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Plato: Symposium (review)

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Robin Waterfield (trans.), *Plato: Symposium*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. Pp. xlv + 104. \$4.95. ISBN 0-19-282908-4 (pb).

Reviewed by John T. Kirby, Purdue University.

Hard on the heels of his 1993 translation of Plato's *Republic*, also published by Oxford, W. has now produced a version of the *Symposium*. Like the earlier volume, it contains an introduction to the dialogue, a select bibliography, and a section of commentary designed to explain some of the more obscure moments of the dialogue (as well as some of the textual decisions a translator must make in producing an English version). After a long period in which Hamilton's Penguin translation was virtually the only text inexpensively available for classroom use, we have had in fairly rapid succession the Hackett version by Nehamas and Woodruff (1989), the Yale University Press version by R.E. Allen (1991), and now W.'s. Hamilton's is not at all bad, though his introductory material is now somewhat dated. Of the three more recent versions, the most significant scholarly achievement is of course Allen's, including as it does not only a fluent translation of the dialogue, but also more than a hundred pages of what is modestly called 'comment'; these notes actually incorporate Allen's original scholarly assessment of the philosophy of the dialogue. That book is liable to set a benchmark for a long time to come, and it is against this that W.'s endeavor must be measured.

While not actually surpassing Allen's overall achievement, W. acquits himself most impressively. His introductory material is lucid and well-chosen; it includes sections on 'Symposia,' 'Homoeroticism,' 'Socrates' Attitude Towards Homoeroticism,' 'The Artistry of the Dialogue,' 'The First Five Speeches,' 'Socrates' Speech,' 'The Ascent,' 'Love in Plato,' and 'Alcibiades' Speech.' All this is followed by a 'select' (but surprisingly extensive) bibliography. Some of his material recalls the introductory section to Kenneth Dover's 1980 Cambridge edition of, with commentary on, the Greek text. Dover included some technical information -- on symposia, the encomiastic tradition, the historical basis, and the transmission of the ancient text -- that W. has omitted, perhaps on the grounds that his wider audience might find it tedious. What he has included, and I find this entirely appropriate for such an edition, is extended attention to the shape and literary merits of the dialogue.

The translation itself is modern, conversational where that is appropriate, and formal where Plato ascends to greater heights. Its orthography is of course British, and while occasional Britishisms emerge -- e.g. 'a bit of fun' (172a),

'sport' (187a) -- W. is, after all, British, and the prose is not so British overall as to taste foreign to an American palate.

Perhaps the best way to give a sense of the nature of a translation is to situate it vis-à-vis some others. Take, for example, a remark from Aristophanes at 176b, first in W.'s rendition, then in Hamilton's, then in Allen's:

- 'Good thinking, Pausanias,' said Aristophanes. 'We must do everything we can to soften the effect of our drinking. I speak as one of those who was soused yesterday.'
- "You are quite right, Pausanias," said Aristophanes, "to suggest that we should let ourselves off lightly. I am one of those who were pretty well soaked yesterday."
- So Aristophanes replied, You're quite right, Pausanias, about being in every way prepared to take it easy in our drinking; in fact, I'm among those who got a dipping yesterday myself.

Each translator uses his own English idioms to render corresponding Greek ones: ΤΟΥ=ΤΟ ΜΕ/ΝΤΟΙ ΕΥ)= ΛΕ/ΓΕΙΣ becomes 'Good thinking,' 'You are quite right,' and 'You're quite right' in the three translations. ΠΑΡΑΣΚΕΥΑ/ΣΑΣQΑΙ Ρ(ΑΣΤΩ/ΝΗΝ (literally, 'provide an easiness') becomes 'soften the effect,' 'let ourselves off lightly,' and 'being ... prepared to take it easy.' ΒΕΒΑΡΤΙΣΜΕ/ΝΩΝ becomes 'soused,' 'pretty well soaked,' and 'got a dipping.' Allen's is perhaps the one whose idioms correspond most closely to those of the original Greek. But W.'s seem the most comfortable in the target language, and hence the most appropriate to Plato's characterization of Aristophanes. (One might also just point out parenthetically that Hamilton leaves out ΠΑΝΤΙ\ ΤΡΟ/ΡΩ| altogether here; and that Allen eschews the use of quotation-marks, using a capital letter to signify the opening of the quotation -- like the Oxford Classical Text, but not Dover's Cambridge Greek text.)

Having heard from Comedy, let us now give ear to Tragedy. Here is a portion from 197c-d (Agathon speaking). I will reproduce first W.'s, then Hamilton's, then Allen's rendition:

- It is my opinion, then, Phaedrus, that Love is himself without equal in attractiveness and in goodness, and secondly is responsible for similar qualities in others. I am moved to express myself in verse and say that he is the one who causes "peace among men, calm on the open sea undisturbed by breath of air, winds' stillness at the end of day, and sleep for those with cares". He it is who draws insularity out of us and pours familiarity into us, by causing the formation of all shared gatherings like ours, by taking the lead in festal, choral, sacrificial rites. He dispenses mildness and dismisses wildness; he is unsparing of goodwill and unsharing of ill-will.

- In my opinion, then, Phaedrus, Love is in the first place supreme in beauty and goodness himself, and in the second the cause of like qualities in others. Indeed, I feel inspired to express this idea in verse and to say that it is Love who creates
Peace among men, and calm upon the sea,
Rest for the winds from strife, and sleep in sorrow.
It is love who empties us of the spirit of estrangement and fills us with the spirit of kinship; who makes possible such mutual intercourse as this; who presides over festivals, dances, sacrifices; who bestows good-humour and banishes surliness; whose gift is the gift of good-will and never of ill-will.
- So it seems to me, Phaedrus, that Eros, being himself first, as most beautiful and best, is, next, cause of other such things in others. I am moved to speak in verse, though it is he who composes it:
Peace among men, waveless calm at sea,
Rest from winds, slumber for our grief.
He empties us of estrangement but fills us with kinship, causing us to come together in all such gatherings as these, in festivals, in dances, in sacrifices a leader; he introduces gentleness, but banishes rudeness; giving of goodwill, ungiving of ill-will; ...

Allen's prose is the most limpid, I would say, and he departs significantly from the others in translating O(/TI OU(=TO/S E)STIN O(POIW=N as 'though it is he who composes it'; none of the three editions, interestingly, offers any comment on the ambiguity of the Greek here. But it seems clear that W. is the one who has most successfully captured the incantatory Gorgianic structures of Agathon's oratory (insularity/familiarity; dispenses mildness/dismisses wildness; unsparring of goodwill/unsharing of ill-will).

On the whole I would adjudge the translation *per se* as an unqualified success, even in comparison with Allen's excellent version.

The Explanatory Notes, which occupy pages 73-95, are signaled in the text by an asterisk. These range from demure textual notes (as on 197d) to engaging asides, as on 190e: '*with a hair*: it is possible to cut a hard-boiled egg in half with even a human hair (I've done it)!' The reader is alerted to anthropological details of Athenian culture (as on 193a), useful references in modern scholarship (as on 206c), and cross-references to other ancient texts (as on 222b). The volume concludes with an Index of Names, which actually offers much more: dates and so forth for historical figures, and narrative sketches for characters of myth and legend.

The book is (for 1994) attractively priced, and has a beautiful symposiastic cover. The text is pretty clean of errors; the header on page 11 does announce PHAEDRAS' SPEECH, but not a word of Euripides is included there.

As for W. himself, it is heartening to see that a man described as 'a self-employed consultant editor and writer' can succeed in producing and marketing scholarly work. In this connection one thinks also of Roberto Calasso, author of the extraordinary *Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Calasso is the publisher of Adelphi Edizioni in Milano. Perhaps one of the salutary results of all the upheaval now being felt in the academy is that more independent scholars will be able to find a venue for work of high quality.
