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Friendship, Deception, Writing: Within and Beyond Plato's *Lysis*

1

Plato's dialogue the *Lysis* concerns friendship, and it is possible that it is this—friendship—that has, above all, eluded and frustrated scholars and led to the low regard in which the dialogue has been held. Of course, this is not how the scholars themselves would tell the tale. “[N]ot positively instructive or helpful,” one has written. Another: “without positive result . . . speakers and hearers more puzzled than they were at the beginning.” Prominent nineteenth-century classicists proposed that Plato had not in fact written the *Lysis*, because it was full of sophistry and eristic (arguing for the sake of scoring points, winning an argument). Others proposed that the dialogue was made up of *adolescentiae vestigia*—stuff written when Plato was quite young. A leading twentieth-century scholar's verdict: The text “is not a success. Even Plato can nod.”

The *Lysis* is a story, told by Plato's Socrates, of a conversation he had with two naked boys while a third, slightly older boy, half hidden, watched and listened. The ostensible *philosophical* objective of this conversation was to come up with a definition of friendship, and this objective does not *seem* to be achieved. That is, instead of an answer to the question “what is a friend,” most of the *Lysis* wrestles inconclusively with various received ideas of who is a friend to whom, how, and why. This wrestling is tiresome because, as in arid academic





discussions, Socrates, at least in *his* narration, seems to have lost touch with his feelings and desires—for friendship, for connection. (It might be said that these desires underlie all of the conversations of Plato's Socratic dialogues, and it may be for this reason, yet more than because of the intellectual challenges the Socrates character and his interlocutors navigate, that so many of the dialogues seem to come up short, or fail to arrive at the truth they were seeking. Intellectual dialogue can be a poor substitute for something warmer, which we would like to call friendship.)

At the end of the *Lysis*, Socrates, with seeming or feigned cheer and self-mockery, recounts how he told his young interlocutors, as their chaperones led them away from him:

If neither the beloved, nor the lover, nor the like, nor the unlike, nor the good, nor the congenial, nor all the other cases we went through—I can't remember them all now, there were so many— If none of these are friends, I don't know what more to say. . . .

O Menexenus and Lysis, how ridiculous that you two boys, and I, an old boy, who would like to be one of you, should imagine ourselves to be friends . . . and yet we have not been able to discover what a friend is.

2

I would not have wrestled long and hard with the present set of notes if I shared the traditional view of the *Lysis*. Indeed one of the objectives of these notes is to encourage fresh readings of the dialogue. And more: I would like to encourage fresh thinking about friendship and about writers' intersections with it and with their craft more generally. As either Plato or I am the principal writer concerned here, we—along with the dialogue's characters: Socrates, Lysis, Menexenus, and Hippothales—will provide the examples of friendship, and its absences and discontents.

In the end friendship is our great topic—and a great topic it is. Our experiences with friendship and our yet greater longing for friendship play large roles in our lives. As regards Plato's work, these notes will propose that in the *Lysis* he, for various possible reasons, has intentionally hidden beneath the surface much of what he has to say about friendship, as well as many of his feelings about and expe-





riences with friendship. And yet, I am proposing, at least in this case, Plato's greatest insights may be uncovered by readers less concerned with logic than life.

3

I could be the first reader of the *Lysis* to imagine that it could be speaking, in part, about the isolation, however delicious or productive, of a writer's life. I am not the first to have noted the leitmotif of deception that runs through the text. For example, Christopher Planeaux, a Plato scholar, has called attention to Socrates' statement in the very first line: "I was on my way from the Academy, making straight for the Lyceum" (i.e., from one leading gymnasium to the other). Planeaux has proposed that this statement is immediately contradicted by Socrates' own description of his route, which, as Athenians of Plato's time would have recognized, was not direct.

It is quite possible that the keyword here should not be "deception" but "indirection." Socrates is after something, but he cannot pursue it directly. And, with writing as well as friendship in mind, we might note that if Plato had more interest in "direction," he would not have written dialogues and stories about dialogues that may or may not have taken place.

Let us stick for the moment, however, with the idea of deception, which is also of friendship as deception. It quickly raises the question of who the Socrates of the *Lysis*, the principal friend/deceiver (misdirecter), is or is supposed to be. Here, too, we may find ourselves deceived. In Plato's time, "Socrates" became the name of a stock character, written about by many writers. They used, played with, and extended the traits with which this character became associated. A similar thing occurred in Spain with Goya, who, after his death, was turned into the embodiment of an ever-evolving collection of Spanish values.

Given the current solemn approach to Plato's dialogues and his homely-looking Socrates, the readiest comparison may be to what "Honest Abe" has become in American culture. But, as the classicist Kenneth Dover has noted, "[T]he Greeks were often arbitrary, impulsive, frivolous, cynical, witty or jocular, and they are not always





well served by too earnest or solemn a temperament in a modern interpreter.” We may do better to compare the Socrates character to Paul Bunyan or to the Native Americans’ Trickster, who, for example, once extended his penis from one side of a lake to the other in an attempt (failed, I believe) to have sex with maidens bathing on the other side.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is described as sitting chatting on his deathbed with two visitors from out of town (think of the Three Stooges or of Groucho, Harpo, and Chico). No sooner has one of the visitors recalled Socrates’ idea that learning is recollection than the other interrupts: “But how is that proved? Please remind me, as I can’t quite remember at the moment.”

When Plato’s Socrates starts the *Lysis* by claiming to have taken a direct route, and when it is clear that, in fact, he is once again heading to a gymnasium—where good-looking boys are naked—and when he then begins worming his way into their company, we may imagine Plato’s first readers nodding their heads and chuckling, “Typical Socrates.” (A scholarly note: the Greek word “gymnasium” is formed from the Greek for nude: *gymnos*. Along with being social clubs, the Athenian gyms trained boys to wrestle.)

4

The Plato scholar Ann Michelini, discussing features of the stock Socrates character, notes in particular his *eirōneia*, his exaggerated claims of weakness or incompetence, made in order to deceive. At the gymnasium Socrates seeks out Lysis and his friend Menexenus— young aristocrats, best friends, about thirteen years old (to Socrates’ fifty or so). Socrates tells the boys that his interest in friendship stems from the fact that he has never been very good at making friends. Plato’s first readers may have laughed aloud, as this claim flies in the face of evidence from the Socratic literature and many of Plato’s dialogues that one of Socrates’ great talents was making friends (in some sense of this word). Indeed we might say that, like many another adept social climber, Socrates’ greatest problem is his penchant for making friends even, or above all, with people who are more good-looking, well-born, and powerful than they are nice or





well-intentioned. Socrates, the son of a midwife and a mason, has a grand time with his rich and powerful young friends, until the traitorous, disastrous actions of a few of them lead to his being sentenced to death (the charge: corrupting Athenian youth).

Even just reading the text of the *Lysis*, as if we had read no other dialogue, we are unsure what to make of Socrates' claim that he is not good at making friends. Does he imagine he is telling the truth? Or is he having some fun? Is this a tired line of an aging sexual predator? Like a spin serve in tennis or like some of the "spinning" in politics and public relations, Socrates' deception serves to move his pubescent interlocutors out of position, far from the truth and thus more vulnerable to future assertions.

5

"I was on my way from the Academy, making straight for the Lyceum," Socrates begins, falsely. Assuming that there are texts with relatively reliable narrators, we can wonder if the *Lysis* could be the first text in Western history to make use of an unreliable narrator, a narrator whose unreliability is revealed at the start of the narration and is a deliberate creation of the author. And if so, why did Plato decide to take, or explore, such an approach in this text? Was he wishing to call attention to how in friendship we are always dealing with people who misrepresent or misunderstand themselves? Was he wishing to question how we can indeed become friends with such people? With whom—with which of these mirages—would we become friends? (Aristotle argues that our best friend is, or should be, ourselves. Another veteran deceiver, we might say.)

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato's Socrates says—disingenuously? or is Plato poking fun at himself when he has Socrates say—that, unlike dialectical conversation, writing cannot "teach the truth adequately." With this in mind we can also imagine that, with the *Lysis* and its unreliable and somewhat ridiculous narrator, Plato was not trying to teach, but rather, first and foremost, amusing himself.

Early in the *Lysis*, Socrates, speaking to Lysis alone, gives him a demonstration of *elenchus* (refutation via cross-examination), convincing Lysis that, until one has knowledge, one cannot do what one





wants. (If you do not know what you are doing or should be doing, how can you ever do what you want?) More radically, Socrates also convinces the thirteen-year-old that if, as a result of our ignorance, we are useless, no one, not even our parents, will love us. Plato then has Socrates pause in his narration to remark on how impressed Lysis is by his (Socrates') arguments, and, when Menexenus rejoins the group, Lysis asks Socrates to "say what you've been saying to me to Menexenus too." He wants his best friend to have the same experiences as him or to be similarly put in his place, revealed through *elenchus* to be quite ignorant.

In the translation I own, Lysis' request comes at the bottom of a recto page. My first time through there was a delicious moment when, before turning the page, I entertained a hope that Socrates would in fact do, or report doing, as he had been asked—that he/Plato would give the same discussion all over again, offering the pleasures and insights of hearing the same story told twice. Next, upon turning the page, I wondered why Plato dangled before our eyes this possibility but let it go. It brings to mind Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* having "the mechanicals" rehearse one set of lines in one act and then, later on, perform a different set. The literary critic Harold Bloom has written of Shakespeare (in *Love's Labour's Lost*) seeming "to seek the limits of his verbal resources, and [discovering] that there are none." I had the sense, at this moment in the *Lysis*, of a gifted writer, near the beginning both of his own writing life and of the literary age, noting—for himself, above all, and in the midst of glimpsing how truly gifted he might in fact be—*What might I [Plato] not do were I to make use of all the bells and whistles of this writing thing?* (An answer might be the *Symposium*, where so many of the bells are rung, so many of the whistles blown.)

6

In the *Lysis*, Plato contrasts the innocent, unknowing, pure friendship of Lysis and Menexenus with the world of conniving adults, a world in which even the ostensible pursuit of knowledge, or of love, can become a kind of stain, a means of getting the better of others, or of seducing or misleading them into meeting one's needs.





Socrates ostensibly enters into conversation with Lysis so as to show another person, Hippothales, how to talk to his beloved in order to win his love, or his allegiance at least. (Hippothales is either in love with Lysis or is pretending, to himself first and foremost, to be in love with him.) In Socrates' story of his day at the gym, the result of Socrates' demonstration is that Lysis becomes enamored of Socrates, hanging on his every word and not even noticing Hippothales, sitting off to the side. (We might wish to say that deception, like dialogue and dialogue-writing, involves diversion in both senses of this word. Deception and dialogue—conversation—lead us along indirect routes and also entertain us, helping us turn our thoughts from the one end at which we must, sooner or later, arrive.)

Before Socrates—making straight for the Lyceum—runs into him, Hippothales has been writing speeches and poems and singing songs in praise of Lysis. Socrates brings to light the bad faith and self-serving aspect of such behavior. “I,” in singing another’s praises, am glorifying *my* love, an object that *I* am going to win or lose. And furthermore, Socrates points out, the behavior is not effective, as it makes the lover and his suit, however poetic they may be, yet weaker. “When a man praises or compliments handsome boys,” Socrates observes, “they become filled with pride and conceit. . . . And the more conceited they are, the harder they become to catch.”

We may be tempted to say that Socrates knows all too well whereof he speaks. In the *Charmides*, speaking about his judgments of the looks of boys, he remarks: “I’m nothing to go by . . . because pretty well all pubescent boys seem beautiful to me.” In any case, here, the wise and experienced Socrates’ critique of Hippothales’ purported pursuit of Lysis is that, if you would win the love of another, and particularly the love of a younger person not himself invested in feeling superior or in caring for the weak, you need to show him (or her) that you are at least his equal—or, better, his superior.

We may note that there are two ways to do this: one is by making a show of your own capacities (e.g., by winning a wrestling match); the other is by making your beloved feel inferior. If he or she is young, beautiful, and rich, and you are, like Socrates, none of these things, then you might, for example, lead your beloved to feel stupid, uneducated, or tongue-tied compared to you. And thus he may feel you are worthy of being loved and may be anxious to try to impress





you and win your love, and he may also feel that it is worth spending time with you, in order to gain from you what he himself so clearly lacks.

In the *Charmides*, Socrates is confronted with another very good-looking, well-born, and wide-eyed young man. The conclusion of the *Charmides* is, like the conclusion of the *Lysis*, aporetic; the conversants are unable to come to an understanding of what they had, at least in theory, set out to understand. But, nonetheless, the handsome young man, Charmides, overwhelmed by a sense of his ignorance and dazzled by Socrates' wit and intellectual force, expresses a need for Socrates' further teaching and a willingness to submit to it daily, "until you [Socrates] say I have had enough."

7

Socrates deceives (or recounts how he deceived) Hippothales by using the opportunity to demonstrate how to talk to one's beloved as a means of trying to win for himself, rather than for Hippothales, Lysis' affection. We may compare Plato's dialogue with *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in which an aging, ugly, noble soldier gives all his poetry and all his love for Roxanne to a young, good-looking man, Christian, who, in theory at least, is going to use these gifts to win her love and lips. A writer may well cry along with Cyrano when he reveals himself to his beloved, to whom he is, as we say, "just a friend."

Oui, ma vie

Yes, my life,

Ce fut d'être celui qui souffle, — et qu'on oublie !

The one who puffs and pants and is forgotten.

Vous souvient-il du soir où Christian vous parla

Do you remember the evening when Christian spoke to you

Sous le balcon ? Eh bien ! toute ma vie est là :

Under the balcony? All my life is there,

Pendant que je restais en bas, dans l'ombre noire,

Remaining below in the dark shadows.

D'autres montaient cueillir le baiser de la gloire !

For others the ascent, the glorious embrace!





Note further how in both works the aging lover's demonstration also involves deceiving his beloved. Cyrano leads Roxanne to think Christian capable of beautiful poetry and devotion. Socrates gives Lysis the impression that he is speaking with him in order to educate him; hidden is Socrates' superficial project, to educate Hippothales, and Socrates' desire to win Lysis' affection for himself.

Or are we all deceived? Socrates is not a sexoholic, but an eduholic: he cannot help trying to educate every attractive, well-born young man he runs into. And what is Socrates' goal in seducing/educating Lysis (and Menexenus)? Is he actually seeking to become *proton philon* (an object of their love) or is this, too, a deception?

Men and women of many an era have enjoyed seducing others either for the simple pleasure of the seduction or to feel or demonstrate their attractiveness and power. From Molière's *Dom Juan*:

On goûte une douceur extrême à réduire . . . le cœur d'une jeune beauté—

It is an exquisite pleasure to conquer . . . the heart of a young beauty . . . to combat . . . the innocent modesty of a heart loath to surrender; to overcome step by step all the little obstacles that she sets in our way; to overcome the scruples on which she prides herself; and to lead her gently to the desired place.

(It is worth noting the inversion; in "real life" it is the woman who has the "desired place," and she may or may not wish to lead the man to it.)

In French the word *déception* is the equivalent of the English "disappointment." This can remind us that, in many lands, people are seduced by others who are, as we say, just playing games, and how, as a result, sooner or later the seduced may be not only deceived but also disappointed, demoralized. They may well come to find, and likely not for the first time, that what was deficient above all was *philia* (attraction) itself. (Another scholarly note: In the context of the *Lysis*, *φιλία* [*philia*] has traditionally been translated as "friendship." It can also be translated as "attraction," "attachment," or "love"—e.g., *philosophia*, love of wisdom.)

The seduced may come to decide that the seducer was not really drawn to "me" or interested in any kind of ongoing, more open-ended relationship, in a real, flesh-and-blood exploration of friendship. (How many people are?) About Socrates we might imagine





Lysis saying some days later, “I thought he wanted to be my friend, but it was just talk.”

8

Socrates proposes to show Hippothales how to speak to Lysis in order to get what he (Hippothales) has been playing at wanting: love, attachment, sex. In setting out in this way, Socrates is not only taking an indirect route toward coming to understand friendship, he is plunging himself and Hippothales into what I will call lovelessness, into a cold world in which attachments are the products of manipulation or in which, for example, your parents love you if and only if you are useful to them, say, by being particularly accomplished, good-looking, or doting.

In the *Ethics*, Aristotle says that Plato used to often ask, “Are we on the way to or from first principles?” Perhaps we are now prepared to imagine Plato saying this with a smile, more amused than concerned. Or we might imagine that when Socrates first told Plato the story of his day at the gym, flirting with the beautiful, rich, naked boys by talking to them about friendship, at some moment Plato interrupted, “Are we on the way to or from first principles here, Socrates?” More earnestly, we can read Plato as asking us, his readers, if in our own pursuits of truth and friendship we are headed toward or away from these things—toward or away from truth and friendship?

Within the *Lysis*, Socrates appears to take another wrong turn when he engages Lysis and Menexenus in a seemingly frank conversation, and about friendship no less, without either discussing his interest in becoming intimate with them or revealing his ostensible ulterior motive: to demonstrate something to someone hiding in the wings. We might say that here Plato is offering his readers a lesson in the *Realpolitik* of friendship: Socrates’ befriend-ing (helping) one person, Hippothales, involves the deceiving of others. To paraphrase Kant, from such crooked beginnings, nothing straight can be made.





9

We can hardly be surprised to find that, at the end of the *Lysis*, Socrates' behavior has left not only Hippothales in the lurch, but philosophy and Socrates himself as well. Socrates' professed desire is to leave the gymnasium with the two rich and attractive boys, but "suddenly," he recounts in the final paragraph, "we were interrupted by the chaperones of Lysis and Menexenus, who like evil spirits came upon us with the boys' brothers, and told the boys to come home, as it was getting late." (Wealthy Athenians tasked slaves with keeping their sons from being drawn by older men into conversation and from mixing with older teenagers at the gym. Socrates had wandered over to the Lyceum on this particular day because it was a holiday, a day on which older men were allowed into the clubs and got to see the boys.)

Getting to see naked boys—this, Socrates achieved. His winning of the argument and of Lysis and Menexenus' friendship, however, appears hollow, the friendship now seeming, like many a friendship, to be rooted in wishful thinking. At the end Socrates is left alone with what can be a feeling of uselessness—nothing but a story to tell. It is no accident that, unlike others of Plato's texts, the *Lysis* has no implied audience. It feels as if the narrator, Socrates, is telling his story to no one. And the melancholy is deepened by the fact that this telling is done in a jaunty tone.

10

Why does Plato's Socrates tell this story, which, though amusing, hardly puts him in a good light? And why did Plato go to the trouble of creating and setting down this story that does not put Socrates in a good light and that seems to end so inconclusively? Was it, as we have earlier imagined, simply a way of exploring "this writing thing"?

We might begin with the supposition that, in addition to the pleasures of exercising his writer's craft, Plato wanted to say—or get off his chest—some things about friendship. He certainly succeeds at showing us how in our friendships we may have various ostensible goals—seduction, sex, power, social climbing, seeing ourselves





(however correctly or incorrectly) in a pleasant light—but it is while pursuing these goals that we get what we may most need and enjoy, even if we are not willing to fully admit this need and pleasure. I would define this *what*—this essence of friendship—as a kind of rubbing against other human beings, a rubbing and being rubbed by them. This analogy may seem more appropriate to sex or wrestling, but certainly conversation, too, is a contact sport. And the warmth of its rubbing may be felt at most every intellectual and social level, and whether our conversations are deceptive, disappointing, and self-deceiving, or not.

It is not uncommon for a French person, over dinner, to try to provoke an argument with someone else, who will in turn take the bait so that soon these two, and perhaps the whole group, will be going at it, arguing with one another. To an American such conversations can seem disconcerting, even threatening. Until one recognizes the pleasure that lies underneath—the pleasure of this vigorous intellectual rubbing against other people.

11

If Socrates went to the gym to enter into conversation with naked boys . . . Well, for my part, as I was working on these notes in a New York City café, attractive young women were passing by on the street and coming in to get their mochaccinos and so forth. It being a hot and humid summer, and current fashions being what they are, these women were, less or more, stripped down to their boxers, short shorts, and bras.

Socrates was not in fact interested in sex. He wanted the boys to be young and rich and beautiful and naked, but then he wanted to talk philosophy with them. In my case, I was *trying* to stay focused on my writing and rewriting. And among the distractions was an awareness that these women were prepared to take offense, if not go to the police, were I to propose that we might together and in a more private location explore either their wardrobes or what might be meant by a word like friendship or *philia*.

Which is all to say that these women were helping me appreciate how discussion and writing can be asked to satisfy deeper needs





or desires—the need for rubbing, or friendship, perhaps first and foremost. And I can appreciate, too, how discussion and writing fail to do this, and how a talker’s or writer’s response to this failure is often to talk or write more. This is not the only alternative (there is alcohol, onanism, prostitution, figure-drawing or tango classes, etc.), but words on top of words can seem the best one. If a life without erotic exploration with someone tantalizingly other (and tantalizingly similar too) at times feels not worth living, then a life well-examined can seem both a pale shadow and the next best thing. Third prize would be a life examined in yet greater depth, or over and over again.

12

The name Plato (roughly, “The Broad”) sounds like a Robin-Hood-y nickname, and we have scant evidence of the life or character of the person so nicknamed. As one scholar, George Boas, has summarized what the data allows us to conclude:

He [Plato] was highly praised by his successors in the Academy at the time of his death. He was probably born in 427 and died about 347 [BC]. (We know from the *Dialogues* the name of his father and of two of his brothers.) The rest is legend, no detail of which can be traced back to a date earlier than the second century A.D.

(And we might ask what knowing “from the *Dialogues*” means, insofar as they are inventions, works of fiction.)

This reality has not stopped scholars and popular writers from writing biography after biography of various Platos. And as Ulysses S. Grant remarked regarding fantasies about what actually transpired at Appomattox, some fictions “are told until they are believed to be true.” In Plato’s case, many of the biographies rely heavily on a letter that Plato probably did not write and on the confused collection of tidbits offered by Diogenes Laertes, who is often treated as if he knew people who knew Plato, whereas in fact one of the very few things we know about Diogenes Laertes is that he wrote more than half a millennium after Plato, *perhaps* in the first half of the third century AD.





As often in cases of *philia* (attachment) to another person, we are here entangled in and distracted and inspired by our projections. This “we” must include the author of this essay as much as anyone else, though I believe it is different when one knows one is projecting, when I accept that “my” Plato is some part of myself, perhaps a part I do not wish to own up to or, alternatively, a part of me that I would like to imagine was also a feature of the life of a great philosopher.

That said, I will further propose, and now as pure speculation, that the portrait of friendship that lies half-hidden in the text of the *Lysis*—friendship as some mixture of disingenuousness, of deception, and of an ultimately sad playfulness, and of competition and erotic desire—all this *could* hold in greater darkness Plato’s experiences with “friendship” or with other people more generally. And we might conclude that these experiences were not very pleasant or satisfying, but rather, the kinds of experiences that might drive someone to write. Something, we can say, must have driven Plato to write with the necessary level of dedication, to give the number of solitary hours required to produce a *Lysis* or, say, *The Republic*.

I have read that Plato has been thought to have been shy. I do not know in what century after Plato’s death this idea was cooked up, but, *from the dialogues*, it *feels* right. In reading the opening of the *Symposium*—in which the writer (“Plato”) intricately prepares one of his characters, who was *not* at a wonderful party years prior, to begin telling what he has heard about this party from someone who went uninvited—along with the word “playful,” the phrase “painfully shy” comes to mind. In a rare autobiographical allusion, in the *Phaedo* Plato has a character remark that Plato did not join the others in attending on Socrates the day Socrates drank the hemlock, the last day of his life. This, we are told, is because “Plato was unwell.” (“Social anxiety disorder” is a current phrase.)

A fair amount of recent scholarship argues that, the existence of written texts notwithstanding, Athens in Plato’s time was not what we would consider a literate society. Legal practice, for example, was oral and independent of documents, and prose was written to be read aloud, be this in a relatively cozy space or in an amphitheater. If books were copied and sold, it was so they might be read aloud in another part of the Mediterranean. Setting this down, I have intimations of





violation (Plato's work being read aloud by strangers). A more recent technology, photography, has led some to think that when we take or show someone's picture, we steal a part of their soul. But, of course, showing may have been Plato's goal. Perhaps the whole point of his isolation, like many another writer's, was so he could carefully imagine and craft something to show to others—to friends, fellow seekers of understanding (philosophers), or the public at large.

"You show me yours, I'll show you mine"—phrases associated with childhood attempts to learn about the opposite sex or about The Other more generally. One thing that makes writers and other artists seem different from other adults—and yet hardly unlike people who spend a great deal of time shopping for clothes and getting dressed and made up—is the lengths to which we go to develop some "I" or some artwork we are willing to show to others. (And instead of in fact showing ourselves.) Some of us writers may end up *appearing* naked, but, in fact, we are always traveling under the cover of words.

13

Freud proposed that the successful artist "is an incipient introvert who is not far from being a neurotic." Like so many others, an artist wants to achieve *Ehre, Macht, und Liebe der Frauen* (honor, power, and the love of women), but seems to lack a means of doing this. However,

If he is able to make it possible for others . . . to obtain solace and consolation from their own unconscious sources of gratification . . . he wins gratitude and admiration for himself and so, by means of his imagination, achieves the very things which had at first only an imaginary existence for him: *Ehre, Macht, und Liebe der Frauen*.

Freud is focused on *being loved*: the successful artist is to be loved by others and such love is his goal. The *Lysis*, as I have suggested, spends a good deal of time on the question of who is attracted to or befriending whom, the lover or the beloved, the successful or aspiring, etc. Ideally, I would propose, friendship and love involve mutual attachments and pleasures, so that, for example, the truly successful





artist would not only find lovers but would also find, in himself or herself, a capacity to love.

This puts in relief how solitary and self-contained Plato's project seems to have been. In a famous passage in the *Phaedrus*, he has Socrates, the great conversationalist, say that "in the garden of letters" a lover of wisdom

will sow and plant, but only for the sake of recreation and amusement. He will write his thoughts down as memorials to be treasured against the forgetfulness of old age, by himself, or by any other old man who is treading the same path. He will rejoice in beholding their tender growth; and while others are refreshing their souls with banqueting and the like [while others are enjoying love and friendship, we might say], writing will be the pastime in which the writer's days are spent.

What Freud does not consider in the "incipient introvert" text quoted from above is the extent to which art-making can become an end in itself, one of *die Ersatzbefriedigungen* (compensatory satisfactions), as he elsewhere calls them. Given the deceptions and *déceptions* of human social life, rather than wishing to win honor, power, and love, a writer of dialogues, or essays, may find more than a little satisfaction in his imaginary friendships, in his rubbings on papyrus (or tapping on keys).

14

In Freudian psychotherapy and its offshoots, a session lasts a pre-established number of minutes. The time limit is thought to help us, as mortality sometimes does, to focus our thoughts and come to insights we would not otherwise come to. By contrast, in Lacanian therapy there is an idea that a patient comes to a session with one thing he or she wants to say, a statement she wishes to make to the world or the therapist, something she wants to hear herself say or get off her chest. In a pure form, a session of such therapy ends the moment the statement has been made (or when the therapist believes the statement has been made).

We have just about come to such a Lacanian moment, for both me and Plato, and yet I would put it off with one last scholarly note.





The earliest extant copies of Plato's dialogues come from the ninth century AD, more than 1,200 years after the original Plato (let's call him) died. We are reading, translating, analyzing, ruminating, and speculating about echoes—copies of copies of copies of . . . (Here's a loneliness.) As one of the experts, T. H. Irwin, has written, we cannot reasonably suppose that our versions of Plato's texts "contain all and only the very words that Plato wrote." This may be better appreciated if I add this detail from Irwin's history of the Platonic corpus:

Copies of Plato were originally written in capital letters ("uncials"), without punctuation and without spaces between words. Small ("miniscule") letters were introduced, probably in the eighth century, and eventually punctuation was also introduced.

I mention this here because I will now, in closing, call readers' attention to one more deception—perhaps the greatest deception—in the *Lysis*. We, like many others, have noted that the dialogue ends inconclusively, with Socrates' quip about how he, Lysis, and Menexenus have not been able to figure out what friendship is. But it is possible that neither the fictional narrator Socrates nor the writer Plato really believed this. They may have been only pretending, to auditors and readers and perhaps to themselves as well.

Just before the dismissive, self-mocking end, Socrates poses a series of questions that seem to sum up, and with not a little emotion, what has been learned, rightly or wrongly, as a result of his discussion with Lysis and Menexenus. I would have these questions stand also as the Lacanian statement of Socrates' story, of Plato's text, and of the present essay:

MAYNOTTHETRUTHBERATHERASWEWERESAYING
JUSTNOWTHATDESIREISTHECAUSEOFFRIENDSHIP

In other words, as I, on the heels of many another, have reconstructed it:

May not the truth be rather, as we were saying just now, that desire is the cause of friendship? And that he who desires, desires that of which he is in want? And that of which he is in want is dear to him?

