

LOVE'S IRONY: SIX REMARKS  
ON PLATONIC EROS

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*For Valerie Traub*

I

Irony consists in meaning something other than what you say. It enables you to say one thing and imply the opposite. It indicates that what you said is not what you meant. Or it can simply warn your audience not to identify you too closely with the view you just expressed. Irony allows the speaker to disappear as a guarantor of authenticity, to become unfindable in the utterance, to escape responsibility for meaning. Irony evades the dichotomies of sincerity and falsehood, belief and unbelief, being for oneself and being for others. It registers a shifting and dynamic tension among different orders of meaning.

That is the formal structure of irony. Irony has a form, then, but it is not itself a formal property of language. It has no fixed or unambiguous linguistic markers. It requires a community of understanding. "I just love this weather" bears no indexical sign that identifies it as an ironic utterance. Spoken by one sunbather to another on a tropical island, it may have nothing ironic about it; spoken in the context of an ice storm, it is ironic only if speaker and audience participate in a shared experience of meteorological discomfort (if the statement is made long distance to someone in a different climate who has no way of knowing what the weather is actually like where the speaker happens to be, it is at most deceptive, not ironic at all—except, perhaps, in the solipsistic mental world of the speaker). Irony is intentional and relational. It is a means of communication, and it presupposes specific social and discursive situations. Irony is a species of rhetoric.

Even when uttered ironically, the statement "I just love this weather" is not a very good example of irony; it does not convey what irony is or what it can do. That is because it does not display the dynamism of irony, because it does not vibrate unstably between belief and unbelief. A more representative instance of irony can be found in the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Perhaps this actually isn't true; perhaps not everyone thinks it is. But who would dare to deny it? Not Jane Austen.

Irony is never completely self-evident. There is no statement so ironic as to ensure that its irony will not be lost. Jane Austen has been taken at her word. Swift's *Modest Proposal* has been read straight. Randy Newman's song, "Short People," an object lesson in the absurdities of social prejudice, caused outrage when it was released in the United States in 1977: audiences understood Newman to be claiming, in all seriousness, that "short people got no reason to live." (Americans have an international reputation for being deaf to irony: they are only ever able to hear, or mean, one thing at a time.)

Irony is unlimited. It cannot be contained. No word, sentence, topic, or subject matter is off limits to irony. There is never any way to know in advance whether the meaning of an utterance will turn out to have been corroded by irony. Nothing is constitutionally immune to irony.

Some experiences, however, are incompatible with irony. In order to have them at all, it is necessary to banish any hint of irony. Conversely, the arrival of irony signals the end of the experience, or its diminution. Irony's opposite is intensity. In moments of intense, overwhelming sensation, we have little awareness of context and no attention to spare for more than one set of meanings. In such states, we become literalists: we can experience only one kind of thing. The three cardinal experiences that demand the elimination of irony, or that cannot survive irony, are raw grief or suffering, religious transport, and sexual passion. Little wonder, then, if they tend to merge.

## II

Good sex is not ironic. When sex is passionate, it makes us unaware of our surroundings, indifferent to what we look like, oblivious to the larger context. Intense sexual pleasure is notoriously impervious to competing realities. The very intensity of its focus on its object and on its own sensations excludes a multiplicity of possible meanings.

When those meanings flood back in, when context reasserts itself, then the moment of intensity is past, and we are suddenly overtaken by irony. Which is why we feel an impulse to smile—with embarrassment, affection, or relief.

In backrooms, bathhouses, and sex clubs, no one smiles while cruising. To smile at you would be to acknowledge, and to invite a common awareness on your part, of the one thing that neither of us has ever doubted for a moment but that our mutual quest for self-loss in sex forbids us, temporarily, to admit—namely, that we are both human beings related by our participation in a shared social situation. To admit that would be to allow for the possibility of irony in our apprehension of our circumstances and of each other. The moment you smile at me is the moment I know it's all over. If I smile at you before it's over, I intend for it to stop, and I smile in order to break the contact.

Good sex is not social, not while it lasts. There is nothing polite or friendly or good natured about my desire to break down the limits between you and me, to test how far my body and my desire can be made to fit with yours. For that purpose, what I need is not to situate you in the larger social context of our encounter, of which we are both aware, but to ignore everything except what I feel about you, what I want to do with you, and what it is about you that makes me want to do it.

“Fuck me,” pronounced in such circumstances, is the least ironic utterance in the world. There is only one thing it can mean, and it must mean only and exactly what it says.

Actors in pornographic movies do not have to be good at their lines. It is not necessary to sound sincere, or credible, when you say, “Fuck me,” so long as the other person's desires, your lover's or your spectator's, are passionately engaged. What is required is not that the words themselves be believable, only that they be uttered. The intensity of the desire they express, and of the desire they mobilize, is sufficient to neutralize, if not quite to banish, the ironic awareness of everything about the utterance that may cause it to sound fake. If it sounds fake to you, that's because your desire is no longer intense: either you're watching a bad pornographic movie, or you're watching a pornographic movie for the second time.

The bad dubbing of Fassbinder's last film, *Querelle*, only enhances the excruciating improbability of its dialogue. In a stunning betrayal of Genet's entire design for his novel, Fassbinder puts the words of the narrator into the mouths of the characters. What had made those characters so erotically compelling, both for Genet and for his narrator, was in part their butch inarticulacy: the only language they have in which to express themselves is the salty, macho

slang of the merchant marine. To endow Genet's sailors with the capacity to articulate the workings of their own subjectivity in the nuanced speech of the men who desire them is to push gay pornography to its breaking point. Now, instead of saying, "Fuck me" (which he's too virile to say anyway), Querelle is required to say, "I'm on the brink of a shame from which no man ever rises, but only in that shame will I find my everlasting peace." The effect is not just wildly implausible; it is one long assault on psychological realism in the realm of pornography. What keeps *Querelle* teetering, just barely, this side of the completely ludicrous is the aura of erotic intensity in which Fassbinder bathes the entire *mise-en-scène* and the deliriously rapt contemplation of masculine power and beauty to which he summons the spectator. Fassbinder thereby demonstrates the extraordinary ability of erotic ecstasy to stave off irony, to prevent it from deflating the breathless intensity of sexual excitement, despite nearly irresistible provocations to do so.

The intensity we bring to sex, or that we find in sex, may be predicated on an originary intuition of the impossibility of union through sex, the impossibility of a fusion of bodies, of a merging of subjectivities. And no doubt it is through a calculated heightening of the tension between our recognition and our denial of those impossibilities that we manage to increase the thrill of sex. In that sense, a certain ironic play with the limits of our bodies and our selves, with the surfaces that both separate us and enable us to touch each other, intensifies the excitement, the longing, the desperation of sex. Nonetheless, at the peak of its most ecstatic transports, sex obliges us to suspend all acknowledgment of irony, to keep the absurdity of what we are doing from becoming explicit.

### III

Erotic desire, then, would seem to lie at the farthest possible remove from irony. And yet it would be hard to imagine a more powerful or more eloquent demonstration of irony than the lived experience of erotic desire. It is no accident that Plato, the first person on record in Western history to formulate a theory of erotic desire, is also the source of our concept of irony. Plato's best-known version of irony is epistemic, not erotic: it is Socratic irony, the attitude of ignorance assumed by Socrates that paradoxically enables him to rebut everyone else's claims to knowledge. "Irony" is a Greek word, and in Plato's Athens it meant "mockery," the sense it still has today in French. When various characters in the Platonic dialogues call Socrates an ironist, they mean he makes fun of people's pretensions. But Socratic irony, as Plato portrays it, extends the meaning of that word beyond its contemporary Greek signification and

endows it with the dynamic rhetorical properties that we now associate with it. By claiming that the only thing he knows is that he does not know anything, Plato's Socrates both affirms and denies that he possesses knowledge, and this ironic stance enables him to profess genuine admiration for other people's expertise even as he sets about to demolish it. Meaning something other than what he says, refusing to surrender either to skepticism or to authority, Plato's Socrates is an ironist in the modern sense.

Platonic eros may be less flamboyantly ironic than Socratic ignorance but it is no less paradoxical. It describes a sexual desire that cannot be sexually fulfilled. It motivates passionate love affairs that do not consist in the love of persons. Erotic attraction is not physical but metaphysical: it intends an object that cannot be grasped without a finely calibrated knowledge of the kinds and degrees of being. Desire ultimately aims not at bodily contact but at self-transcendence. It means more than human beings realize, and it exceeds what can be realized within the limits of any human life.

Love's ironies are many. But they all come down to a single paradox: the object of desire is not what you think it is.

You do not know what you love, or why. What you seek to possess in love is not what you desire. The desire you feel cannot be expressed or fulfilled. No particular object corresponds to your love.

Irony is the very condition of love, its mode of being. Love is the name we give to that state of mind in which we take another person to be the origin and cause of what we feel. In this ascription we may be right or we may be wrong, but, so long as we are in love, we will never know.

When we are unhappy in love, we typically experience a driving epistemic need to find the cause of our unhappiness, to discover whether it lies in ourselves or in the world. But it is pointless for a lover to attempt to locate the true source of his joy or his suffering: to be in love means to be unable to determine whether the desire one feels originates in oneself or emanates from the other, whether the causes of one's suffering lie in the other or in oneself. The wish to escape, in the midst of grief, from this perplexity, or to transcend it, is a wish to step off the world. Plato's transcendental theory of desire offers such a cure for our suffering, a cure shaped from the start by the reality of the suffering it would spare us, but it can provide this cure only by abolishing the epistemic tension in love, by persuading us ultimately to see love as unitary, logical, consistent, whole, and free from paradox—in short, by saving us once and for all from love's irony. That is why Plato's solution to the problem of love is less interesting, and has proven less convincing, than his analysis of it.

## IV

Love is an ironic condition insofar as it produces a necessary doubling of perspective. The lover knows that how the world looks to him is different from how it looks to others, but he can't integrate those different views or reduce one of them to the other. Love is defined by the fact that the truth of love, if there is one, never coincides completely with the experience of love.

What I desire exceeds anything I can demand. I may want to have sex with you, but sex does not enable me to actualize what I feel about you, or what you make me feel. Sex does not translate feeling into act. It testifies to the fact of my desire and it acts out to some small extent the turmoil I experience in your presence, but it merely represents my emotions, as if it were a rhetorical figure: it does not express them. To take sexual intercourse for erotic fulfillment would be to mistake a sign for the thing it signifies. Sex is grotesque to the degree that we seek, through physical machinations, to literalize our desire, and perverse insofar as we attempt, through a persistent keying up of effort, to break out of sex's figurality—to close the distance between signs and things, and thereby to refuse the irony intrinsic to erotic desire.

Your body is at once a vehicle and an obstacle. It narrows the field of my desire and gives my desire a focus, a bounded form, a local habitation. At the same time, it gets in my way: it comes between me and what it is about you that I want. My desire for your body also intends both more and less than your body itself: it intends more, insofar as your body, or its parts, are desirable only in some larger context that underwrites their value (the context of a living, conscious human being who trembles at my touch, for example); it intends less, insofar as I do not fixate democratically on every detail of your body.

Your body's meaning inheres in its features but is not reducible to them. As if it were a statue fished out of the sea, your body promises me what I desire but presents it to me encrusted with the "shell and weed and rock" of material contingency (as Socrates says in Plato's *Republic* [611d]), "full of human flesh and color and many other sorts of mortal trash" (as Diotima scathingly puts it in Plato's *Symposium* [211e]). And so to the extent that I take the materiality of your body to be the goal of my desire, I am an idolater, who pursues not a real object but a wraith, such as the gods sent to Troy in place of Helen (according to some versions of the myth) to be an empty focus of heroic strife (*Republic* 586bc).

The secret of my desire for you is written on your body. But I cannot read it; I cannot decipher the hieroglyphs in which it is encoded. There is not the slightest doubt about the significance that your body holds for me: every hollow, every contour, every modulation of your flesh that evokes my desire is

filled with intense and urgent meaning. But it is meaning of a different order, composed according to some alien logic. Perhaps it is comprehensible to angels; perhaps somewhere there are creatures who speak the mystical language in which it is inscribed. Something is going on, clearly, something that cries out to be understood, but I am not the person who is permitted to understand it. (If I were a tragic hero, this situation would be called dramatic irony.)

Sex, then, accomplishes nothing in the sphere of desire, whatever else it may accomplish in other spheres. My desire for you does not disappear or diminish when I make love to you. I may get tired of you, but unless or until I do, those features of your body that arouse my desire will continue to do so long after I have given up trying to express through sex the attraction you awakened in me. Making love with you is not what I really want to do with you, or to you, although I do want to do it, and I don't know what else to do. But sex achieves nothing, beyond merely "verifying to the point of giddiness the useless objectivity of things."

Or so Baudrillard says. Plato puts it more gently. Those who spend their entire lives together "could not say what they wish to gain from one another," Aristophanes remarks in the *Symposium*. "No one would think it was sexual intercourse," he adds, "or that for the sake of sex each partner so earnestly enjoys his union with the other. But it is clear that the soul of each lover wants something else, which it is not able to say, but it divines what it wants and hints at it" (192c-d; cf. *Republic* 505d-e). A number of characters in the *Symposium*, including Aristophanes himself, attempt to answer this riddle about the aim of erotic desire. And a number of male writers since Plato, such as Augustine, Dante, Freud, Proust, and Nabokov, have also tried to identify what it is that the soul of the lover wants. What is striking about those efforts is not the specific answers they produce but their formal, structural correspondences, their common insistence that passionate desire for an individual object always points somewhere beyond it, that no object contains within itself the secret of its own fascination.

To say that sexual desire intends a transcendental object is to say that there is nothing in the world to which the ultimate object of that desire exactly corresponds. If I am turned on by blonds, it is not because blond hair is intrinsically desirable; I do not get a charge out of holding a detached handful of blond hair. Blond hair is a sexual metaphor: it is the vehicle of a certain meaning or value that has taken up residence in your body. What thrills and fascinates me about your body, then, is not any particular somatic feature in itself but the meaning that one or more of those features conveys to me. (As Proust says, "Even women

who claim to judge a man on the basis of nothing besides his physique see in that physique the emanation of an extraordinary life.") All passionate love of individual objects is fetishistic, for Plato and Proust no less than for Freud, because it attaches to particularities that are meaningless in themselves and acquire their erotic significance only from an ulterior idea or value in which individual objects participate. So long as that idea or value remains unidentified, so long as the lover does not possess a completed metaphysics, he is liable to pursue a goal that will neither answer to his true need nor fulfill it.

The sexual idea or value that I pursue in loving you cannot be possessed by possessing you: you are merely the medium through which it manifests itself to me. It transcends you. I want you, but you are not what I want.

Plato locates an ineluctable irony in this gap between the subjective experience of love and its truth. The content of the lover's consciousness does not reflect the actual structure of his desire. Without the benefit of revelation, no lover can discover the object he ultimately seeks or the operation he ultimately wants to perform with it. He experiences a transcendental desire even as its logic escapes him. His instinct is infallible: some awareness of the nature and goal of desire is buried in his soul, as Aristophanes says; whether he likes it or not, his erotic longings are structured by the structure of reality. His passion conforms to the order of things. In this, he bears ironic witness to a metaphysics of desire that he doesn't understand.

Love's greatest truth is also its greatest lie: my love for you is stronger than death, more lasting than the universe itself. No wonder Socrates in the *Symposium* presents love under the sign of an impossible immortality. Love imparts to creatures who are going to die an intuition of eternal reality. That is love's final irony.

v

Relations between Socrates and the members of his circle, as they are portrayed in the *Symposium*, dramatize love's irony. Socrates is old and ugly, yet all the golden youth of Athens are in love with him. Their desire for him is well motivated: he has something they want. But their desire is also perverse because they confound him with it. Without a Platonic analysis, they are unable to see Socrates as a vehicle, as a metaphor, or to distinguish Socrates himself from the value he represents to them.

Their mistake is comic. It leads to all sorts of ridiculous errors and misunderstandings—to Alcibiades' failed seduction of Socrates, whom Alcibiades didn't desire anyway, at least not sexually, though he was driven to pursue



him as if Socrates were a beautiful boy. But these confusions are also the stuff of tragedy. Misguided eros turns the Socratic community into a theater of frustration and torment. Alcibiades suffers humiliation and inward agony. And he brings about the Fall of Athens.

The drinking party at the center of Plato's *Symposium* is a historical fiction. Plato was writing at least thirty years after the date on which it was supposed to have taken place. It would have been impossible for a contemporary Greek to read the *Symposium* unironically. (It is as if a modern American writer were to depict, on the eve of the congressional vote on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, an all-night seminar featuring Robert Kennedy, Mick Jagger, Paul Tillich, Ethel Merman, Robert Frost, Martin Luther King, Rock Hudson, and Michel Foucault.) Readers of the *Symposium* already know how it all turned out, and we bring to bear on our judgment of the characters our retrospective understanding of how their lives and loves have stood the test of time, how well their words matched their deeds, how intimately their desires contributed to their fates. We read the *Symposium* possessed of a tragic knowledge that is denied the characters at the moment of their speaking. They are surrounded by deep shadows of which they are unaware.

Erotic error has potentially gruesome consequences. Coming so inconveniently between the lover and his unknown object, the beloved's body gives rise to increasingly furious resentment in Western literature since Plato. Even Milton, our great champion of embodied human love, registers distinct frustration at the limits imposed on love's expression by the human body: an unmistakable wistfulness can be heard in the Archangel Raphael's boast to Adam in *Paradise Lost* that angels enjoy sexual pleasure "in eminence," inasmuch as they "obstacle find none / Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars." Human beings are not so fortunate. The horrific and pointless ransacking of the body in search of the qualities that make it erotically desirable to the lover is a prominent theme of Dennis Cooper's novels. In *Frisk*, for example, one boy describes what it is like to be the object of such an erotic assault, "to have an older man so completely, insanely worked up over me, like if I was where someone had buried some sort of treasure or antidote to something malignant in him." Nothing left for it but to cut a pretty boy to pieces. That is the dark side of Platonism.

Given all the tragicomic disproportions between love and its objects, between the desire I feel and what it is I am able to do about it, between the object I seek and the object I really want, between the experience of love and the truth of love, it is eminently reasonable for Socrates to argue, at the end of the *Symposium*, that a poet skilled in comedy should also be good at composing

tragedy, and vice versa. Love's irony is a solvent of formal distinctions: it dissolves the differences between the genres. The reader does not hear Socrates' arguments; we learn only that he defends what to an ancient Greek audience would have been a counterintuitive proposition.

But here is how Socrates ought to have defended that proposition. Love breaks down the division between tragedy and comedy because love's irony cuts both ways. Irony undermines the seriousness of high tragedy, but it also registers how much of civilization is at risk in the deceptive balancing act of romantic comedy. Love makes great men ridiculous—and yet that only shows how, even at its most ludicrous, love can still destroy us. Love is one long comedy of errors, an inexhaustible drama of mistaken identity, but a joke so cruel that it can lead to murder and mayhem. Neither tragedy nor comedy alone can contain the irony of love. To write well about love is to refuse to sacrifice either an amused or an appalled perspective on love to the other. And that means that the only way to write well about love is to write about it ironically.

"When my love swears that she is made of truth," Shakespeare said at the end of his life, "I do believe her though I know she lies." Only an ironic mode of representation can manage to convey with the right doubling of perspective the necessarily unironic experience of love—the falseness of sentiments that we genuinely feel, the irrefutable rightness of feelings that are so wrong, the impossibilities that we both deny and do everything we can to heighten. A frank refusal to disavow the irony of love conduces to a sympathy so encompassing that it can span and combine, without exactly fusing, without reducing to each other, a tragic vision of life and a comic one. That is what Shakespeare demonstrated in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and that is what the few great writers about love, without exception, also understood—that love's irony requires a literary form all its own. Hence the formal originality of Dante and Proust, of Nabokov in *Lolita*, of Plato in the *Phaedrus* and, above all, in the *Symposium*.

#### VI

The unique literary form that love requires does a lot to reveal the formal properties of the literary as such. All great literature finds some way to acknowledge and to incorporate what it does not say. Tragedy and comedy are shadowed by their opposites: a sense of the perennial possibility of a normal, unagonized existence hovers around the edges of tragedy, while comedy keeps us aware that it is only the providential goodness of our luck that prevents our lives from being plunged into horror and despair. But tragedy plays down comic

elements, just as comedy plays down tragic ones; neither attempts to give equal weight to the opposed perspective.

Like all great literary forms, the ironic story of love teases us with the contradictions built into its design. What distinguishes it is the way it holds opposed perspectives in unstable and dynamic equipoise. It thereby pushes to an extreme limit what all good writing aims to do—to impress on us a lively consciousness of what it does not, or what it cannot, say. In that sense, the structure of erotic desire ultimately corresponds to the formal practices and properties of literature itself.

So not only is it fitting, it is necessary and telling that Plato's *Symposium* belongs to no preexisting literary genre. Plato composed the *Symposium* in such a way that it could not be classed according to any of the specific formal criteria that had previously been used to define epic or lyric or tragedy or comedy or history or oratory or natural science. The *Symposium* belongs to a category for which not even Aristotle had a word. It is the first surviving work of Western culture that can claim—and that demands we give it—the undifferentiated generic title of literature.

Love's irony will stop at nothing less.