

Article

The Comic Mask of Socrates: Irony, Initiation, and the Pedagogy of Laughter in Plato's *Symposium*

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Abstract

Nietzsche claimed, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that the Platonic dialogues are the lifeboat on which Socrates rescues older poetry, only to finish off comedy. This article contests that claim. Distinguishing comedy (a mode organized around *to geloion*, whose object Plato himself defines in the *Philebus* as self-ignorance) from irony (a two-level device of meaning), it argues that Socratic irony in Plato is comic in a precise threefold sense: genealogically, as the inheritance of the *eirōn*-mask from the Aristophanic *Clouds*; structurally, whenever the dialogues frame it for staged laughter; and thematically, as the instrument of the laughing exposure of *doxosophia*. Drawing on Kierkegaard's reading of the Socratic maieutic as 'indirect communication' and Vlastos's concept of 'complex irony,' the article offers a close reading of Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* within the generic frame Plato himself names at 222d: the satyr-play, 'tragedy at play,' in which tragic material is held inside a laughing form. The speech's mythological imagery (Silenus, Marsyas, Corybants, Sirens) carries a coordinated dark sub-text that reverses its overt meaning—the satyric signature, not a departure from the comic. Against Vlastos, who locates pedagogical failure in Alcibiades' self-deception, and Lane, who finds complex irony's deliberate indeterminacy ethically indefensible, the article proposes a meta-ironic resolution: Plato stages both positions simultaneously, performing at the authorial level the very *pharmakon*-logic the speech describes—a seriocomic philosophical method grounded in the mythological ambivalence of the theatre of Dionysus.

Keywords: Socratic irony; Platonic comedy; satyr-play; *Symposium*; *Philebus*; Alcibiades; Aristophanes; Vlastos; *pharmakon*; *eironeia*

1. Introduction: Comedy That Was Never Abolished

"By Heracles, this is Socrates' accustomed irony! I knew it, and I foretold to these gentlemen that you would refuse to answer, that you would play the ironist and do anything rather than answer if anyone should question you." (Cooper 1997, Republic 337a)¹

So cries Thrasyarchus in the *Republic*, his exasperation at the characteristic Socratic evasion rising to the surface in one of the most directly comic moments in the dialogues—comic by the structural test we shall establish in Section 3: an explosion of thwarted expectation, framed for the reader's laughter rather than for pity. The cry is more than a dramatic flourish: it names the phenomenon, Socratic irony, and registers its effect on those who are subject to it. It is this phenomenon, at once comic and philosophically consequential, that the present article sets out to examine.

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In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously claims that the Platonic dialogues function as a lifeboat on which Socrates rescues the drowning forms of older poetry—only to finish off comedy in the process (Nietzsche 1999, §14). Comedy, on this reading, is the lone poetic form not resuscitated but abolished by the Platonic enterprise. The present article contests this claim directly. We shall argue that comedy in the Platonic dialogues is not abolished but transformed: that Plato inherits the comic mask of Socrates from Aristophanes, strips it of its reductive satirical function, and redeploys it as the central vehicle of a philosophically radical pedagogy. Let us be precise from the outset about what this claim is and is not. We do not contend that comedy and irony are the same phenomenon: irony is a device of double meaning that can serve tragic and oracular ends, and comedy can dispense with irony altogether. We contend, rather, that Socratic irony is the device through which Plato continues the distinctive work that his own *Philebus* assigns to comedy—the laughing exposure of self-ignorance—and that the figure who performs this work wears a mask inherited from the comic stage. Section 3 makes this distinction systematic and identifies the generic frame, named by Plato himself at *Symposium* 222d (Cooper 1997), within which the dialogue’s darkest registers belong to the comic tradition rather than departing from it: the satyr-play. The comic and the philosophical are not antagonists in Plato but conspirators—and nowhere more visibly than in the *Symposium* and the extraordinary speech placed in the mouth of the drunken Alcibiades².

The figure of Socrates has generated an almost insoluble hermeneutic problem—‘the Socratic problem’—from antiquity to the present. As William K. C. Guthrie puts it with disarming candour, “no one has ever remained indifferent to this singular figure: everyone who has written about him has also reacted to him in one way or another. If every man must have his own Socrates, all that I can do is present mine” (Guthrie 1971, p. 5). The difficulty is structural: Socrates wrote nothing, and what we possess is a complex web of testimonies—above all those of Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato—that are irreducibly partial and mutually divergent. As Søren Kierkegaard observed, Socrates belongs to a class of thinkers whose speech is constitutively oblique: “What Socrates says is directed at something other. The externality of his words does not correspond to the interiority of his intention; rather, it is precisely the opposite. And his words must be understood only in light of this fundamental incongruity” (Kierkegaard 1989, p. 249). This oblique mode of speech is Socratic irony; and it is precisely irony’s comic genealogy that has been insufficiently explored.

The article proceeds in five movements. Section 2 maps the semantic history of *eironeia* from Aristophanes through Aristotle, arguing that the comic character of Socratic irony is not incidental but foundational; within this section we also undertake a focused reading of the Aristophanic Socrates in the *Clouds* (Aristophanes 1998). Section 3 defines comedy—anchoring the definition in Plato’s own theory of *to geloion* in the *Philebus* and in Aristotle’s *Poetics*—distinguishes it from irony, and identifies the satyric frame within which the *Symposium* asks to be read. Section 4 examines the maieutic metaphor in the *Theaetetus* and develops Kierkegaard’s and Vlastos’s accounts of irony as a pedagogical instrument. Section 5 undertakes a sustained close reading of Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium*, analyzing its mythological imagery as a satyric-philosophical performance. Section 6 draws conclusions about the ambivalent nature of Socratic irony as *pharmakon*—and about Plato’s own deeply ironic relationship to his teacher.

2. The Comic Genealogy of Eironeia: From Aristophanes to Aristotle

The concept of irony is itself elusive³, and perhaps necessarily so. As Melissa Lane has observed, “there is no algorithm and no degree of solid philological grounding that can present irony correctly to someone who does not understand it by themselves” (Lane 2011, p. 243). Its elusiveness is confirmed by the dramatic semantic instability of the term

across antiquity: what Aristophanes deploys as a term of comic abuse, Cicero will later adopt as a marker of elegant rhetorical refinement. Let us first survey this semantic instability in its Greek setting, for it is there that the comic roots of the concept are laid bare.

2.1. The Aristophanic *Eirōn*: Comic Imposture and the Birth of the Mask

In fifth-century Athenian usage, *eironeia* carried a sharply negative meaning: dissimulation, cunning concealment, the extraction of advantage through feigned innocence. The term appears in this sense in Aristophanes' *Birds* (Aristophanes 1998, 1211), *Wasps* (174), and most revealingly in the *Clouds* (449ff.), where Socrates himself is the central comic target. In Aristophanes, the *eirōn* is a stock figure of Old Comedy: a trickster who masks intelligence behind a performance of stupidity, who extracts profit from others by pretending not to desire it. The comparison in Oppian's *Cynegetica* with the fox who feigns death to catch birds illustrates the basic logic: *eironeia* as "profiting at another's expense through deceit, wearing a mask of innocence and goodwill, in order to deprive the victim of the capacity for self-defense" (Wolfsdorf 2007, p. 175; cf. Vlastos 1987, p. 80).

The *Clouds* deserves more than a marginal citation, for it is in this play—performed at the Great Dionysia of 423 BCE, nearly a quarter-century before Socrates' death—that the Athenian public first encountered Socrates as a dramatically constructed comic type. Aristophanes' Socrates is simultaneously a sophistic charlatan, a natural philosopher who thinks in mid-air (suspended in a basket, lest his thought be dragged down by the moist earth), and, crucially for our purposes, a comic *eirōn*: a figure whose distinguishing trait is a studied, theatrical dissimulation of ignorance deployed for comic and dramatic effect. When Strepsiades enters the *Phrontistērion* (the Thinkery), he is greeted by a Socrates who guards the school's teaching as a secret reserved for initiates—"it is not lawful to speak of these things except to disciples" (Aristophanes 1998, 140–43)—who stages the old man's admission as a parodic rite of initiation, with enthronement, garland, and mystery-formulae (250–74), and who punctuates the instruction with abuse of his pupil's slowness ("the most forgetful and stupidest old man," 789–90): a grotesque comic anticipation of precisely the pedagogical scenario that Plato will later recuperate and transform. The caricature is, of course, hostile; its effect on the historical reception of Socrates is registered in the *Apology* (Cooper 1997, 18d, 19c), where Socrates himself identifies the Aristophanic caricature as a source of his troubles with the Athenians. Yet the very hostility of the caricature encodes a recognition of something genuinely unsettling in the Socratic manner: something that demands comic form in order to be captured at all.

A clarification is in order, lest the argument be mistaken for a stronger one. We do not claim that the Socrates of the *Clouds* is Plato's Socrates, or anything close to him: the basket-borne meteorologist who takes fees and teaches the Unjust Argument is, doctrinally, almost his photographic negative—and Plato has Socrates name the caricature among the causes of his death (Cooper 1997, *Apology* 18d, 19c). The claim is dramaturgical, not doctrinal. What Plato inherits from the *Clouds* is a scenario and a mask: the master of a closed school; knowledge figured as mystery and admission as initiation; the dull pupil mocked by the dissimulating sage. Plato's relationship to this inheritance is appropriation under protest—he takes over the comic machinery of the *Phrontistērion* precisely in order to transvalue it, replacing fraudulent mysteries with the genuine initiation of the elenchus while keeping the theatrical form intact. That he could not, or would not, discard the form even while blaming it for his teacher's death is perhaps the deepest testimony to our thesis that the comic mask was, for Plato, not detachable from the Socratic phenomenon itself.

Plato's philosophical project can be understood, in part, as a sustained response to Aristophanes: a transformation of the comic mask into something philosophically serious without surrendering its essential structure. The *eirōn* of Old Comedy thus becomes the *eirōn* of the Platonic dialogues—but the mask remains. Martha Nussbaum has rightly em-

phasized that Plato's relationship to Aristophanes is neither repudiation nor imitation but a complex appropriation (Nussbaum 1986, esp. chap. 5–6), and Ruby Blondell's analysis of the 'play of character' in the dialogues clearly demonstrates that the dramatic armature of Plato's writing is continuous with the conventions of Attic drama, comic no less than tragic (Blondell 2002, esp. chap. 1). The recuperation of the comic mask is therefore not an incidental feature of Plato's literary strategy but an organizing principle of it.

2.2. Aristotle's Ethical Rehabilitation of Irony

Between Aristophanes and Plato stands Aristotle, who effects an important semantic shift. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1934, 1126b24), he opposes the boastful man (*alazōn*), who "puts on airs as though he possessed things that bring him a reputation, when he does not really possess them," to the *eirōn*, "who belittles himself and denies, or diminishes, the things he does have." Both stand at a distance from the golden mean of honest self-presentation, but the ironist at least occupies a higher ethical position than the braggart. More significantly, Aristotle's *eirōn* directs irony inward, at the speaker's own self-presentation, rather than outward as a weapon against an interlocutor. This internalization introduces a dimension of self-deprecating humility—a comic reduction of the self—that Kierkegaard will later recognize as philosophically productive.

The contrast between the Aristophanic and Aristotelian versions is not trivial. For Aristophanes, irony is directed outward, toward the victim, with predatory intent; for Aristotle, it turns inward, and thus carries a faint positive valence of modesty. Kierkegaard follows Aristotle's internalizing line when he notes that ironic speech "isolates the speaker from his surroundings" (Kierkegaard 1989, p. 249). What the philosophical tradition has been reluctant to acknowledge is that both dimensions—the predatory and the self-deprecating—are simultaneously present in the Socratic practice that Plato stages. That simultaneous presence is precisely what makes Socratic irony comic in the deepest sense: it is a performance that plays on incongruity, on the gap between apparent and real, on the reversal of expectation that is the formal signature of comedy itself (a claim we make precise in the next section).

It is Plato who stands between these two poles and achieves the most complex presentation of Socratic irony. His dialogues, written in polished prose and structured as philosophical drama, present a Socrates who embodies a new ideal of Greek rationalism: the lover of wisdom who devotes his life to relentless inquiry and who seeks to awaken his interlocutors to self-examination. This Platonic Socrates is the perfect antithesis of the sophist, who denies the existence of truth, wanders the land, and sells the art of persuasion for a handsome fee. Against sophistic rhetoric stands Socratic dialectic (*dialektikē*), the cross-examination of opinions (*elenchos*), and the sustained collaborative search for truth (*suzētēsis*). This rigorous process of philosophical initiation is guided by the ironically self-concealing master—and, as we shall see, comedy is its structural engine.

3. What Is the Comic? Defining Comedy, Distinguishing Irony, and the Satyric Frame

The genealogy traced above establishes that Socratic irony enters the philosophical lexicon already wearing a comic mask: the *eirōn* is, before anything else, a stock figure of the Attic comic stage. But genealogy alone cannot carry the weight of our thesis. To claim that the Platonic dialogues rehabilitate comedy for philosophical purposes, one must first say what comedy *is*—and one must state with precision how comedy is related to, and how it differs from, irony. Without such an account, "comic" risks becoming a sliding signifier, available to label any two-level utterance, any incongruity, any reversal whatever; and the conflation of the comic with the ironic would impoverish both terms, strip-

ping comedy of its constitutive association with laughter and denying irony its capacity to function tragically, oracularly, or rhetorically without any humorous charge. This section therefore performs three tasks. First, it assembles a working definition of comedy, anchored—as the subject demands—in Plato’s own theory of the laughable in the *Philebus* and in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and consolidated by the modern theoretical tradition. Second, it distinguishes irony from comedy as belonging to different conceptual orders, and specifies the three precise senses in which Socratic irony may nonetheless be called comic. Third, it identifies the generic frame within which the *Symposium* itself asks to be read—a frame that Plato names explicitly, and that will prove decisive for the interpretation of the dark mythological registers of Alcibiades’ speech: the satyr-play.

3.1. Defining Comedy: To Geloion from the *Philebus* to the *Poetics*

It is a happy circumstance for any study of Platonic comedy that the oldest surviving theory of the laughable is Plato’s own. In the *Philebus* (Cooper 1997, 48a–50b), in the course of analyzing pleasures that are mixed with pain, Socrates turns to “the malice of comedy”—to the question of what we are laughing at when we laugh in the theatre. His answer defines the ridiculous (*to geloion*) as a determinate condition of soul: a species of ignorance, specifically the self-ignorance of those who disobey the Delphic inscription. The ridiculous man believes himself richer than he is, or more beautiful and well-formed than he is, or—the largest class by far—wiser and more virtuous than he is (48e–49a). Laughter at this condition, Socrates argues, is a mixed experience: we take pleasure in what is, strictly, an evil in our neighbour, and the pleasure is therefore alloyed with malice (*phthonos*, 49d–50a). And in a remark whose reach extends far beyond the theatre, Socrates concludes that this mixture of pleasure and pain is found not only on the stage but “in the whole tragedy and comedy of life” (Cooper 1997, *Philebus* 50b).

The relevance of this account to the present argument can hardly be overstated, and deserves to be made fully explicit. On Plato’s own theory, the paradigmatic object of comedy is the false conceit of wisdom—*doxosophia*, the conviction of knowing what one does not know. But the false conceit of wisdom is precisely the condition that the Socratic elenchus is designed to expose. The targets of Socratic examination—the generals who cannot define courage, the rhapsodes who cannot account for their art, the statesmen who cannot say what justice is—are, by the strict letter of the *Philebus*, ridiculous: they instantiate the comic condition itself. The elenchus, in other words, is on Plato’s own definition an instrument of comic exposure, and the laughter that attends Socratic refutation throughout the dialogues is not an ornament of the drama but the generically appropriate response to the unmasking of self-ignorance (on Greek laughter and the *Philebus* account see Halliwell 2008). When we argue, in what follows, that Plato presses the comic into philosophical service, the claim is anchored here: not in a loose modern intuition about what is funny, but in the dialogues’ own theory of *to geloion*.

Aristotle’s *Poetics* adds the second classical determination. Comedy is the imitation of people worse than average—worse, however, not in respect of every vice, but only of that species of the shameful which is the laughable: “the laughable is an error or deformity that is painless and not destructive; the comic mask, for instance, is something ugly and distorted, but without pain” (Aristotle 1995, *Poetics* 5, 1449a32–37). Two elements of this compressed definition matter for our purposes. The first is the criterion of painlessness: deformity, error, and incongruity become comic only when they are framed in such a way that the spectator is licenced to laugh—when the frame suspends the suffering that the same material would otherwise demand. The second is Aristotle’s chosen example, which could not be more apposite to our subject: the comic mask itself, the ugly and distorted exterior that does no harm. The Silenus figure of Alcibiades’ speech—the grotesque out-

side concealing divine images within—stands recognizably in this conceptual lineage, and our title means the phrase in Aristotle’s sense.

The modern theory of comedy and laughter, for all its variety, consolidates into three broad families, each of which has an ancient root in the texts just cited. Superiority theories, classically formulated in Hobbes’s “sudden glory” (*Leviathan* I.6; Hobbes 1996), develop the *Philebus*’s own insight that laughter involves a pleasurable apprehension of another’s deficiency. Incongruity theories—Kant’s “affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Kant 2000, §54), given its most influential literary form in Bergson’s account of the mechanical encrusted upon the living and of laughter as a social corrective (Bergson 1911)—generalize the structural gap between appearance and reality that Aristotle locates in the painless deformity. Relief or economy theories, above all Freud’s analysis of the joke-work (Freud 1960), describe the discharge effected when censored material passes the frame in disguised form; and it is worth noting that Freud’s joke, with its manifest surface and latent charge, is the modern theory of comedy most obviously congenial to the two-level structure of irony. We need not adjudicate among these families here. For the purposes of this study we extract from the classical and modern accounts a composite working definition:

Comedy names a literary mode organized around the laughable (to geloion). Its structural signature is incongruity—a gap or reversal between appearance and reality, expectation and outcome—framed as painless, so that the audience is licensed to laugh; its paradigmatic object, on Plato’s own account, is self-ignorance; and its characteristic social function is corrective exposure.

From this definition follow three operational criteria, and we bind ourselves to them: in the remainder of this article, a figure, an image, or a passage will be called comic only where at least one of the following is explicitly met. (i) The generic-historical criterion: the phenomenon descends from, or deliberately invokes, the conventions of the comic and satyric stage—stock types such as the *eirōn* and the *alazōn*, the mask, the *kōmos* and its drunken late arrival, obscenity, parody, the reversal of expectation (*para prosdokian*). (ii) The structural criterion: incongruity or reversal presented under a painless frame that licences laughter—including, importantly, laughter actually staged within the text. (iii) The thematic criterion, Plato’s own: the exposure of self-ignorance, paradigmatically of *doxosophia*. These criteria are the answer to a legitimate methodological worry: that on a loose definition, anything double, anything ambivalent, anything incongruous becomes “comic.” On our account a two-level structure is necessary but never sufficient. Tragic irony is two-level and is not comic, because its frame is anything but painless; an oracle’s amphiboly is two-level and is not comic, because no laughter is licenced and no self-ignorance is unmasked—or rather, where the oracle does unmask self-ignorance, it does so under the sign of terror. The difference lies not in the doubleness but in the frame.

3.2. Comedy and Irony: Distinction and Intersection

With a definition of comedy in hand, the relation between comedy and irony can be stated exactly—and the first thing to state is that they are not the same kind of thing at all. Irony is a device: a manner of meaning, located at the level of the utterance—a saying of one thing whereby another (or, in Vlastos’s complex case, simultaneously the same and another) is meant. Comedy is a mode or genre: a way of framing a represented world, located at the level of the work. Because the two concepts belong to different orders, neither entails the other, and the relation between them is an empirical and historical question, not an analytic one.

That irony does not entail comedy is shown by its most famous instances. The dramatic irony of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*—where every utterance of the king means more, and

worse, than he knows—is structurally identical to the two-level utterance we have been describing, and its effect is annihilating rather than amusing. The amphibolous speech of the Delphic oracle is ironic in the strict sense, and nothing about it is funny. Romantic irony, in Schlegel’s sense, is a metaphysical posture of the authorial consciousness that may express itself comically but need not. To call Socratic speech ironic, therefore, is not yet to have said anything about comedy. Conversely, comedy does not entail irony: the pratfall, the obscene gesture, the gluttonous Heracles of the comic stage require no two-level utterance whatever. The conflation of the two terms would be a genuine error, and we do not propose it.

What we propose is an intersection—and it is historical before it is conceptual. As Section 2 has shown, the *eirōn* was a stock type of Attic comedy before *eironeia* was a philosophical concept: the term enters the tradition as the name of a comic mask. Socratic irony may accordingly be called comic in three precise senses, each answering to one of our criteria. It is comic genealogically (criterion i): the figure of the dissembling Socrates is inherited from the comic stage, above all from the *Clouds*, and Plato’s redeployment of that figure carries the generic memory of its origin. It is comic structurally (criterion ii) wherever the dialogues frame it for laughter—and they conspicuously do: Thrasymachus’s exasperated outburst is written as a comic moment, and at the close of Alcibiades’ speech Plato stages the response in so many words—“when Alcibiades finished, there was laughter at his frankness” (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 222c). The laughter is in the text; it is not our projection onto it. And it is comic thematically (criterion iii): the work that Socratic irony performs—the exposure of the false conceit of wisdom—is precisely the work that the *Philebus* assigns to comedy as such.

Our central thesis can now be restated with the precision it previously lacked. We do not claim that irony and comedy are identical, nor that every ironic utterance in Plato is comic. We claim that Socratic irony is the device through which Plato continues, within philosophical prose, the distinctive work of comedy—the laughing exposure of self-ignorance—and that the figure who performs this work does so wearing a mask inherited from the comic theatre. Irony is the instrument; comedy is the inherited frame, function, and genealogy of its Socratic employment. Where in what follows we call a passage comic, one or more of the three criteria will be performing the work, and we shall say which.

3.3. The Satyric Frame: Tragedy at Play

One difficulty remains, and it is the most interesting of all. The mythological registers of Alcibiades’ speech, as we shall read them in Section 5, are dark: Silenus is the bearer of a nihilistic wisdom; Marsyas is flayed alive; the Sirens’ island is littered with bones. If the painless frame is the signature of the comic, are these not so many counterexamples? And is there not a related danger of treating Dionysian and comic as interchangeable, when Dionysus presides over tragedy no less than over comedy—when Dionysian ecstasy has, notoriously, its tragic face? The objection is just, as far as it goes. But Plato has anticipated it—by naming, inside the text, the genre in which Alcibiades’ speech is to be heard.

When the speech ends, Socrates replies: “you have not deceived me—this satyric, or rather Silenic, drama of yours was perfectly transparent” (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 222d3–4). The generic classification is Plato’s own: not comedy *simpliciter*, and not tragedy, but the satyr-play (*satyrikon drama*)—and M. D. Usher has demonstrated that this is no isolated jest, the closing scenes of the dialogue being systematically composed of satyric motifs, down to sustained engagement with Euripides’ *Cyclops*, the one complete satyr-play we possess (Usher 2002). The satyr-play was the fourth drama, performed after the tragic trilogy at the same Dionysian festival: it took the very matter of heroic and tragic myth—monsters, violence, terror, death—and re-staged it with a chorus of satyrs led by old Silenus, re-framed for laughter. Demetrius captures the genre’s whole logic in a lapidary re-

mark: laughter is the enemy of tragedy, and no one could so much as conceive of a “tragedy at play” (*tragōidia paizousa*)—for in writing one he would find himself writing a satyr-play instead (Demetrius 1995, *On Style* 169). The satyr-play is, in other words, the institutional embodiment of Aristotle’s criterion: the genre whose entire office is the painless re-framing of painful material—darkness held inside a laughing form, without being annulled by it.

This dissolves the apparent counterevidence, and converts it into confirmation. The dark substrata of Alcibiades’ imagery—the flayed satyr, the pessimist Silenus, the lethal singers—are not anomalies within a comic reading of the speech; they are the satyric signature, the precise generic markers of the form Plato has named. A satyr-play requires the tragic substrate: that is what it plays with. The spectator of the satyr-play occupies exactly the double position in which Alcibiades’ encomium-invective places the reader: licenced to laugh, invited to shudder, and forbidden to resolve the two responses into one. It should now also be clear that we do not treat Dionysian and comic as synonyms, and the argument does not need the equation. Dionysus presides over the whole spectrum of the festival—tragedy, comedy, and satyr-play alike. Our claim is generically specific: the register of Alcibiades’ speech is satyric—the Dionysian form whose office is the conversion of tragic material into laughter that does not abolish its darkness.

The *Symposium* itself, finally, raises this generic logic to a programmatic statement. In the dialogue’s famous last scene, with the company asleep or departed, Socrates compels Agathon the tragedian and Aristophanes the comedian to concede “that the same man should know how to write comedy and tragedy, and that the skilled tragic poet is a comic poet as well” (223d; see the classic discussion in Clay 1975). The sentence has long been read as Plato’s oblique self-description, and our argument gives that reading a precise content: the Platonic dialogue is the form in which the tragic and the comic poet are the same man. Bakhtin, approaching from the history of genre, reached the same destination: he placed the Socratic dialogue at the fountainhead of the serio-comical genres (*spoudogeloion*), the ancestors of carnivalized literature, in which praise and abuse fuse in a single ambivalent utterance and laughter is directed at the very thing it crowns (Bakhtin 1984, chap. 4; for the application of Bakhtin’s account to the *Symposium*, see Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan 2004; cf. Hunter 2004). An encomium that is structurally a *psogos*—the very form of Alcibiades’ speech—is, in Bakhtin’s terms, carnival ambivalence *avant la lettre*.

We may now fix the vocabulary that will govern the remainder of this study. Comic will be used where one or more of the three criteria above is met, and the criterion will be identified. Satyric will name the specific configuration in which tragic or terrifying material is held within a laughing frame—the configuration Plato himself names at 222d. Serio-comic will name the fused mode of the dialogue as a whole, in which the comic and the serious interpenetrate without synthesis. With these distinctions in hand, we turn to the pedagogical machinery that the comic mask serves: the maieutic art.

4. Maieutics, Indirect Communication, and Complex Irony

The bitterness of Thrasymachus’ outburst, cited at the opening of this article, is paradigmatic of a widespread experience among Socrates’ interlocutors. Above all those who give voice to their frustration stands the drunken Alcibiades, who in the *Symposium* will protest at length against “the irony and mockery” of Socrates. Let us first attend, however, to the question of how Socratic irony and laughter, embodying simultaneously the Aristophanic dissimulation and the Aristotelian self-belittlement we have outlined above, constitute a dimension of philosophical initiation. The central Platonic image for this pedagogical dimension is the curious analogy between the philosopher-teacher and the midwife.

4.1. The Maieutic Art in the *Theaetetus*

In a celebrated passage of the *Theaetetus*, the Platonic Socrates reveals the strange nature of his midwifery:

“In all other respects my art of midwifery resembles that of the ordinary midwife, but it differs from hers in being practised upon men, not women, and in attending to their souls in labour, not their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a mere image, an imposture, or a fertile truth. For I have this characteristic in common with the midwives: I am barren of wisdom, and the reproach that many have brought against me, that I question others but make no answer myself about anything, because I have no wisdom in me—this reproach is just. The reason is that the god compels me to attend the travail of others, but has forbidden me to beget.” (Cooper 1997, *Theaetetus* 150c)

The passage may be inflected with Aristotelian self-deprecating irony, a comic reduction of the self. Yet at its philosophical core Socrates here presents a teacher who stands in a position of constitutive unknowing—who “knows that he does not know”—and who nonetheless, through the process of examining his interlocutors, is able to bring to birth the truth that grows from within them. In this framework, “irony and laughter” are not distractions from the philosophical process but expressions of its central paradox: the midwife cannot give birth herself, and the students’ resentment and frustration are nothing more than the expression of the fact that they are “suffering the pangs of labour and are full of perplexity day and night” (*loc. cit.*). Let us note, moreover, what kind of image this is. That it is a metaphor is obvious; our claim is that it is a comic one, and the criteria of Section 3 say why. It is comic, first, by the generic-historical test: in assigning himself the role of an elderly, barren, female practitioner of a low manual art—the son of the midwife Phaenarete, plying his mother’s trade—Socrates performs the *eirōn*’s signature act of self-belittlement, the comic reduction of the self that Aristotle codified and that the comic stage had made a recognizable mask. It is comic, second, by the structural test: the incongruity (the gadfly of Athens as obstetric nurse; grown men in labour; arguments inspected for soundness like newborns) is framed entirely without pain—nothing in the image asks for pity, everything in it permits the smile. A metaphor becomes comic, in short, not by being doubled but by being framed: the same maternal field, deployed in Diotima’s account of pregnancy and birth in the *beautiful* (209a–212a), is solemn and hieratic, because there the frame is initiatory and nothing invites laughter. The midwife and Diotima’s pregnant lover are the comic and the serious faces of a single Platonic figure—and that Plato can run the same image in both registers is itself a small demonstration of our larger thesis. The incongruity of the midwife is philosophically deliberate: it enacts, at the level of the image, the self-concealing diminishment that the irony performs at the level of speech.

4.2. Kierkegaard: Indirect Communication and the Pedagogy of Deception

The young Kierkegaard’s fascination with Socrates is evident already in his dissertation on Socratic irony, where he presents irony as an existential stance of “infinite negation,” contrasted with the religious subject’s negation of the relative in affirmation of the absolute. But it is in the *Journals and Papers* that Kierkegaard develops the most penetrating analysis of irony as a pedagogical instrument—and it is here, we shall see, that the structural logic of Old Comedy enters the philosophical argument most directly. Let us survey the main lines of his account.

Kierkegaard draws a foundational distinction between two modes of truth. *Objective truth* involves the direct transmission of a cognitive content from speaker to hearer—the truth of science. *Subjective truth*, by contrast, involves no transmission of content; what is

communicated is rather the insight that truth exists only in the process of becoming, and is accessible only through inward search (Kierkegaard 1941, pp. 67–72). This distinction between two kinds of truth entails, correspondingly, two kinds of communication. Objective truth is communicated directly; subjective truth—which belongs to the domains of ethics and religion, beyond the sphere of facts—can only be communicated indirectly.

The confusion of these two modes is, for Kierkegaard, the fundamental malady of modernity (*Journals*, §649/5): when the direct communication of science is applied to the indirect domain of ethics and religion, the result is not knowledge but the illusion of knowledge. In the domain of indirect communication, the starting point is not ignorance to be converted into knowledge but an already-present knowledge that needs to be realized existentially: enacted, not merely learned. Since this inward truth is nothing other than the self-knowledge of the one who knows it, the aim of indirect communication is not to transmit additional content but to seduce the student into knowing himself. And this seduction can only be accomplished indirectly, which means that it necessarily involves the diminishment and concealment of the teacher's own presence: the teacher reduces and conceals himself in order to allow the student to perform the process of forming his inward truth in his own strength (Kierkegaard 1967, pp. 307–8).

This is where Socratic irony assumes its central pedagogical function. Kierkegaard explicitly names indirect communication a “method of midwifery” (Kierkegaard 1967, pp. 274–76; cf. Söderquist 2016). The method is expressed in the formula “to stand alone—with the help of the other,” a phrase whose tension between its two halves is itself enacted in every ironic utterance, where the stated meaning explains itself by being opposed by the implied meaning (Kierkegaard 1967, p. 280). The ironic teacher conceals himself from the student so as not to become an obstacle to the emergence of inward truth—so as not to be perceived as an all-knowing external authority. In a deficient pedagogical process, where the teacher remains the authority, the student's mistaken response will be to imitate the teacher rather than to examine his own knowledge; and thus the student will fall into the trap of substituting the direct communication of an external content for the indirect domain where only inward truth can be realized. The mechanism of indirect communication works properly only under the veil of irony, which reduces and conceals the teacher's presence until it leaves the student alone before his own inward truths seeking the light. Here the ironic teacher presents himself, necessarily, as ridiculous and frivolous—and the dissimulation or concealment is required in order to ‘deliver’ the inward truths from within the listener—a process that Kierkegaard memorably calls “deceiving into the truth” (Kierkegaard 1967, p. 288).

Kierkegaard's account thus presents Socratic irony as a unique amalgam of the two classical senses of *eironeia*: the Aristophanic “dissimulation and concealment” directed outward, and the Aristotelian “self-belittlement” directed inward—fused into a single comic-pedagogical instrument whose aim is philosophical. The irony is comic in its form (the teacher appears ridiculous, incongruous, inconsistent)—criteria (i) and (ii) of Section 3: the self-staged indignity of the *eirōn*, framed to draw the audience's smile rather than its pity—and philosophical in its intention (the provocation of authentic self-inquiry). To adapt the *Theaetetus* image: Kierkegaard reads Socratic irony as the ‘labour-inducing injection’ of philosophical midwifery, whose target is the authentic knowledge that rises from the student's own interiority and self-searching. This autarkic and authentic state—in which the student stands alone before a truth that no external authority has imposed—finds its clearest expression in the famous lines of the *Seventh Letter*:

“After much converse about the matter itself and a life lived together, suddenly a light, as it were, is kindled in one leaping spark; and once it is born, it nourishes itself thereafter.” (Cooper 1997, *Seventh Letter* 341c)

4.3. Vlastos: Complex Irony and Its Interpretive Stakes

Gregory Vlastos, one of the most distinguished scholars of Greek philosophy in the twentieth century, walks in the footsteps of what he calls “Kierkegaard’s interpretive genius” and develops in a celebrated study an account of Socratic irony that extends the Kierkegaardian insight (Vlastos 1991, chap. 1; first published as Vlastos 1987). For Vlastos, Socratic irony is distinguished from ‘simple’ irony by being ‘complex irony.’ Simple irony in fifth-century Athenian usage carries the meaning of deceptive dissimulation: ironic speech is false speech. But this is incompatible with Socrates’ educational and moral character. What is presented in the Platonic writings is therefore in his view a unique kind of irony in which what is said is simultaneously what the speaker means and does not mean: “In ‘simple’ irony what is said is simply not what is meant. In ‘complex’ irony what is said both is and isn’t what is meant” (Vlastos 1987, p. 86).

How does such an utterance actually work? Vlastos’s two paradigm cases make the mechanism concrete. When Socrates says “I am not a teacher,” the utterance is true in one determinate sense—he does not do what Athens calls teaching: he transmits no doctrines, takes no fees, certifies no pupils—and false in another: there is no one in Athens from whom more is learned. When he says “I know nothing,” the disavowal is true of knowledge in the strong sense he reserves for the god—certain, complete, unreviseable—and false of the elenctically tested moral convictions by which he is conspicuously willing to live and die. The crucial point is that the two senses are not given in the utterance; the hearer must construct them. Complex irony is thus a riddle whose solution is itself a philosophical acquisition: one cannot disambiguate “I am not a teacher” without working out for oneself the difference between sophistic instruction and maieutic education, nor “I know nothing” without distinguishing divine certainty from human, examined conviction. The device does not transmit these distinctions; it extorts them. This is what it means to call complex irony a pedagogical instrument rather than a trope: its functioning is the hearer’s labour, and its misfiring—as Alcibiades will demonstrate—is the hearer’s catastrophe (Vlastos 1991, chap. 1).

Complex irony is thus a two-level utterance in which Socrates says something that is simultaneously true and untrue, in two different senses at once. It is neither a lie, nor a rhetorical trick, nor a deception, but a first-rank philosophical-educational instrument whose purpose is to force the interlocutor to interpret, judge, and arrive at truth by his own effort and from within himself. On this reading, the teacher’s self-concealment and the dimension of dissimulation—as sharply presented in Kierkegaard’s *Journals*—are clarified as a two-level ironic mode of speech that seeks the student’s autonomous interpretation, in a consistent and morally serious method of philosophical initiation that aims to deliver truth from within.

The structural kinship between complex irony and Diotima’s Eros deserves notice before we proceed. Eros is defined as metaxu—between beauty and ugliness, wisdom and ignorance, mortal and immortal (202a–e); the philosopher, accordingly, as the one who neither possesses wisdom nor is resigned to its lack (203e–204b). Complex irony is the discursive form of this in-between: an utterance suspended between affirmation and denial, true and untrue at once, exactly as its speaker is suspended between knowledge and ignorance. Socrates’ characteristic speech-act, one might say, is Eros translated into grammar—which is one more reason why the dialogue that defines the one should contain the definitive dramatization of the other.

5. The Satyr-Play of Philosophical Initiation: Alcibiades’ Speech in the *Symposium*

Vlastos himself identifies the speech of Alcibiades in the Platonic *Symposium* as the privileged locus for the understanding of Socratic complex irony (Vlastos 1991, p. 36; cf. Helfer 2017). Across the entire Platonic corpus—and indeed across all the evidence of the ancient world—this is the unique location where one of Socrates’ interlocutors offers a detailed, wide-ranging, and profound account of Socratic irony from the student’s perspective, presenting a dramatically sophisticated picture of Socrates’ mode of speech, his behaviour, his personality, and his emotional impact on those around him. Its importance for our argument is further amplified by the fact that it is also, from a literary-formal point of view, one of the most elaborate comic performances in the dialogues—and, as Socrates will say in so many words at its close (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 222d), a satyric one. Let us now analyze its two dimensions—comic and philosophical—simultaneously.

5.1. The Comic Frame: Drunkenness, the Inverted Encomium, and the Psogos

The *Symposium* belongs to the ‘middle period’ of Platonic writing and is structured as a layered series of speeches in praise of the god Eros, “the most ancient of the ancients.” The speakers—Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus the physician, Aristophanes the comic poet, Agathon the tragedian, and finally Socrates himself—each illuminate a different face of Eros and his unique status among the Olympian gods. Socrates, characteristically, employs a narrative device: after presenting his own argument about the nature of Eros, he offers a reported dialogue with Diotima, “a demonic woman,” who initiated him into the art of the erotic. The structure is sophisticated: a speech within a speech, with Socrates himself finally subjected to cross-examination by his demonic teacher. Moreover, Diotima’s account of the deepest nature of Eros closely parallels the portrait of Socrates himself: like him, Eros is rough and barefoot, not beautiful in himself but drawn to the beautiful, always seeking wisdom and dwelling “in between wisdom and ignorance”: that is, a philosopher. As such, Eros desires above all to give birth in the beautiful, “for generation is in the beautiful, both of the body and of the soul” (206a).

And the summary description of the erotic human being points a thick finger at the figure of Socrates himself:

“He will go and seek out the beautiful in which he can beget [...] and he is still more drawn to one in whom there is united beauty of body and beauty of soul; to such a man he will overflow with speech about virtue and what the good man should pursue and should practice—and he will try to educate him [...] And when he touches the beautiful and consorts with him, he begets and brings to birth the seed he has long carried within him.” (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 209b)

This is philosophy as the erotic art: overflowing with desire for wisdom, vital and dynamic, fertile and generative in beauty. And it is indirectly a description of Socrates himself as the philosophical erotic who longs to beget in the beautiful. And yet, the situation will not prove so simple in Socrates’ encounter with Alcibiades. For after this richly layered speech of Socrates, Alcibiades arrives—young, beautiful, drunk—and bursts into the symposium. It is thus a classic comic entrance: the intoxicated late arrival, the disruption of the ordered gathering, the chaos that attends the servant of Dionysus. Indeed the entrance is comic in the etymological sense: Alcibiades arrives as a *komast*—a one-man *kōmos*, the drunken revel-procession from which comedy (*kōmōidia*) takes its very name. The comic topos of drunkenness is, moreover, philosophically functional: *in vino veritas* (“truth in wine”). As Alcibiades himself will note (217e), the drunk man speaks truth, and the frame of his intoxication thus authorizes a revelatory discourse—it promises a stripping away of the masks that sober decorum imposes. When he sees Socrates, Alcibiades is startled and “leaps up as if bitten by a snake.” After some deliberation he agrees to join

the circle of speakers—but not to praise the god Eros; instead, he will praise Socrates who sits beside him.

The speech Alcibiades delivers is formally a speech of praise (*encomium*)—but it is an encomium that structurally functions as an invective (*psogos*). The opening move is telling: he asks whether Socrates does not say the exact opposite of what he means. This is ‘simple’ irony as Alcibiades understands it—speech whose stated meaning is the reverse of its intention. He then promises to reveal the true face of Socrates by means of images that will serve the truth, not the laughter (215a). The promise of seriousness is itself ironic, since the images he proceeds to deploy are precisely the stock-in-trade of comic representation. Three major rhetorical movements follow: the comparison of Socrates to mythological creatures; a dramatic staging of a homoerotic seduction scene in which Socrates resists Alcibiades’ advances; and a depiction of Socrates’ bravery as a foot-soldier. Each illuminates a different facet of the Socratic figure, but it is the mythological imagery that most precisely encodes the comical logic of Socratic irony.

5.2. The Mythological Imagery: Satyric-Philosophical Encoding

The four mythological figures invoked by Alcibiades—the Sileni, the satyr Marsyas, the Corybantic revellers, and the Sirens—were known to every Athenian audience with an intimacy that allowed Plato to pack dense mythological resonances into a brief comparison. It is this density, we shall argue, that makes the speech philosophically significant—and that has been insufficiently analyzed from a comic-literary perspective.

5.2.1. The Silenus Statues

Alcibiades begins with the comparison to Silenus figures—hollow statuettes that, when opened, reveal figures of gods inside:

“I claim that he is most like those Sileni that sit in the sculptors’ workshops, which the craftsmen represent as holding pipes or flutes; when their outer halves are pulled open, they are found to contain inside them images of gods [...] And his discourses, too, are very like the Sileni when they are opened. For anyone who comes to listen to Socrates’ speeches will find them at first utterly ridiculous, wrapped as they are in the skins of such words and phrases as might well suit some mocking satyr. [...] But if one sees them opened up, and gets inside them, one will find first of all that they are the only discourses that have any sense within them; and then, that they are supremely divine, and contain within themselves the greatest number of images of virtue...” (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 215b, 221d–222a)

The image is structurally perfect as an emblem of complex irony: the gap between the grotesque, comic exterior and the divine, beautiful interior precisely maps the gap between the stated and the intended meaning of Socratic speech. Vlastos is right that the Silenus figure is the mythological symbol of complex irony. But the image carries additional layers that a comic-literary reading brings into focus.

The Sileni belong in Greek mythology to the retinue of Dionysus: riotous creatures associated with drunkenness, wild sexuality, and coarse irreverence. The image also carries a specific literary resonance that Plato is almost certainly activating: the figure of old Silenus, eldest of the Sileni and teacher of the young Dionysus, described as a fat, drunken, hairy old man riding a donkey—the very image of comic indignity. Yet his words, when wrested from him, represent a form of dark nihilistic wisdom preserved in a fragment of Aristotle’s lost dialogue *Eudemus* (Fr. 44 R⁴), quoted in Plutarch’s *Moralia* (Plutarch 1928, *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, 115b): “It is best of all not to have been born; and second best, having been born, to die as soon as possible.” Nietzsche invokes this Silenic wisdom as the dark heart of Dionysian truth in *The Birth of Tragedy*, §3, where King Midas at last

captures Silenus, teacher of Dionysus, and wrests from him the dreadful answer. By invoking this figure, Alcibiades connects Socrates' ridiculed exterior and comic speech to a Dionysian nihilistic wisdom—a wisdom whose reception is dangerous, silencing, and pessimistic. Socrates acts upon Alcibiades, we are invited to suspect, as the old Silenus acted upon the young Dionysus: through the medium of a wisdom transmitted in a comic, undignified guise.

5.2.2. The Marsyas Myth: Satyr, Flute, and the Satyric Tradition

The comparison to Marsyas the satyr is more extended and more specific (215b–216a). Alcibiades draws an analogy between the satyr's flute-playing and Socratic speech: both are hypnotic, suggestive, and enormously powerful in their effect on those who hear them. Those who listen to Socrates become “thunderstruck and possessed”—entranced, beside themselves. As Alcibiades declares, Marsyas has often brought him to such a pass that he felt he could hardly endure the life he was leading, and has often made him feel that his condition was not worth living in (216a).

The comparison to Marsyas invokes, for an Athenian audience, a mythological narrative of profound significance for the relationship between comic and tragic, Dionysian and Apolline. The myth runs as follows. Athena invented the double flute (*aulos*) but eventually threw it away after seeing the distortion of her face in a pool while playing. Marsyas the satyr found it and played it with such virtuosity that his pride swelled into *hybris*: he challenged Apollo himself—god of music, healing, and rational order—to a musical competition. Apollo triumphed by a stratagem (inverting his lyre to play, a feat Marsyas could not replicate with his wind instrument), and the god's punishment of the satyr was savage: he bound Marsyas to a tree and flayed him alive. The rational Apolline order had vanquished Dionysian ecstasy, and the price was the satyr's skin.

This is not a neutral mythological decoration—and let us say plainly what the recounted myth is: tragic in its content. *Hybris*, divine vengeance, prolonged agony, ignominious death: as narrative material, the flaying of Marsyas would not be out of place in a tragic trilogy. Marsyas embodies the Dionysian characteristics at their most dangerous: pride leading to *hybris*, transgression of the divine order, the excess that invites catastrophic punishment, and—from the other side—savage cruelty, prolonged agony, and ignominious death. His name attaches to Socrates a cluster of associations that are precisely the associations that Socrates' Athenian accusers will mobilize against him. But Marsyas is a satyr; and the satyr is not tragedy's creature: he is the protagonist of the *satyr-play* (*satyrikon drama*)—the fourth play presented after the tragic trilogy at the Dionysia, the genre, identified in Section 3, whose defining operation is precisely to take such material and hold it inside a laughing form. When Alcibiades compares Socrates to Marsyas, he is not (*pace* a tragic reading) casting him in a tragedy; he is casting him in the genre that Socrates himself will name at the speech's end (222d): a satyric drama, in which the horror is real, the laughter is real, and neither cancels the other. To compare Socrates to a satyr is thus to place him within the generic tradition that mediates between tragedy and comedy—and the comparison is therefore not evidence against the comic genealogy of the Socratic mask but the strongest evidence for the precise form that genealogy takes. Alcibiades adds that Socratic discourse is like the flayed skin of Marsyas: his arguments, once stripped of their grotesque outer covering, reveal divine wisdom within (221d). The reversal is satyric in structure: the flayed skin—the emblem of the myth's horror—is converted into the container of divine wisdom, exactly as the satyr-play converts the matter of tragedy into an occasion of laughter. The ugly exterior becomes the necessary condition of the beautiful interior: Aristotle's comic mask, ugly and distorted and without pain (Aristotle 1995, *Poetics* 1449a35), raised to a hermeneutic principle.

5.2.3. The Corybantic Revellers and the Sirens

Two briefer allusions complete the mythological portrait. The Corybants—frenzied mythological attendants of the goddess Cybele, ‘the Great Mother,’ associated in Phrygian and Greek tradition with ecstatic rites—are invoked to describe the emotional disturbance Socrates produces in those who hear him: his words make the heart leap up and fill the eyes with tears (215e). The Corybantic frenzy involved armed ritual dance, described by Plato in the *Laws* (Cooper 1997, 790b), as a form of trance that dissolves the boundaries of ordinary consciousness and induces a state of ecstatic possession. The allusion encodes, beneath the surface of a description of emotional intensity, a portrait of the Socratic encounter as a kind of rite of initiation—a dissolution of the ordinary self before the revelation of something overwhelming.

The Sirens, finally, are famously drawn from Homer’s *Odyssey* (1919, 12.153–200): creatures (half-women, half-birds in the post-Homeric tradition) who sit on a rocky isle and sing a song of total knowledge and enchanting beauty—“We know all that happens on the bounteous earth”—that lures sailors to their deaths. The island is depicted as littered with the bones of those who could not resist. Odysseus, on Circe’s counsel, hears the song while bound to the mast, his sailors’ ears stopped with wax. Accordingly, Alcibiades blocks his ears against Socrates as Odysseus’ sailors did: “I stop my ears by force and run for my life, lest I sit here beside this man until I grow old” (216a). The Siren song promises the ultimate epistemic reward—total knowledge—while delivering death. Socratic discourse similarly promises philosophical fulfilment while delivering, to those who cannot bear it, paralysis and disorientation.

5.3. The Satyric Argument: Thanatos Within Eros

The mythological imagery of Alcibiades’ speech has a common denominator that a comic-literary reading brings into sharp focus. In every case, the overt surface of the comparison—praising Socrates’ power, his charisma, his effect on those around him—conceals a darker sub-text, well known to every Athenian auditor. Silenus: nihilistic wisdom. Marsyas: *hybris* and flaying. The Corybants: ecstatic possession and self-dissolution. The Sirens: fatal enchantment and death.

In a broadly Freudian register, it can be said: while Alcibiades’ mythological images overtly point to the erotic, generative power of Socrates, their implied sub-text—legible to every Athenian citizen—points in precisely the opposite direction, to the action of a death-drive (Thanatos) in Socratic speech upon those who hear it, leaving them floundering in pessimism, sterility, and paralyzing anguish. What is publicly presented as an erotic encomium of Socrates’ wisdom and charisma is, in its mythological depths, a sustained and devastating thanatic indictment.

Is this structure comic? By itself, no—and the criteria of Section 3 oblige us to say so. A two-level utterance whose surface conceals a counter-meaning is not yet comedy: tragic irony has exactly that anatomy. What makes Alcibiades’ speech comic is the frame in which the structure is set, and the frame is triply determined. Generically (criterion i), the speech is delivered by a drunken komast at a symposium, opens with the unmasking gambit of the *eirōn*-hunter (“he says the opposite of what he means”), and proceeds as an encomium that inverts itself into a *psogos*—the *para prosdokian* reversal that is Old Comedy’s signature figure. Structurally (criterion ii), Plato seals the frame in the text itself: when the speech ends, the company laughs (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 222c)—the audience’s response is staged, and it is laughter, not the silence or the cry that tragedy would have scripted. Thematically (criterion iii), the speech is one long self-exposure of the ridiculous man in the strict Platonic sense, as we shall see in a moment. And beneath this comic frame runs the thanatic sub-text we have traced—which is to say that the speech’s mode, exactly, is the satyric: the laughing form holding the dark material without dissolving it.

The mechanism of the speech—a two-level utterance whose stated meaning conceals an implied counter-meaning—remains structurally identical to the complex Socratic irony it describes; what the generic frame adds is the licence to laugh. Plato's narrative art here achieves a remarkable self-reflexivity: Alcibiades' speech about Socratic irony is itself constructed on the model of Socratic complex irony, and the reader is placed where the satyr-play places its spectator—laughing at what should make him shudder, and knowing it—obliged to practice, against the text itself, the very hermeneutic that Socratic initiation demands.

But this does not yet resolve the evaluative question. Three figures call out Socrates as an *eirōn* in the Platonic dialogues: Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, Callicles in the *Gorgias*, and Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. The first two are dramatic interludes—outbursts of impatience at Socratic evasion, offering no new insight into the comic mechanism of irony, and their complaints find parallels in Aristotle, Xenophon, and elsewhere (cf. Cooper 1997, *Apology* 37e⁵; on the Xenophontic parallels, see Gray 1998). Alcibiades' speech is categorically different in its extent, its dramatic complexity, and its directness of engagement with Socratic irony in its pedagogical-moral context.

5.4. *The Pedagogy of Failure: Vlastos and Lane*

The seduction scene (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 217a–219d) places the evaluative question at its sharpest. Alcibiades describes how he proposed to Socrates an exchange: physical beauty for wisdom. Socrates' response was “ironic as always” (218d)—and the irony is complex in Vlastos's exact sense, operating on both of its levels at once. On the surface, the reply is self-belittling: if you see in me a beauty that could improve your own, your eyes are better than mine; I am probably nothing (219a). Beneath the surface, the Homeric figure of “trading bronze for gold” (218e) asserts the precise opposite: that what Alcibiades proposes to buy with his body is the gold, and the body the bronze—a claim of immeasurable superiority delivered in the grammar of modesty. The utterance disclaims Socrates' wisdom and prices it beyond purchase in the same breath; it is true (he possesses no transferable commodity) and false (what he has is worth more than everything Alcibiades owns) in two senses the boy is left to construct—and cannot. The scene that frames the utterance is, moreover, itself built as a comic inversion (criterion i): the most beautiful *erōmenos* in Athens contriving wrestling-bouts and dinner invitations in the role of a scheming *erastēs*, while the ugly old satyr plays the coy beloved who wraps himself in his cloak and goes to sleep—a wholesale reversal of the pederastic script whose absurdity no Athenian reader could miss (on the inversion see Reeve 2006; Hunter 2004). Alcibiades' outrage at this rejection—and at Socrates' persistent concealment of himself and his wisdom behind “irony and laughter”—is the emotional and dramatic centre of the speech.

Vlastos interprets this dramatic scene as evidence of Alcibiades' failure to decipher the complex irony—a failure attributable not to Socrates but to Alcibiades' own desires, pride, and prior assumptions: “Yes, Alcibiades was deceived; deceived he was—but by whom? Not by Socrates, but by himself” (Vlastos 1987, p. 93; cf. Vlastos 1991, ch. 1). On this reading, Socrates' complex irony, properly understood, is a morally impeccable pedagogical method that respects the autonomy of the interlocutor, even at the cost of temporary suffering and failure. Alcibiades was deceived by his own passions, pride, and unexamined assumptions, which prevented him from deciphering the complex irony and from walking in the path of philosophy. Socrates' silence in the face of his pupil's error is, on Vlastos's account, not deception but a mark of Socratic philosophical ethics: since inward truth cannot be directly transmitted, it must be revealed to a man through his own confrontation with his own failures.

Melissa Lane has challenged this interpretation in a well-argued response (Lane 2011). Lane argues that it is impermissibly apologetic to place the entire responsibility for

the failure of the philosophical-pedagogical interaction solely on Socrates' interlocutors. In her reading, the young, beautiful, and ambitious Alcibiades presents us not with a failed student but with the price paid by the vulnerable student when exposed to complex irony—and Socrates' silence in the face of this price is thus unjustifiable and damaging. Complex irony, Lane argues, creates a deliberate indeterminacy that is liable to generate sustained illusion in young interlocutors; and when such illusion arises in Alcibiades' soul, Socrates, in his silence, chooses to leave it undisturbed over time, abandoning his young student to flounder in his failure. Thus Lane: "Alcibiades' speech dramatically displays the heavy emotional cost of Socratic irony. In this, it exposes a dimension that is sorely lacking in Vlastos's optimistic interpretation of complex irony." As Lane goes on to ask: "If the burden of misunderstanding always falls on Socrates' interlocutors, then Socrates himself appears strangely shielded from any responsibility for the harm that irony may cause." On this account, then, Alcibiades remains confused and wounded within an asymmetrical power relation vis-à-vis the aged and sophisticated Socrates, who has already declared his love for Alcibiades (Cooper 1997, *Protagoras* 309a) and his pursuit of his beauty (Cooper 1997, *Gorgias* 481d). Rowe's commentary on the *Symposium* mediates between these positions, noting in 215b–217a an unstable oscillation between comic reduction and religious awe (Rowe 1998)—an oscillation that, in our account, is not an interpretive residue but the speech's structural logic.

The cry of the bitten Alcibiades speaks for itself—and it is the most directly satyric passage in a speech rich in them—laughter and the shudder in a single image:

"I feel to this day that I have been bitten by a serpent, and that is what they say of those who are bitten: only those who have had the same experience will understand what I mean. [...] I have been struck and bitten by something sharper than a viper's tooth; I have been struck in my heart or my soul or whatever you like to call it by Socrates' arguments, which cling more sharply than a viper when they get hold of a young and not ungifted mind [...] And there you see the reason why I cannot get away from this man, and yet I know that I cannot defend myself against him." (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 217e–218b)

The viper image is the seriocomic moment of the speech, and we use the term now with full precision. Its comic dimension is not free-floating incongruity but criterion (iii) exactly: Alcibiades is the ridiculous man of the *Philebus*—beautiful, brilliant, and sunk in the one self-ignorance Plato's Socrates defines as the essence of the laughable, believing that wisdom is the kind of thing his assets can purchase, that the self he brings to philosophy needs no examination first. The company's laughter at 222c is the generically correct response to this self-exposure. And yet the suffering in the image is real, and the speech makes us feel it: the bite, the wound, the man who can neither stay nor flee. Nor should Alcibiades be sentimentalized into an innocent victim of the philosopher's reticence. Plato's first readers knew what the drunken komast of 416 would become: the profaner accused of parodying the very Mysteries whose language he borrows in this speech—when he bids the profane stop their ears (218b), the dramatic irony is annihilating—the deserter to Sparta, the architect of the Sicilian ruin (on the destructive side of the historical Alcibiades and its bearing on the speech, see Helfer 2017; Bonnemaïson 2022; Nussbaum 1986). If Socrates has a dark side in this speech, so does his accuser; the hindsight irony cuts both ways, and Plato—writing after the catastrophe, for readers who knew it—built it in. The passage is thus comic by Plato's own definition and harrowing by his own design: not a contradiction but the satyric double exposure, sustained to the last.

6. The Pharmakon and the Comic Mask: Conclusions

Alcibiades' closing declaration is telling: "There, gentlemen, is what I have to say in praise of Socrates. I have also mixed into my speech what I have to say in blame of him, and I have told you how he has treated me" (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 222c). The speech is simultaneously a eulogy and an indictment, praise and blame—formally a comic reversal of what it presents itself as being (criterion ii of Section 3: the *para prosdokian*, praise inverted into blame—and Plato seals the frame by staging the listeners' laughter at 222c). And this formal ambivalence is, we propose, philosophically irreducible: neither Vlastos's optimistic reading (Alcibiades deceives himself) nor Lane's critical one (Socrates wounds and abandons the vulnerable student) fully accounts for what the speech stages.

Our proposal is this. Plato deploys here a subtle and sophisticated narrative strategy that mirrors, at the level of his own authorial practice, the very structure of Socratic complex irony itself: a two-level presentation of pedagogical and moral evaluation, in which one level affirms the ironic method and another simultaneously exposes its dangers. Socratic irony is both useful and damaging, both life-giving and death-dealing—and accordingly, Alcibiades' speech is both comic and tragic—which is to say, in the precise generic vocabulary of Section 3, satyric: the tragic substrate held within the laughing form. At one level its action is erotic and generative; at another level, simultaneously, it is thanatic and sterile. In this sense, we suggest that Socratic irony constitutes for the philosophical student a form of *pharmakon*—the Greek word that signifies at once remedy and poison, cure and toxin. Derrida's reading of the *pharmakon*⁶ in "Plato's Pharmacy" has illuminated the structural ambivalence of the term (Derrida 1981, esp. pp. 97–117); our reading, however, grounds that ambivalence not in a general logic of writing but in the specifically comic-tragic duality of the Dionysian mythological tradition that Plato explicitly invokes through Alcibiades' imagery. The *pharmakon* is, on our account, not a deconstructive category but a name for the seriocomic method itself: a method that Plato inherits from the theatre of Dionysus and transposes into philosophical prose.

This *pharmakon* formulation, thus, maps directly onto the dramatic function of comedy in the Platonic dialogues. Comedy, as the Athenian tradition understood it, is itself a *pharmakon*: a form that heals through laughter, through the controlled release of disruptive energies, through the staging of incongruity that allows the spectator to recognize and metabolize what is unbearable in direct confrontation. When Plato deploys comic structures—the Silenus figure, the satyr-play allusion, the drunken encomium, the erotic-pedagogical farce—he is not decorating philosophy with literary entertainment. He is, we submit, making a philosophical argument through comic form about the nature and limits of philosophical initiation. The comic mask of Socrates is not an ornament: it is the method.

The question left by Alcibiades' speech is not finally answerable within the *Symposium* alone: is Socrates' ironic influence on his students more like the gadfly awakening the horse to movement (Cooper 1997, *Apology* 30e), or more like the viper's bite that poisons the soul (Cooper 1997, *Symposium* 218b–d), or perhaps like the torpedo-fish whose stinging paralyzes its prey (Cooper 1997, *Meno* 80b)? Plato presents us with all three images—and with the interpretive demand that we negotiate between them. This is Plato's own comic mask: the philosopher who stages, with consummate literary irony, a text about the dangers of the ironic method—and who thus performs, at the level of the work itself, the very double-bind of the Socratic *pharmakon*. Perhaps Plato wishes to tell us that the philosophical teacher must choose, with the utmost care, the student fit for the journey of initiation into truth. And perhaps, more intimately, he wishes to point in quiet code to the deceiving, demonic, and divine nature of his own enigmatic master.

It will fairly be asked, at the end of such an argument, where we ourselves stand on the question it keeps raising: what, finally, was Plato's judgement on Socrates and his

method? Our answer is that the judgement is enacted rather than stated, and that its form is the very complex irony this article has anatomized. Stated doctrinally, the dialogues canonize Socrates; staged dramatically, they document his casualties—and Plato declines, with perfect consistency, to resolve the two levels into a verdict. But an enacted judgement is legible in what Plato did: he went on writing Socratic theatre for fifty years, mask and all. The decision to continue the method in full knowledge of its cost—to administer the *pharmakon* while exhibiting, in Alcibiades, what an unsupervised dose can do—is itself the position: Socratic irony is affirmed as the only honest pedagogy for truths that cannot be transmitted, and indicted for what it risks in the souls unfit to receive it; and the affirmation and the indictment are, like the two levels of a complex irony, both meant. Plato's last word on his teacher is not a sentence but a genre: the seriocomic dialogue, in which the gadfly and the viper are the same insect, and the reader is left—deliberately, pedagogically, dangerously—to decide which has bitten him.

Nietzsche, we may now say, was wrong: comedy was not abolished by the Platonic dialogues. It was sublimated, transformed, and pressed into the service of philosophy. The comic mask of Socrates—inherited from Aristophanes, philosophically reconstructed by Plato—is the face of philosophical initiation itself: ludicrous in its exterior, divine in its interior, and always, in the end, dangerously double.

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Notes

1. All citations from Plato are given in the English translation of Cooper (1997), with occasional minor modifications where the Greek requires closer rendering.
2. For a full account of Alcibiades' historical figure and his complex relationship with Socrates—the dangerous combination of great talent, charismatic leadership, overweening pride, and unbounded ambition that made him, in the Athenian imagination, a paradigmatic figure of both Socratic pedagogy and its failures—see Helfer (2017).
3. On the elusiveness of irony as a hermeneutic concept, cf. Wolfsdorf (2007, p. 175). The Oppian reference is discussed in Vlastos (1987, p. 80).
4. Aristotle, Eudemus, Fr. 44 R3, preserved in Plutarch, *Moralia* (Consolatio ad Apollonium, 115b).
5. In the *Apology*, Socrates himself notes that were he to state the plain truth—that he could not live in silence because silence would mean disobedience to the god—the Athenians would doubtless call him an *eirōn*, “the one who plays at ignorance knowingly” (37e).
6. On the *pharmakon* as ‘remedy and poison’ in the *Phaedrus*, see Derrida (1981), esp. pp. 97–117.

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