

Recollecting, Retelling and *Melete* in Plato's *Symposium*: A New Reading of ἡ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν (206c5-6)

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I. Recollection, Procreation, Immortality and Chronology of Platonic Works

Plato presents “recollection as learning” in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Phaedrus*, and something similar to it, that is, mental procreation in the *Symposium* and the *Theaetetus*. The *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* are all in common in touching the problem of the soul's immortality. As to their chronology, the *Meno* is likely to have been written first, and the next group to consist of the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*, and the third of the *Phaedrus* and the *Theaetetus*.¹

However, Hackforth suggested the possibility of the *Symposium* being earlier than the *Meno*, on the basis of some seemingly different treatment of immortality between the *Phaedo* and the *Symposium*. Socrates' statement in the *Phaedo* (107b), “If you [Simmias] analyse the first hypotheses of the demonstration of the soul's immortality sufficiently, you will, I think, follow the argument”, suggested to Hackforth Plato's confidence about the soul's immortality beyond all question. In the *Symposium*, on the other hand, the soul's immortality is not openly expressed, but rather implied in 208a-b as vicarious immortality. Even where it may seem to be openly expressed (211e5-212a7), it seems to be the privilege of those who have succeeded in reaching the apex of the great initiation. Besides, even these privileged people may not be able to become immortal, for according to Hackforth, “in view of the whole tenor of the speech, and particularly of 209c and 210c, it is doubtless τόκος ἐν ἄλλῳ that P. has predominantly in mind”, when he referred in 212a to the begetting of true virtue. He says, “the immortality here promised [...] spring[s] [...] from the begetting of true virtue (*sc.* in another's soul)”, and concludes that “consequently the philosopher can no more than the ordinary man become immortal [...] save by vicarious self-perpetuation”.²

This further led Hackforth to the idea that the *Symposium* may be earlier than the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*.³ But in the final analysis he did not accept this chronology, being rather inclined to the view that “the *Symposium* was written when Plato had come to feel doubts about the validity of that final argument [of the *Phaedo*]”, and that “Plato has abandoned, albeit temporarily, both that interdependence of individual immortality and the doctrine of Ideas [...] and the doctrine of ἀνάμνησις on which it is grounded”.⁴ As to the abandonment of ἀνάμνησις, he says that “the omission of any reference to ἀνάμνησις in Diotima's speech is, to all appearance, deliberate”.

¹ Cf. *e.g.* Kahn (1996), 47-48; Rowe (2003), 103.

² Hackforth (1950), 44 and n. 2.

³ Gaye (1904), 23 and Morrison (1964), 44, 46 adopted this option.

⁴ Hackforth (1950), 45.

However, is this view of Hackforth correct? Did Plato have in mind merely τόκος ἐν ἄλλῳ, without any hint of sharing of virtue and immortality between the lover and the beloved, when he referred to the begetting of true virtue (212a)?

II. Pregnancy and Procreation in the *Symposium*

In considering this question, let us first focus on *Symposium* 206c1-6, where too Socrates refers to τόκος resulting from love. Diotima says there to Socrates:

[A] All human beings are pregnant ... both in body and in soul, [B] and on reaching a certain age our nature desires to procreate. [C] It cannot procreate in anything ugly, but only in the beautiful thing. [D] For the being together (συνουσία) of man and woman is procreation (τόκος).

Concerning this remark Burnyeat drew attention to the following oddities:⁵

- (1) “strange reversal: the pregnancy is the cause, not the consequence, of love”.
- (2) “Although Diotima speaks of ‘our nature’ [in [B]], it is a male pregnancy she is describing, and the birth is the lover engendering offspring, at the physical level in bodily union with a woman, at the spiritual level [...] especially in passionate communion with a beautiful boy”.⁶
- (3) “In short, at either level pregnancy precedes intercourse, because birth and intercourse are imaginatively equated”.

Burnyeat dared to accept them all. Concerning (2), some interpreters even read there, for example:

an instance of male cultural imperialism, a typical attempt by men to colonize female ‘difference’ in order to claim it for a universalizing male discourse.⁷

But it seems strange that Diotima, starting to talk about “all human beings” (206c2) and “our nature” (c4), should move at once to male pregnancy. In fact through the whole argument, Diotima keeps talking about love’s influence to “human beings”.⁸ She also refers to “mortal nature” (207d1), to “everything mortal” (208a7), and to “human nature” (212b3). Besides, she includes Alcestis as an example of love for fame making one vicariously immortal (208c-d). Further, the terrible state of all kinds of animal in engendering (207a-b) is certainly applicable to female as well as male animals. The weakest fighting the strongest (b3-4) certainly includes mother-birds protecting their offspring (*Laws* 814b). They do so because they are eager to leave their own children and attain immortality (207d).

There are some passages where Diotima uses ἀνὴρ as the subject of pregnancy: 206c5, 209e1, 212b5.⁹ But 206c5 refers to woman as well as man, and 212b5 (πάντα ἄνδρα) is an instance of the meaning *LSJ* shows as “VI. Special usages, 5. a man, any man”, allowing for female pregnancy. How about 209e1 (ἄνδρες, καὶ ἐν Ἑλλήσι καὶ ἐν βαρβάροις)? Does Diotima focus on male pregnancy and procreation in 208e-211d, in order to universalize male discourse? Rather it seems to be simply because when Diotima referred to the children in the area of poetry, craftsmanship and the affairs of cities (209a-e), it was difficult to find examples of children brought about through female procreation. After completing the whole expla-

⁵ Burnyeat (1977), 8.

⁶ Also Morrison (1964), 52; Dover (1980), 147; Halperin (1990), 117; Pender (1992), 73-74.

⁷ Halperin (1990), 145; also cf. 138-139, 144-145, 150.

⁸ “Human beings” (202e3, 202e4, 203a2, 203a3, 204c8, 205e4, 206a1, 206a4, 207b6, 208c2, 212a1, 212a7), “all human beings” (205a6, 205b1).

⁹ At 209c1 too, ἄνδρα appears, but not as the subject of pregnancy.

nation of erotics, she returns again to the locution of “human being” (212a1, 212a7) and “human nature” (212b3), as if to correct her inevitable but unwilling restriction to male lovers.

However, the following question may be raised against including female pregnancy and procreation. How can women biologically procreate in the beautiful thing?¹⁰ What we can think of as the procreation in the beautiful thing is only male ejaculation. But let us first note here that the preposition used with τόκος or τίκτειν is ἐν and not εἰς. In Aristophanic comic image of original human beings procreating into the ground like cicadas, εἰς γῆν was the prototype image of procreation, and thus when Aristophanes said that Zeus brought in reproduction in each other (ἐν ἀλλήλοις: 191c3), ἐν ἀλλήλοις was understood rather in the sense of εἰς ἀλλήλους (the incubator where the seeds are sown), and thus only the possibility of “in the female through the agency of the male” (c3-4) was allowed. But Diotima doesn't use εἰς in the context of procreation. She employs only ἐν, and ἐν can cover a very wide range of meaning, covering εἰς as well as various types of relationships describable as “in, within, surrounded by, on, at, by, etc.” However, it may be claimed that because the idea of a woman as an incubator was such a prevalent idea in ancient Greece, with the male parent as the only generative agent, Plato also must have been under this influence. But we should note that in the late fifth and fourth centuries there were theories that “insist that the female parent emits seed just as much as the male does”.¹¹ Besides, Eros has inherited his mother's characteristics (203c-d), which means that for Plato women were not mere incubators.

Diotima uses the expression τίκτη [..] ἐν ungrudging philosophy at 210d5-6. Ungrudging philosophy is something beautiful, even if a philosopher as a mortal being is neither beautiful nor ugly. This suggests the possibility that “A τίκτει ἐν B” does not mean any sexual intercourse between A and B. Beauty (*kallone*), who presides over birth, is not a sex partner, but Fate and Eileithyia (206d2) protecting mothers and babies and providing harmonious surrounding for a smooth birth (206c8-d3).

Diotima says that what is pregnant tries to approach (προσπελάζει: 206d3) what is beautiful. To approach something is to try to be near it, or to be in its presence. Thus, the most appropriate equivalent in English as the meaning of ἐν in τίκτειν ἐν will be “in the presence of”.¹² In the presence of *kallone*, mothers can safely and smoothly give birth to babies. When we fall in love with someone, we want to be in the presence of that person, so much so that we want to become one body with the beloved, if possible (192d-e, 211d). On such an occasion, we further want to be in the presence of beautiful things, in order to give healthy birth and nurture to babies, and abhor ugly things (206c8-e1).

III. ἢ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν¹³

“The being together (συνουσία) of man and woman is procreation (τόκος)” (206c5-6) may seem to suggest that in the act of τίκτειν sexual intercourse is carried out,¹⁴ especially because the noun συνουσία can mean sexual intercourse. However, when we closely examine the use of συνουσία and the corresponding verb συνεῖναι in the *Symposium*, they rather represent “being together”, even though *LSJ* cites 192c and 206c as usages of συνουσία meaning “4. sexual intercourse”.

¹⁰ Pender (1992), 75.

¹¹ Lloyd (1983), 91; cf. Halperin (1990), 138-139.

¹² I owe this expression to Suzanne Obdrzalek.

¹³ Although many editors excise this sentence, Dover (1980) and Rowe (1998) keep it in their text.

¹⁴ Burnyeat (1977), 8.

In 192c Aristophanes uses the expression ἡ τῶν ἀφροδισίων συνουσία to mean “sexual intercourse”, and this may seem to support its inclusion by *LSJ* under “4. sexual intercourse”. But the meaning of “sexual intercourse” comes from the addition of τῶν ἀφροδισίων (of sexual pleasures), and συνουσία (or συνεῖναι) itself means “being together”, as is clear from the statement by Aristophanes that no one will think that it is for the sake of this “being together (συνουσία) of sexual pleasures” that one rejoices in “being together (συνῶν)” with another (192c4-7).

As to the use of συνουσία at 206c, taking this in the sense of “sexual intercourse” has led to what Burnyeat called “strange reversal”, which should make us more cautious against taking the word in this sense. As a matter of fact, when we examine each occurrence of συνουσία and συνεῖναι in the *Symposium*, there is no use that clearly corresponds to sexual intercourse. To leave aside the ones *LSJ* cites, they all rather mean “being together” without any sexual connotation.¹⁵

Then, how should we understand 206c5-6 and its two factors, that is, “being together” and τόκος? Now, τόκος (206b7, 206c6, 206e5) is the noun form of the verb τίκτειν, but this verb is used in the *Symposium* both in the present (206c3, 206c4, 206d5, 209b2, 209c3, 210c1, 210d5, 212a3)¹⁶ and in the aorist (209a3,¹⁷ 212a5), and they represent different aspects of the same verb, the aorist denoting the result, and the present representing an action going on at the present time, or an action begun, attempted, or intended.¹⁸ The noun τόκος, then correspondingly, can also represent either the result of procreating, or the action of procreating now going on, or just begun, attempted, or intended. And the environment of its use (206b7, 206c6, 206e5) suggests that it should be understood in the sense to do with the present. When τόκος is considered as a process that takes time, the time of labour and even the time of gestation may be taken to be τόκος. According to *LSJ*, there is certainly such a use of τόκος, meaning “I. b. the time of parturition ...; period of gestation” (e.g. *Hdt.* I 111). τόκος in horses is a year, in human beings ten months at the outside, and in elephants very long (Aristot. *De Gen. Anim.* 777b13-14).

The “being together” (206c6), on the other hand, is equivalent to “living together”, just as Pausanias said concerning those driven by heavenly love that they are ready to “be together” and “live together” (181d). With these points taken into account, then, the meaning of ἡ ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνουσία τόκος ἐστίν will be “the being or living together of man and woman is the process or the time of procreating”.¹⁹

This remark by Diotima is understandable enough. On reaching a certain age (cf. 209b1-2), our nature desires to procreate. It is human nature or instinct to leave one’s parents, driven by some inner desire to build a beautiful new family with a beautiful partner.²⁰ Diotima sees in this natural inclination of ours the desire to procreate what we are unknowingly pregnant with.

We can find instances of this kind of approaching beautiful persons or things in the *Symposium*. Penia, driven by her desire to procreate, approached the beautiful house and the beautiful feast of gods, and then found beautiful Poros (203b); Diotima approached Socrates,

¹⁵ 172a7, 172b7, 172c1, 173a4, 173b3, 176e2, 176e8, 181d4, 191c7, 195b4, 211d6, 211d8, 212a2, 219d8.

¹⁶ At 191c1 it is used in the imperfect, but because this is in the myth of Aristophanes, I leave it aside.

¹⁷ Bury (1932²), Dover (1980) and Rowe (1998) etc. adopt τεκεῖν here at 209a3, following the papyrus text, while Burnet adopts κωεῖν.

¹⁸ Resultative aorist – cf. Smyth (1920), 430 – and conative present: cf. Smyth (1920), 421.

¹⁹ I have changed my initial translation this way, thanks to Suzanne Obdrzalek’s question whether there are any examples of τόκος meaning “attempt of procreating”.

²⁰ Cf. *Genesis* 2, 24.

who was inwardly beautiful, and Socrates approached Diotima, who must have been also beautiful in soul; Alcibiades approached Socrates, believing that he might be able, through *συνουσία* (219d8), to hear what Socrates knew (217a), which means that he was attracted by something beautiful he found in Socrates, and also that he had something to procreate with the help of Socrates, even if he was not aware of his own pregnancy. And more generally, we notice that the banquet at Agathon's house itself is represented by *συνουσία* (172a7, 172b7, 172c1, 173a4, 173b3, 176e2) and *συνεῖναι* (176e8). And this *συνουσία* took place, because Socrates (174a), Alcibiades (212e) and others were attracted by the beauty of Agathon, and it became the occasion for them to procreate beautiful discourses in praise of Eros.

But although the being together of Diotima and Socrates was successful, that of Alcibiades and Socrates ended in failure. What made the difference? One crucial difference lies in the fact that Socrates and Diotima repeatedly met each other and engaged in friendly conversation (207a), whereas Alcibiades tried to run away from Socrates, stopping his ears (216a-b).

What does it mean to stop one's ears? Alcibiades describes how he felt when he listened to Socrates. His soul was confused and vexed at the thought that his condition was that of a slave (215e6-7). This means that he not only ran away from Socrates but also tried to shut out the memory of Socrates' words. When one loves another and engages in child birth and rearing, there sometimes occurs a situation in which they cannot spend their time together. On such an occasion, they have recourse to memory (*μνημύμενος* 209c4). And thus making good use of memory as well as actual being together, one is able to keep somehow living together with another, so as to be able to rear one's child together with the partner (*συνεκτρέφει*: c4). In this co-rearing how does the child grow up?

There is an interesting remark in the *Symposium*, which has to do with memory (207d-208a):

Mortal nature always leaves behind something else that is new in place of the old, for even during the time in which each creature is said to be alive and to be the same - as for instance someone is said to be the same from when he is a child until he becomes an old man - he does not have the same things inside himself [...] but is continually becoming a new person, [...] This is not limited to body. In soul too, its traits, habits, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears - none of these things is ever the same in any individual, but some are coming into being, others passing away [...] what we call exercising exists because knowledge is leaving us: forgetting is departure of knowledge, while exercise saves the knowledge by putting in a new memory²¹ in place of the memory that went away, so that the knowledge seems to be the same.

In the co-rearing by lovers, the child is continually becoming a new person, and this means that it does not matter much which partner is the first procreator of the child, because every moment is the time of new procreation and of the new birth of their child, through which they come to have their children in common (*παίδων κεκοινωκότες*: 209c7). Through their co-rearing of their child, their partnership and friendship grows strong and firm, in fact much stronger and firmer than when they rear a bodily child (c4-6). And if their friendship becomes firmer, they will certainly find more pleasure in rearing their child together. Thus I cannot agree with Vlastos, when he says, "It is not said or implied or so much as hinted at that 'birth in beauty' should be motivated by love of persons - that the ultimate purpose of the

²¹ Although Bury (1932²), 117 excises *μνήμην*, his reason is not cogent enough. *μνήμη* appears in the papyrus too, although in the nominative. It is preserved by Dover (1980) and Rowe (1998).

creative act should be to enrich the lives of persons who are themselves worthy of love for their own sake".²²

IV. Recollection

If we regard remembering or recollecting as a kind of regrasping of pieces of knowledge stored in the mind, just like the reading of wax block impressions or the catching of birds in a cage of the soul (cf. the *Theaetetus*), then the remembering of a previous conversation with one's lover or beloved will be just like listening to the same music again and again. But according to Diotima's remark above, it is impossible to remember something as if it is the same music that can be automatically repeated, for there is no such identical thing permanently stored in the soul. What is recollected in each act of remembering is a product of new creation.

Although there can be some controversy concerning recollection in Plato's middle dialogues, I think the following points explicitly stated in the *Meno* constitute the kernel of recollection (85c9-d1):

The true opinions of the slave have now just been stirred up in him as if in a dream, and if someone asks him repeatedly these same things in many ways, in the end he will know about these things as exactly as anyone else does.

By being asked repeatedly, the slave will be led to try to recollect the same things, but each act of recollecting is an attempt to connect various concepts anew, because no opinion is ever the same in any individual, with some coming into being and others passing away" (*Symp.* 207e2-5). He will thus engage in exercise (μελετᾶν, μελέτη; 208a4-5), which saves the knowledge by putting in a new memory in place of the memory that went away (208a5-6), and come to bind true opinions through the calculation of the cause, which is recollection (*Men.* 98a). I take it that although recollection is not explicitly mentioned in the *Symposium*, the attempt to bind true opinions through the calculation of the cause (recollection) is certainly carried out in the co-rearing of the common child by the lovers.

V. The Soul's Immortality

This process of συνεῖν and τίκτειν (in the present) finally leads to τεκεῖν (in the aorist) of true virtue (212a5). This true virtue is the child the lovers can have in common, although even on one's own one will be able to attain it, just by remembering the time one spent together with the lover or the beloved. Then how does this procreation bring about immortality? It is to be noted that it is not merely by touching the true beauty that one is allowed to become immortal by gods. Diotima says that by having procreated and reared true virtue (212a5-6) one comes to be loved by gods, and then finally one is allowed to become immortal if any human being is allowed to. Essential to this procreation / rearing process is the collaboration of the lover and the beloved, and thus through their joint quest both of them will be able to share in virtue and immortality, not vicarious immortality, as Hackforth claimed.

Now, is this immortality compatible or incompatible with that in the *Phaedo*? I cannot enter this problem here, but there were some hypotheses left to be further examined in the *Phaedo*, and one of them was "whatever is ἀθάνατος is indestructible", or to put it another way, "such souls as bring up life into this world are indestructible".²³ And the couple who procreate and rear true virtue will certainly be regarded as bringing up true life into this

²² Vlastos (1973), 31.

²³ Kanayama (2000), 98.

world. They will be loved by gods, and their souls will be allowed to be indestructible, because it must be “good” for them to be indestructible in the world where the Good has the binding force as the cause of generation and destruction.

VI. Retelling and μελέτη

When the lovers engage in conversation again and again, just as Diotima and Socrates did so, the same things will be retold, and in this course of retelling, what one takes to be the same memory will certainly become a new memory, with new connections established. To be noted in this respect is the fact that the *Symposium* is full of retellings, the process that needs the act of recalling and μελέτη (cf. 208a4-5). The dialogue as a whole is a retelling, well exercised by Apollodorus (οὐκ ἀμελέτητος: 172a1, 173c1), of the story of what happened at Agathon's house, which he relates to unknown friends, himself having got it retold by Aristodemus. His μελέτη was helped by retelling it to Glaucon, who had previously learnt its ambiguous version through another route of retelling.

In this large framework of retelling we observe a series of retelling of the identity of Eros by people attending the banquet. What comes as the culmination of this process is Socrates' own retelling, which itself is a retelling of Diotima's story. What happens after Socrates' speech is again a retelling, this time by Alcibiades, of the identity of Socrates, which he recollects from his experiences with Socrates.

What is the effect of retelling? Neither Aristodemus nor Apollodorus remembers every detail of what they heard; Apollodorus retells his friends what Aristodemus remembered best and what it seemed to himself to be worth to be remembered (ἀξιομνημόνευτον: 178a). Retelling by these philosophically enthusiastic people certainly helps philosophically important things to form a stable network of true beliefs, which can be established by the binding down of true beliefs through the calculation of the cause (recollection).

The structure of the *Symposium*, where readers are told the stories together with Apollodorus' friends (172a, 173c-e), suggests Plato's intention to make us readers into hearers of the stories of love and further into retellers of our own version of the story of love, so that through this μελέτη we may be able better to recollect what love and its target beauty are.

And finally, the *Symposium* itself was one of the children that were procreated by the collaboration of Socrates and Plato, because what made Plato rear it was his memory of Socrates (cf. 209c), in which he could engage together with Socrates in enquiry and keep renewing his understanding of the master's words and deeds. This recollection driven by love must have helped Plato to explore the great sea of beauty, to discover new routes in the quest for the Beautiful or the Good itself, and to procreate many beautiful words and thoughts in ungrudging philosophy (210d), in the form of Platonic dialogues where Socrates eternally continues lively conversations, on the surface, with various people, but, in the undercurrent, with Plato himself. In the *Phaedo* Socrates ended his last words in this life with μὴ ἀμελήσητε, “Don't neglect μελέτη”, which suggests the care of the offering of a cock as well as the care of the soul (118a).²⁴ Plato must have kept following this instruction all through his life, by remembering Socrates' love and conversation with him and procreating their common children.

²⁴ For a new interpretation of Socrates' last words, see Kanayama (2014), although it is a rather curtailed version. The full and final version (yet unpublished) was most recently read in University of California, Berkeley (September 2014), after its rewriting and retelling in University of Sydney (March 2014) and Waseda University (May 2014), each time with the addition of new developments.

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