, on the other hand, is superior because it can produce the enemy and thus the political society.

Ultimately the political is constituted by the regime and its way of life, the habits and actions of the particular society. In other words, the values of the given regime produce the political and the particular enemy. We can see here why philosophy, as understood here, has a problem, because its subject is a truth that it knows that it cannot know; this is unlike science which does make some claim to truth.

---

<sup>14</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Classical Political Philosophy*, in *What is Political Philosophy*, University of Chicago Press 1959, page 93.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, The University of Chicago Press, 1996. This edition also contains Strauss’s commentary on the original Schmitt text.

Philosophy is unable to produce the values that are needed to sustain a political order because of this lack of certainty. Though we must note here that Strauss has already told us that Plato is the alternative to this problem, Plato's philosophy will not have the problems that Socrates's philosophy had.

Thymos (anger/spirituality) is the political passion, it "is essential for constituting the polis and is, in a way, most characteristic of the polis" (PS, 9). Thymos is opposed to what will be the subject of the *Symposium*, eros, Strauss tells us that if thymos is the political, eros is the non-political. It is this distinction that causes the tension. To understand the political an understanding of the non-political must also be developed, this is how the *Symposium* relates to the *Republic* as it is the other side of that dialogue. In some sense the non-political is the natural, "there may be something natural which transcends the political in dignity and which gives politics its guidance" (PS, 10). So the non-political is not the same as the pre-political or the Hobbesian state of nature, though this is a part of it. It is better thought of as *beyond* the political, a space un-constrained by thoughts of the political.

The *Symposium* is a private dialogue, this is opposed to the public dialogue of the *Republic*, and there is also talk of drinking wine. For Strauss, the wine drinking is relevant because alcohol is synonymous with frankness, the discussion will be open and the speakers will be able to take risks. They would not say the same things in public. For Bloom it "helps them leap over the chasm separating *nomos* and *physis*" (LL, 441).

As part of the contextualization of his reading Strauss now moves on to what he calls 'noble dissimulation'. This has been a controversial concept for some recent readings of Strauss, particularly in more populist texts, being both banal – 'Strauss says that politicians should lie to us' as if this is some sort of revelation – and conspiratorial: 'Strauss says that politicians should lie to us'.

By noble dissimulation he is really talking about irony, that is, moderation (a key Straussian concept) in speech and in writing. Here he gives an innocent interpretation of irony, "A man conceals his superiority out of politeness" (PS, 34). He should conceal his truth to protect the opinions of others which gives this a political edge. Opinion is what produces value, so in a certain sense, noble dissimulation teaches that one should be careful about trashing opinion because of the unknown social consequences that it could cause. The centre of Strauss's conservatism is a fear of or wariness about radical political discourse in public. But as we have just said,

the *Symposium* is a private conversation, though it is of course also retold as a written dialogue. Similarly Strauss's text is a private conversation, a class, edited into a book. In both cases we are reading a private conversation that has been made public. The erotic discourse is not precluded but hidden by being private (at a symposium or a seminar) but this is disrupted when that private discourse is made public. However, the seminar is never a wholly private space and this is especially the case for Strauss who seems to have allowed a large amount of his seminars to be recorded (these are now being published by the University of Chicago's Leo Strauss Centre). The teacher who is conscious of these considerations will stand back from that which is being taught and hide him or herself in the same way that the author of a commentary will.

Noble dissimulation also has a less than noble side. Irony, when it is found out, becomes insolent and offensive because people do not appreciate being taken for fools. "Strictly speaking, crimes against justice are punished only... when one is caught, when they are noticed" (PS, 34). The problems caused when it is discovered is the difficulty with noble dissimulation. To illustrate this point Strauss uses the example of tax evasion which he seems to be saying is only unjust if it is discovered, up until that point it is not unjust. This would be the same idea of justice as that of Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, that we are justified in doing as we please as long as we are seen to be just. There is dissimulation here but we can hardly call it noble, and it is this aspect of Strauss's work that has led to the controversial/paranoid reading. However, we may point out that both Strauss and Bloom's reading of Plato states that what is revealed are political things and so not values, this form of ignoble dissimulation is just one of these 'political things'.<sup>16</sup>

The dialogue that we hear in the *Symposium* is a retelling of speeches that had taken place a few years earlier, reckoned by Strauss to be 415 BC. The events took place on the eve of the Sicilian expedition, at the height of Athenian power; however, the Sicilian expedition was a disaster and led to the decline of that power. The retelling (404 BC) is during Athens period of decline but, Bloom points out that this period is also the period of the birth of philosophic dominance in Athens. "If philosophy did not destroy

---

<sup>16</sup> See Strauss's commentary on the *Republic* in, *The City and Man*, University of Chicago Press, 1978 and also Bloom's commentary at the end of his translation in *The Republic of Plato*, basic books, 1968.

Athenian culture, it prospered in its demise” (LL, 447). Socrates was executed in 399 BC and Bloom is suggesting that the *Symposium* has something to tell us about this and the relationship between philosophy (as the highest form of eros) and political power.

The events are retold by Appolodorus, described by Bloom as a groupie of Socrates, a ‘mediocrity’. Appolodorus listens to what Socrates has to say and then retells this to anyone who will listen for his own aggrandizement. “There is a danger that the pupil’s imprudence, partly connected with preening himself with this special learning will attract undue and hostile attention to that teaching” (LL, 448). The implication is that a teacher should practice an element of self protection because “among Rousseau’s pupils is not only Goethe but also Robespierre” (LL, 448), the same goes for Nietzsche and of course for Socrates who was accused of corrupting the young; here we have one of the reasons behind Strauss’s ‘art of writing’. The implication of this is that both Strauss and Bloom practice writing and teaching in this way, indeed, this is one of the accusations against them. Critics often point out that Strauss and Bloom taught many neoconservatives, we are perhaps left to wonder if we should consider them as either good students like Plato or Xenophon, tyrants like Critias, political disasters like Alcibiades or mediocrities like Apollodorus. An example of this use of a teaching would be an echo of what was mentioned earlier about ‘thinking politically’. Irving Kristol, who was impressed by Strauss’s work and the doctrine of the art of writing, chastised US oil companies during the 1970’s oil shock for not ‘thinking politically’.<sup>17</sup> The oil companies did not act to alleviate high prices for customers but did make record profits for themselves. Kristol was worried that not thinking politically here reveals the capitalist system as deeply unjust thus endangering the viability of the system;<sup>18</sup> we could say exactly the same about bankers today. However, in this instance, if oil companies had tried to appear more just by lowering prices they would also actively have been more just. The question here is whether we think that this is a noble or ignoble use of a teaching, in his recommendations to big business is Kristol misusing Strauss? If so the Straussian project seems to be a failure because the private teaching now seems to be public and being

---

<sup>17</sup> Irving Kristol, *The Philosopher’s Hidden Truth*, in, *Commentary*, October 1952.

<sup>18</sup> Irving Kristol, *The Corporate Dinosaur*, *Wall Street Journal* (February 14, 1974) cited in Mark Gerson, *The Neo Conservative Vision*, Madison Books, 1996.

used to advise oil companies. Or, is this the teaching? Is this just the correct understanding of ‘political things’ in a way that Thrasymachus would see?

## 2. THE SPEECH OF SOCRATES

*Part one: Between wisdom and ignorance – referring to chapter nine of Leo Strauss’s On Plato’s Symposium and Plato, The Symposium, 198a – 204c<sup>19</sup>*

Strauss’s commentary on Socrates’ speech in praise of eros begins by telling us that “praise cannot possibly be true” (PS, 176), it is selective in its telling in that it will overlook that which is not praiseworthy.

Strauss reiterates the political tension between love of one’s own and love of the beautiful, “the love of one’s own leads to ideology; the love of the beautiful leads to the truth. If the fundamental fact is love of one’s own, one absolutizes one’s own and one seeks reasons for it. This is ideology . . . where as love of truth is not primarily concerned with one’s own” (PS, 183). This seems to be understood in part as the conflict between poetry and philosophy and encapsulates the political problem for philosophy that was mentioned above.

Socrates does not make a speech himself, instead he retells a speech that was given to him by Diotima, Bloom states clearly that she is “a made up person” (LL, 501). Diotima is a device for Socrates to describe his transition from a pre-Socratic into a Socratic philosopher. The pre-Socratic Socrates is the one that Aristophanes describes in the *Clouds*, this Socrates was a natural scientist and un-erotic. This is linked to his Delphic quest and his (claimed) knowledge of his own ignorance, “Eros is awareness or knowledge of a lack and therefore is linked to the knowledge of ignorance, which is obviously a kind of ignorance” (LL, 502). Diotima introduces to Socrates the idea that between ignorance and wisdom lies what she calls ‘correct opinion’ (PS, 187). Correct opinion is an opinion (so not knowledge) that is true, however, the possessor of the opinion is not aware as to why it is true; and so cannot explain it. This theme is taken up again when we get the suggestion that wisdom is the end of

---

<sup>19</sup> Strauss divides the speech of Socrates in to three distinct sections and dedicated one class to each section. I have followed his schema here and deal with each of his sections individually.

philosophy but that the ignorant are satisfied.<sup>20</sup> However, the philosopher is not wise, though neither is he ignorant, even though he may claim to be. Philosophy is in-between wisdom and ignorance, but so is correct opinion, so are we to assume that these two seemingly different things are the same? In a sense Strauss seems to think that they are, “A man who has right opinion on everything can exist only by virtue of some philosophizing and, on the other hand, the philosopher who is truly a philosopher is the one who starts from right opinions and does not throw out the right opinions” (PS, 195). It is in this sense that Diotima says that the god Eros is a philosopher because eros is not the thing that is loved; it is not the beloved but the lover (PS, 186). The god Eros loves the beautiful, so at this point philosophy appears as love of the beautiful. This is how philosophy and right opinion differ, the former loves the beautiful in itself but the latter does not, though it may love a particular instance of the beautiful.

*Part two: Love of the good – referring to chapter ten of Leo Strauss’s On Plato’s Symposium and Plato, The Symposium, 204c7-207a6.*

Diotima changes the subject from the beautiful to the good, Strauss notes that “this implies one crucial thing: that the good is not identical with the beautiful”. Diotima tells Socrates that possession of good things *seems* to make men happy. Happiness seems to be the end of man, this for Strauss is an example of right opinion, it is not presented as knowledge because of the use of ‘seems’. What is left unsaid, at this point, is exactly what happiness is (PS, 200).

Strauss tells us that “happiness is a state of contentedness, you want nothing further, and at the same time an enviable state. Because a moron, for example, might be perfectly content but we would no longer say that he is happy” (PS, 200). In this formulation happiness appears as the happiness of the last men, wanting nothing more, and this state is first called enviable and then moronic. The ‘moron’ is enviable because he is content and so the implication is that the non-‘moron’ will not be content and so not happy

“Eros is desire for happiness” (PS, 201). The difficulty here is that, as Strauss says, not all men are lovers because the content

---

<sup>20</sup> This sentiment echoes Strauss’s correspondence with Alexandre Kojève where Strauss expresses his horror at the thought of the last men. See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, page 236 – 8.

person is not erotic (and eros is the lover). The content moron would not be a lover, but he is happy; also, “Men who seek their happiness in wealth, or in strength, or in wisdom are not called lovers; but they are lovers because they seek their own happiness” (PS, 201). This problem is solved when considering some forms of happiness as base, for example wealth; moronic happiness would, I assume, also be base, if, for whatever reason the moron stopped being content he would desire happiness. Those who aren’t content are lovers and Bloom points out a distinction within the objects of love, (as the good), “external goods, goods of the body and goods of the soul” (LL, 508); objects, bodily satisfaction or soulful satisfaction.

But before they loved the good, Bloom continues, men loved their own. He is describing a conflict between the good and one’s own, where the good exists beyond the polis. This is the problem with Socrates, he urges men to break with their own in favor of the good. To pursue the good you would have to give up your city, and this is what Socrates appears to do, “He lives in Athens but is not really of it, he is married and has children but pays little attention to them” (LL, 508), earlier Bloom had called Socrates a bohemian, now he says that he must “appear monstrous to the decent people who love their own” (LL, 509). Socrates is here described as the inverse of the pious ascetic; he is honest in deed because he stays in Athens even when his speech causes him trouble.<sup>21</sup> Willingness to abandon one’s own is here depicted as a characteristic of philosophy, “Erotic men seem to have some of this willingness too, but only if their eros does not collapse into a defense of their own” (LL, 509). Eros is here described as collapsing into the thymotic, making the thymotic simply a base form of the erotic. Eros now appears as beyond but also protector of the city. Socrates can tempt men away from their own through their love of the good, but men also want good cities and laws, “Man’s divided loyalties lead to intolerable conflict and much mythmaking” (LL, 509); so the city and law are dependent upon myth. Philosophy (in the guise of Socrates) poses a question to myth and therefore to the polis, however, philosophy also requires good cities and laws to make possible the life of the philosopher (the erotic life).

---

<sup>21</sup> Strauss and Bloom’s reading of the death of Socrates is that he chose execution by purposely angering the jury and then refusing a chance to escape.

The definition of eros is next moved on to “the sempiternal possession by oneself of the good.” (PS, 204) This addition explains the meaning of happiness as including an element of self-love and eternality. Diotima says of eros, “in what manner and in what action would the zeal and intensity of those who pursue it be called eros?” (PS, 204)<sup>22</sup> There are different intensities of eros and we might assume that this intensity is related to the baseness or not of the happiness.<sup>23</sup>

In Strauss's reading of Diotima's speech, love is the sempiternal possession of the good by oneself, so where does sexual love fit here? Giving birth is directed to the possession of the good because the eternality of it relates to the immortality of the self which means that “eros implies the transcending of death” (PS, 208). Having children is a way to immortality and this is the love of one's own, this is related to the immortality of the species. However, this does not take into account the city, “the political society is, of course, always a closed society. By a closed society I mean one which does not include the human race. The universal society would be, strictly speaking, the community of all human beings. The polis is never that. The polis is always some men's own, even if there are 170 million” (PS, 209). Strauss was always opposed to ideas of the universal state,<sup>24</sup> though not because it would be impossible but because (in the Schmittian sense) it would be neutralised and depoliticized.<sup>25</sup> Strauss is repulsed by the idea of the end of history.<sup>26</sup> The retention of the political and therefore the polis is an ever present theme in his work. We have here a seemingly implicit reference to the United States with 170 million being roughly the population in 1959. Eros has to be fashioned into the desire for the immortality of the particular state, and in this instance that state is the US.

Bloom makes another point regarding the love of one's own: “today, one's children are with difficulty conceived of as our own . . . This throws us back much more on our isolated selves” (LL, 513).

---

<sup>22</sup>Plato, *Symposium*, 206b1-4.

<sup>23</sup>Intensity is also related to Schmitt's concept of the political where the political is of different degrees of intensity, see also Heinrich Meier, trans. Harvey J. Lomax, *The Hidden Dialogue*, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

<sup>24</sup>See Kojève/Strauss correspondence in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*.

<sup>25</sup>See Schmitt, Carl, *The Age of Neutralisations and Depoliticizations* (1929), trans. Matthias Konzett and John P. McCormick, *Telos* 96, Summer 1993.

<sup>26</sup>See Kojève correspondence.

The corruption of the young (that which Socrates was also accused of) poses an existential problem to the parents/city. Children, Bloom is saying, no longer follow traditions so the desire for immortality that here manifests itself in offspring is disappointed. Children no longer live up to what is expected of them and Bloom's implication is that Socrates's bohemianism has something to do with this.<sup>27</sup> It is Socrates's public love of wisdom and all that this entails that is the cause of the 'moral decline'. It is not the love as such but its public nature and the possibility of a misinterpretation of the teaching by those who hear it.

### GEORGES BATAILLE AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LOVE

An interesting and worthwhile counterpoint to this Straussean understanding of love would be that of Georges Bataille.<sup>28</sup> Love, for Bataille, is a manifestation of the excess, "the precondition for its appearance was given in the relative abundance of resources."<sup>29</sup> It transcends the useful in society but for this to happen there must first be abundance, it is beyond but also reliant upon what is useful. He makes a distinction between types of love, the procreating, universal, animal love and love as excess "this love necessarily had a sense of transgression opposing it to animal sexuality."<sup>30</sup> This transgression goes beyond the animal, "lovers tend to negate the social order," it goes beyond the state because "if we love a woman nothing is further from the image of our beloved than the image of society or, a fortiori, of the state."<sup>31</sup> The state is not loved by the lover of something else, but the state wants to be loved, it needs your love it wants sacrifice (ultimately on the battlefield). But also on a more mundane level "the state cannot in any way *use up* that part of ourselves that comes into play in eroticism or in individual love."<sup>32</sup> Lovers are not productive

---

<sup>27</sup> We can see here Bloom's closeness to the neo conservative critique of the US, see, for example Midge Decter, *A Letter to the Young (and to their parents)* in Mark Gerson, ed., *The Essential Neo-conservative Reader*, Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1996; Norman Podhoretz, *Ex Friends*, The Free Press, 1999, page 48.

<sup>28</sup> Kojève worked with Bataille to get Strauss published in French in the journal *Critique*, see the Kojève/Correspondence in *On Tyranny*.

<sup>29</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume Two*, trans. Robert Hurley, Zone Books, 1999, page 158.

<sup>30</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, Page 159.

<sup>31</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, Page 160.

<sup>32</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, Page 160.

for the state (unless their love drives them to fight for it), the excessive nature of love has no interest in anything beyond because “the beloved object is for the lover the substitute for the universe.”<sup>33</sup> The only object of love that is in any way useful for the state is the state itself as this love can be channeled as a political love. However, for the lovers there is no interest in productivity, “theirs is a society of consumption, as against the state, which is a society of acquisition.”<sup>34</sup>

The society of consumption can be recuperated into the society of acquisition via the married couple, where the lovers seek the recognition of others. Family and children are the stabilization of the lovers. Children are a pure field of consumption but the parents (the ex lovers) are now bound to acquisition. The pure eros of the lovers is transformed into the desire for immortality through procreation. We can see then why, for the neo-conservatives, marriage is the epitome of bourgeois value and because of this basis of the society and the state.<sup>35</sup> But, Bataille says, “let us assume that the union is stabilized, at least in appearance. The sexual play of the lovers has reproduction and growth of a family as its effect, if not as its purpose.”<sup>36</sup> In marriage eros does not disappear but becomes private, the excessiveness of it is subsumed under the public appearance; remember that Socrates was both married and had children. Absolute excess ultimately leads to extinction and Bataille seems to be acknowledging that at some point, at least in public, it needs to be curbed if only for the survival of itself as excess; paradoxically it requires the abundance of the acquisitive society for it to be. The lovers who ignore the social and refuse to be, in some part, acquisitive will eventually fade, die and leave nothing behind. The lovers need to settle and appear to ‘live happily ever after’, satisfied.

*Part three: Eros and immortality – referring to chapter eleven of Leo Strauss’s On Plato’s Symposium and Plato, The Symposium, 207a6 – 212c3*

---

<sup>33</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, Page 161.

<sup>34</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, Page 163.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see Irving Kristol, *Life Without Father in Neo-conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, or George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty*, Basic Books, 1981, pages 68-69. Gilder is of particular relevance here because as Jean-Joseph Goux points out both he and Bataille situate themselves on the same terrain, via the notion of the Gift, see Jean-Joseph Goux, *General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism in Bataille: a Critical Reader* edited by Botting, Fred and Wilson, Scott, Blackwell, 1998.

<sup>36</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, page 163.

Desire for immortality now takes precedence, “eros is neither love of one’s own . . . nor is it love of the beautiful” (PS, 217). Procreation is directed toward immortality but these other two elements will remain and are still manifestations of eros. Directly after this we are told that “by denying that eros is eros of one’s own and that eros is love of the beautiful, one is led to the rejection of the gods . . . The gods are created through poets by love of the beautiful on the one hand . . . and by eros of one’s own on the other” (PS, 217). The gods are created by the poets and produce love of one’s own, they bind the polis together as polis, and a true understanding of eros is going to reveal a political problem to this construction.

Diotima now goes on to the last part of her speech, she considers ‘the brutes’ which is a way of avoiding consideration of calculation because “eros, in the case of man, is not based on calculation” (PS, 218); eros lacks any form of utility. So, in this sense it is different from the above description of poetry which did seem to have a use value in that it produces love of one’s own and therefore the polis.

The desire for children to assist in old age is here rejected as this would imply a calculation, Strauss now refers to it as an instinct, and this form of eros is seen by Diotima as ‘common to all animals’. Sexual union and care of offspring (this latter point is here introduced for the first time) are that which is common, but this second element is not strictly correct. All animals do not care for their offspring, in some cases this is a specifically female role if it is done at all, even if we consider caring for the young in the most minimal sense.<sup>37</sup>

“The calculating man never forgets himself. The madman, mad for good or ill, forgets himself. This self forgetting can merely be low, but it can also be higher than any calculation. In eros, then, there is a complete forgetting of oneself, a complete forgetting of one’s own.” (PS, 218) So, eros is akin to madness. We can also add that there can be combinations here between high and low eros, different intensities; forgetting of oneself for one’s own as in a sacrifice for the city; forgetting of one’s own for oneself as in a selfish action where one

---

<sup>37</sup> This point about parental care is interesting if we consider it along side neo conservative discourses of the family and its demise in liberal society, there seems to be a connection between eros, the polis and parental care. – for example, see Irving Kristol, *Reflections on Love and Family*, in *Neo-Conservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*.

profits from the city; and forgetting or a rejection of both, which is here positioned as the higher form of eros.

Added to the above is “that the parents are willing to die for their offspring” (PS, 219) and again this is hardly universal, the minimum that we can say is that parents protect their offspring when they are young and then in many cases abandon them. But the good polis would not abandon its children and would instead care for and educate them, though this extra care now seems to be unnatural and to have something to do with values. Love of one's own (in the sense of offspring) is being given a higher status than it seems to deserve. This difficulty is expanded if we consider it along side love of one's own (as in the polis), the polis needs the people to be willing to die for it but it seems that this is not entirely natural from the point of view of calculation or non-calculating eros. However, it also clear that self sacrifice for community is common and that it is related to eros. So, “every mortal being honors its own offspring. That means love of immortality, as discussed in this subsection, is love of one's own . . . Love of one's own, which is in many ways silly, is nevertheless a phenomenon of human nature” (PS, 222).

This last section of Diotima's speech is separated by Strauss into three subsections. The second subsection is about ambition which “is concerned with immortal fame for virtue” (PS, 224). Virtue here is considered as a means to an end, the end of immortal fame. Strauss tells us that the eros here is ‘eros of one's own’ and self-sacrifice for honour, but it also seems that this eros of one's own is acting as a means, love of own is a means to immortal fame. So it would be more accurate to talk about merely the appearance of love of own for the means gaining immortal fame. It is only necessary for others to believe in your sacrifice; what is at stake here is self love. This is the sort of love of honor that is, in the *Republic*, associated with *thymos*.

“Love of one's own, self love, inspires indeed all human action” (PS, 225). This is then specifically human, we can no longer say that it is common to all animals, but it also contains elements of the love of one's offspring, it must be generated from that instinct. This second part of love of immortality regards “prudence and other virtues” (PS, 225) and “to this class belong the poets and the inventor craftsmen” (PS, 225). Ultimately, though, it regards the production of virtue and virtue is “the production of the most beautiful prudence, namely political prudence, the prudence of the statesman. This immortality is the preserve above all else, of the good poets, who are immortal in their works” (PS, 229). The poets educate the statesmen

into political prudence, i.e. moderation and justice but also nobleness. Bloom adds to this the teacher, who “as opposed to the lawgiver, can actually propagate himself, and not just a distorted image of himself. In this way teaching is more erotic than lawgiving or poetry” (LL, 516). The difficulty here is that, as has already been pointed out, the teacher may not be understood and could produce the mediocrities or the tyrants, the teacher can propagate himself fully only in very rare circumstances (when he is understood); propagation into a mediocrity or a tyrant is not an actual propagation. All three, teacher, statesman and poet teach, though only the teacher teaches as an end in-itself the other two seem to teach as a means to an end; however, we can also say that all three teach because of a desire for immortality.

The subject of the final subsection is the highest form of eros and Diotima will see if she can make Socrates understand this strange phenomena. She introduces the love of the ‘beautiful sciences’ (by which she means maths), these are higher than the ‘beautiful pursuits’ because they are not necessary, “the sciences are beautiful in themselves” (PS, 231) because of their order; they are objects of contemplation. Strauss sees five stages in this final section; love of the body; love of all bodies; love of the beautiful pursuits and laws; love of the beautiful sciences; and finally love of the beautiful in itself. This last stage seems to lose the object, it is the ‘simply beautiful’. This last part of Diotima’s speech, Bloom tells us, presents a description of the philosophic experience, “the splendid vision she presents is intended to make one believe that the philosophic life is the most erotic life” (LL, 518). This comment relates to something said in his introduction, that the *Symposium* forces the speakers to “gives speeches praising the brute acts they perform” (LL, 433). This is Socrates’s justification of himself; he is defending philosophy and the philosophic life, which is here presented as the erotic life, against its accusers.

But, “The beautiful itself is the good” (PS, 238), what does this mean? The good is higher than the beautiful but “in this final presentation the beautiful is substituted for the good” (PS, 238). This substitution is connected with what Strauss says is the ‘poetic presentation of philosophy’ that Diotima is giving to Socrates. This presentation of philosophy is not a philosophic but a poetic one, how does poetry differ from philosophy? Poetry creates the gods which helps to produce political prudence, it creates the values of the polis. Poetry might, strictly speaking, be philosophically true, but merely ‘right opinion’. Diotima is giving a quasi mystical account of the

philosophic experience and the philosophic way of life where the object of contemplation is the unspeakable.

Eros is eros of the good, including love of the beautiful and love of one's own. So, "eros of the good is love for my well-being, my own perfection" and "If a man loves what is most his own, namely his soul, he loves the truth, the good" (PS, 242). Eros is again formulated as self love and as the desire for my own perfection via the philosophic life.

The political problem is further explained by returning to the poets. The poets love their own immortality not the beautiful itself because the beautiful is, for them, only a means to immortality. "But what is the beautiful? It is moral virtue and, in the highest case, political prudence, ultimately the *polis*" (PS, 242). Moral virtue and the *polis* are means to an end for the immortality of poets and statesmen and this is granted by their public (political) role. Those who inhabit the *polis* are "an arbitrary selection from the natural whole . . . There is no natural inclination comparable to procreation which is directed toward the *polis* as *polis*. There is no natural inclination toward moral virtue and the *polis*" (PS, 242). Love of the *polis*, love of one's own (as in one's fellow citizens) has to be created and it is created by poets and statesmen. Crucially, moral virtue is included here, there is no natural moral virtue; it has to be created. The 'truth' then as the highest form of eros of the good goes beyond moral virtue and therefore the state as well.

The *Symposium* transcends the love of one's own, "Eros is homeless" (PS, 243), it is beyond the *polis*, but it also seems clear that although it is beyond the *polis* it is also reliant upon it; for the non-political to appear there must first be the political. The non-political is parasitic on the political with the political being merely a means for the practice of the non-political. But because of the threat that it poses to the political it is prudent that the erotic non-political remains hidden, just as the writer remains hidden in a commentary on a given text. Strauss points out that *thymos* is not mentioned in the *Symposium* because it is absent from eros, in particular it is not present in the highest forms of eros, so, may we assume that it is present in the lower? *Thymos* is present in love of own, love of *polis* and moral virtue rely upon *thymos*. Love of *polis* needs the thymotic to produce the anger and distinction that go into the production of the enemy, Strauss will say, in almost a repetition of an earlier statement "all that is we call interesting in human beings is in the sphere of *thymos*" (PS, 244), *thymos* is the creative element of the *polis*; it is the *polis*. In a

reversal of the taming of Thrasymachus (thymos incarnate) by Socrates (eros incarnate) in the *Republic*, thymos tames eros into the polis (as we also saw in Bataille) through culture, which here appears as poetry; it is making productive of the excess. Strauss tells us that philosophy is a form of eros and that it lacks thymos, “Indignation has no place in philosophy” as it is directed toward the good, but, “In its utterances or in its teaching, this is another matter” (PS, 243). Once again we see the emphasis on the need for the political in the public teaching; the spoken teaching is not the same as the private experience.

Eros is necessarily incomplete, it lacks that which it is eros of; immortality is still the impossible for the philosopher. But Bloom tells that this is where philosophy can understand the human situation as “mortality longing for immortality” (LL, 523). This pessimistic construction is here presented as philosophy’s empty teaching, as it is the abandonment of eros as a rejection of action. Socrates is dangerous because he is not capable of producing a teaching on which political action can be based, for example, it will not give rise to the Schmittian decision. Without the political decision the polis would cease to function, it would be impossible for it to function or even be founded. “Above all, it (eros) provides the energy for flying out beyond *nomo*s” (LL, 524). The highest form of eros is the end of law.

Strauss ends the commentary on Socrates’s speech with a discussion on writing. Poetry and philosophy are related in that they both share the same subject but that poetry takes it only as a means. For Socrates “his eros was only directed at the beautiful, not toward immortality” (PS, 246) Socrates had, in a sense, negated death so he had no need to write; the highest form of eros abandons itself. But Plato wrote (as did Strauss), the answer for Strauss is that Socrates could not write.

“I must again pay homage to that great man . . . al-Farabi, who asserted that Plato’s great achievement beyond Socrates was that he was able to combine the way of Socrates, by which you can teach, dialectically, nice people, with the way of Thrasymachus, by which you can persuade non-docile people who must be frightened and terrified. Socrates did not write because he could not write, more precisely, because he could not write on the highest level” (PS, 247).

The highest form of writing combines philosophy and poetry, it speaks to different people at the same time; this is Strauss’s art of writing. Socrates was guilty of corrupting the young and denying the

gods because he was seen to do so. Strauss goes on to say that he lacked *thymos* (as he was a philosopher) but that Plato did not. Writing and teaching, we can now infer, both need the thymotic element because it is public. Plato, living in Athens after the death of Socrates, chose to hide philosophy (and eros) from the market place both in his academy and in his written dialogues.

### WRITING AND HIDING

The commentary is a method of writing that allows the author a space behind the text where thought can exist without interference. Love, in its authentic sense is not love of one’s own but the completion and abandonment of one’s own self; it rejects the desire for immortality and regains the natural intimacy that is lost in political society.<sup>38</sup> The highest form of eros, as the non-political, both *is* and *is beyond* the natural – it has to go beyond in order to return to itself and in its purest form, for example, Socrates or Bataille’s lovers, it pays no heed to the political.

Because love, as love of the beautiful, is split between that of the lovers and the love of wisdom, it should pretend to be not quite what it is. So, for Bataille, the secrecy of the lovers is maintained by a marriage. But this is only the appearance of a relationship of accumulation over the initial form of pure expenditure. Likewise for the Straussian reading of Plato, Socrates’s demise was his failure to be political in word. Socrates’s Delphic quest, the outcome of the love of wisdom fundamentally questioned the society he lived in. By not accepting that he was wise because of the philosophic acceptance of a lack of truth, Socrates questioned the proclamation of the Delphic oracle regarding himself as the wisest man in Greece, and so Socrates challenges the legitimacy of the gods and political power in Athens.<sup>39</sup>

Strauss follows the Platonic style in his writing, but whereas Plato hides within a dialogue Strauss and Bloom hide within commentary. The highest form of eros now appears as the impossible, it is impossible because it cannot be sustained either by the lovers or as the individual lover of wisdom because it necessarily conflicts with political order. But, at least for Bataille, “clandestinity is not at all necessary to individual love, but it often increases the

---

<sup>38</sup> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Zone Books, 1992, trans. Robert Hurley.

<sup>39</sup> Impiety was one of the charges against Socrates.

intensity of feelings.”<sup>40</sup> This very secrecy has an allure in itself, the very fact that it is not known outside of itself feeds and sustains it as transgression which is the outcome of eros. In the same way as justice is the appearance of justice (and for Thrasymachus the appearance is simply a cover for doing whatever one pleases) the art of writing is the appearance of conformity. Thought, when unbounded, always tends toward transgression. Political philosophy, as exemplified by Strauss’s Plato, is aware of the tension between the un-boundedness of thought and the necessarily bounded nature of political society. With this in mind the political philosopher acts (by writing and hiding) accordingly.

---

**David Hancock** is a member of the London Graduate School, Kingston University. He is currently working on Leo Strauss & the cultural politics of Neoconservatism.

---

<sup>40</sup> *The Accursed Share Volume Two*, page 157.