

PLATO AND THE EROTICS OF NARRATIVITY

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I

ONE of the most curious and seldom remarked facts about Plato's Dialogues is that many of them are not, in fact, dialogues. By this I do not mean that Plato's Dialogues are not 'real' dialogues or 'true' conversations (measured against some normative standard of conversational reciprocity): I am not about to lodge against Plato the routine liberal complaint that he fails to portray genuinely mutual, free-wheeling discussions—choosing to represent, instead, a series of highly asymmetrical exchanges between Socrates (or some other Platonic mouthpiece), who does most of the talking, and various other, more or less co-operative, interlocutors, who (with the refreshing exceptions of Callicles in the *Gorgias* and Thrasymachus in the first book of the *Republic*) are largely 'yes-men'.¹ What I mean, rather, is

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¹ For the application of this term see Gregory Vlastos, 'The Socratic Elenchus', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1 (1983), 27–58, esp. 57.

that a number of Plato's so-called Dialogues are not dialogues at all in the formal sense: their characteristic mode of representation is not dramatic but narrative.²

The formal, theoretical or conceptual, distinction between dramatic and narrative literature is not one that is likely to have been lost on Plato. For that very distinction originated with Plato himself.³ In the third book of the *Republic* Socrates divides literature into three kinds, according to whether it employs as its representational medium 'simple narration' (*haplê diēgēsis*),⁴ 'imitation' (*mimēsis*), or a combination of the two (392D–394C). 'Simple narration' is defined as that mode of representation in which the author does not conceal himself (393C 11) but speaks to the audience in his own person (394C 2–3) 'without imitation' (393D 1, 394A 7–B 1)—that is, without citing the direct speech of his characters and thereby impersonating or 'imitating' them. 'Simple narration' can be found mostly in dithyrambs, Socrates tells us (394C 3); the late antique grammarian Servius added didactic poetry, as exemplified by the first three books of Virgil's *Georgics*, to the same category.⁵ 'Imitation' is originally introduced by Socrates in the *Republic* as an alternative to 'simple narration': it is defined as narration that is effected through imitation, and it refers, in the first instance, to those passages in epic poetry in which the poet's characters speak *in propria persona* (392D 5–6, 393C 8–9); it is later defined more starkly, however, as 'the opposite' of simple narration (394B 3), and it comes to refer to the exchange of direct speeches between characters, such as occurs in tragedy and comedy (394B 6–C 2). A third representational mode, combining simple narration and imitation, is exemplified by epic poetry, and by many other (unmentioned) forms of literature (394C 4–5).

² Noted in antiquity, quite nonchalantly, by a character in Plutarch's *Table-Talk* 7. 8. 1 (= *Mor.* 711B–C): commentary by Michael W. Haslam, 'Plato, Sophron, and the Dramatic Dialogue', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 19 (1972), 17–38 [Haslam], esp. 21.

³ For further details about the history of this distinction, see Haslam, 20–1.

⁴ This phrase is rendered as 'simple rehearsal' by Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 21.

⁵ See Servius' introduction to his commentary on Virgil's *Third Eclogue*, and cf. the third book of the *Ars grammatica* by Servius' near contemporary, Diomedes. On the revival of the Platonic categories by the Latin grammarians of late antiquity, see Peter Steinmetz, 'Gattungen und Epochen der griechischen Literatur in der Sicht Quintilians', *Hermes*, 92 (1964), 454–66, esp. 459–63; generally, Carlo Gallavotti, 'Sulle classificazioni dei generi letterari nell'estetica antica', *Athenaeum*, NS 6 (1928), 356–66; E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Bollingen Series, 36; New York, 1953), 436–43.

Several of Plato's Dialogues belong, interestingly enough, to this third mode, which later grammarians often called by the name of 'mixed' narrative. It is a literary form that does not achieve anything like the purity, the freedom from 'imitation', that characterizes the sort of 'simple narration' that Socrates devises in the *Republic* by converting the exchange of speeches between Agamemnon and Chryses in the *Iliad*'s opening episode into indirect discourse (393C 11–394B 1): on the contrary, it requires of the (vocalizing) reader very nearly the same histrionic antics as does drama. Moreover, Plato's 'mixed' narratives are not narrated, after the manner of Homer or the historians, in anything approaching what we now call a third-person omniscient mode. Instead, Socratic conversations are *reported* in the first person without any preliminary introduction (as if they were addressed directly to the reader or to some silent interlocutor who never comes forward to claim the addressee's role) by a fictional, if historically grounded, character. That character usually turns out to be Socrates himself, as in the case of the *Charmides* (which begins, 'We got back on the previous evening from Potidaea . . .'), the *Lysis* ('I was making my way from the Academy straight to the Lyceum . . .'), and, most notoriously, the *Republic* ('I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon . . .'); the bizarre exception is the *Parmenides*, which turns out to be narrated by Cephalus ('When we reached Athens from our home in Clazomenae . . .'), who recounts a Socratic dialogue as it was reported to him by Antiphon the elder, Plato's half-brother, who had himself heard it from Pythodorus.⁶

Even more intriguing are those Dialogues which seem at first to have the form of drama—to consist of a conversation directly represented without the mediation of a narrative frame—but which quickly abandon that dramatic mode in favour of a 'mixed' narrative by making one of the initial interlocutors into the uninterrupted narrator⁷

⁶ Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, ed. Kenneth Dover (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics; Cambridge, 1980) [Dover], 8–9, comparing the compositional form of the *Parmenides* to that of the *Symposium*: 'Plato's reasons for adopting this technique in a minority of his works are not known; in some others, Socrates himself is the narrator, and the majority are cast in purely dramatic form throughout. Conceivably Plato wished to give authority to his portrayal of Socrates by implicitly inviting us to check it against an independent tradition. On the other hand, he may have intended an oblique suggestion that his portrayal should be judged—like myths or moralising anecdotes—more on its intrinsic merits and the lessons to be learned from it than on its truth to fact.'

⁷ Only in the *Euthydemus* does the forgotten interlocutor suddenly pop up to interrupt the narrative in the middle and carry on a short conversation with the narrator

of another entire conversation. Some of these Dialogues are narrated by Socrates himself after a few preliminary, and rather desultory, exchanges with a member of his circle (as in the case of the *Protagoras* and the *Euthydemus*), but others consist of a Socratic conversation related by a third party to an entirely different audience in response to some brief, introductory request for a story. This latter type is exemplified by the *Phaedo* and by the *Symposium*.⁸ *Phaedo* is prompted by the questions of Echechrates to embark on a lengthy account of Socrates' valedictory conversation with his friends; Apollodorus repeats, for the second time in three days, the story of what was said and done at Agathon's private victory celebration—this time, to a group of nameless acquaintances whose importunities actually precede the spirited exchange with which the text of the *Symposium* opens. Moreover, in all of these cases, except for the *Euthydemus*, the dramatic dialogue that introduces the narrative is not resumed at the end of it (although in the *Phaedo* the dramatic situation is at least alluded to in the final words of the Dialogue), thereby leaving the dramatic frame—if that is what it can properly be called—incomplete and asymmetrical. Why does Plato adopt such a peculiar narrative strategy?

II

I should say right now that I do not propose to answer this question. I intend to pursue it, however, by examining the Dialogue whose narrative structure Plato most fully thematizes: namely, the *Symposium*. That work also possesses—not coincidentally, we may assume—what is probably the most intricate compositional form of any of the Dialogues. The *Symposium* begins with an exchange of remarks, in dramatic (or 'true' dialogue) form, between Apollodorus, a devoted follower of Socrates, and some unnamed acquaintances. Apollodorus

(that Dialogue is also exceptional in that it closes with a resumption of the conversation that had originally opened it).

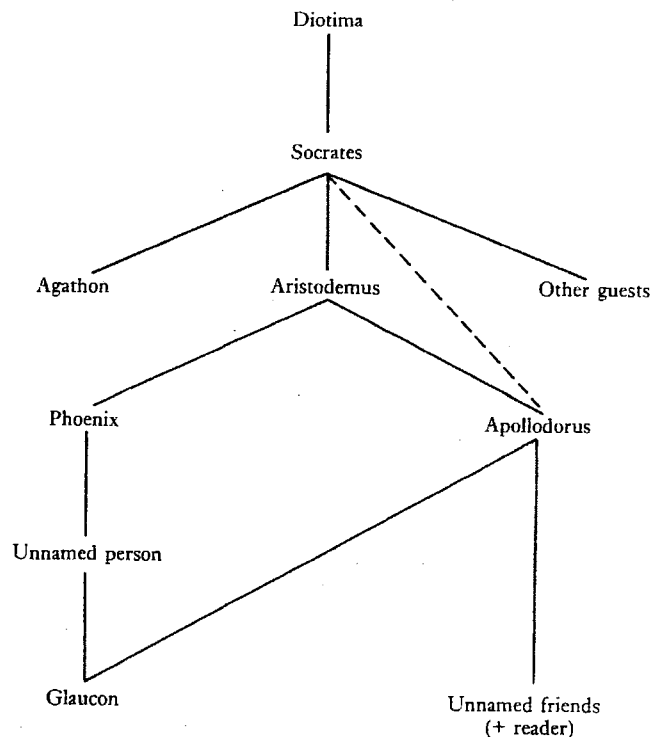
⁸ The *Phaedo* and *Symposium* form a Platonic 'diptych', as Charles Kahn remarks ('Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1 [1983], 75–121, esp. 119); they should be read as a pair. See John A. Brentlinger, 'The Cycle of Becoming in the *Symposium*', in Suzy Q. Groden (trans.), *The Symposium of Plato* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 1–31 [Brentlinger], esp. 2; Bruce Rosenstock, 'Socrates' New Music: The *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*' (unpublished MS), [Rosenstock].

has just been asked, apparently, to tell the story of Agathon's victory-party—a story he had related, he says, to another acquaintance, named Glaucon, two days before—and after some further banter with his friends he accedes to their request. His narrative occupies the remainder of Plato's text, which concludes when Apollodorus comes to what is presumably the end of his story: we never learn what response, if any, his auditors make to it. Apollodorus, however, did not himself attend Agathon's party, which in fact took place many years before the conversation that he is currently engaged in; he can only recapitulate the narrative handed down to him by Aristodemus, an earlier and equally devoted admirer of Socrates, who did attend. The centre-piece of Aristodemus' narrative is a speech about the nature of *erōs* made by Socrates to Agathon and his assembled guests; that speech itself contains a lengthy narrative describing another conversation on the same subject between Socrates and one Diotima, a Mantineian prophetess, and that conversation in turn culminates in yet another speech by Diotima, also about the nature of *erōs*, which is reported by Socrates virtually without concluding comment.

The formal literary structure of the *Symposium*, then, is that of a dialogue which contains within it a series of inset narratives, each of them containing another dialogue and each of them taking the reader further away in time from the dramatic date of the conversation between Apollodorus and his acquaintances. Each framing narrative recedes to disclose another nested inside it, one containing the next like a set of lacquered Chinese boxes. Nor does Plato attempt to make this series of insets transparent to the reader by dissolving the sequence of narrative frames through an illusion of dramatic immediacy, of the reader's direct access to the events narrated. On the contrary: with the chief exception of Diotima's speech, which for a few pages occupies the entire foreground of the narrative, Plato constantly reminds the reader of the many narrators that intervene between the reader and the transmitted story—he emphasizes the *reported* character of the account—by sprinkling throughout Apollodorus' narrative such phrases as 'he said that he said' (*ephē phanai* or, simply, *phanai*), phrases often omitted in translation through a wish to avoid unnecessary awkwardness but so copious in the original as to make the text of the *Symposium* an ideal object lesson in the use of indirect discourse in Attic Greek.⁹ Thus, the earliest event depicted, Diotima's

⁹ See Roger Hornsby, 'Significant Action in the *Symposium*', *Classical Journal*, 52 (1956–7), 37–40, followed by Helen H. Bacon, 'Socrates Crowned', *Virginia Quarterly*

refutation of Socrates, reaches us by an elaborate, lengthy, and rather devious process of transmission. Indeed, that process of transmission (as it is described in the opening pages of the *Dialogue*) is even more complicated than this preliminary summary has indicated: if one were to represent the descent by oral tradition of Diotima's discourse in the form customarily reserved for conveying the transmission of written texts in a manuscript tradition, the stemma would look something like this.



(Unbroken lines indicate direct descent; the broken line indicates 'contamination'.)

Moreover, the opening of the *Symposium* emphasizes, by means of the very language Apollodorus uses in speaking to his friends, that what is about to follow will be a report, a narrative (*diēgēsis*), not a

Review, 35 (1959), 415–30 [Bacon], esp. 418–19: 'the reader is forced by the structure of the language itself to participate in two dialogues at once.' For a detailed and careful summary of Plato's use of the various constructions of reported speech, see Dover, 80–1.

dialogue of the sort that is currently taking place between Apollodorus and the assembled company. Glaucon tells Apollodorus (in the latter's recounting of their conversation) that someone who had heard the story of Agathon's party from Phoenix *narrated* it to him, Glaucon, though ineptly; he then asks Apollodorus to *narrate* it to him in turn; Apollodorus remarks that Glaucon's *narrator* had evidently not *narrated* the story clearly; who *narrated* the story to you?, Glaucon enquires; Socrates' account agreed with what Aristodemus *narrated*, Apollodorus assures us; well, then, *narrate* it to me now, Glaucon urges; if I have to *narrate* it to you as well, Apollodorus tells his unnamed interlocutors, I'll try to *narrate* it to you from the beginning as he *narrated* it to me (172B 3–174A 2). I have, of course, been over-translating for the sake of emphasis: Plato's usage, far from sounding so odd as my rendering would suggest, is (as always) in perfectly good Greek style, which seeks rather than eschews redundancy and employs *diēgēsis* for the recounting of a story. None the less, Plato's insistence is remarkable and significant: if any doubts remain on that score, one need only compare the opening of the *Theaetetus*. There Plato, for reasons of his own, takes a pointedly opposite tack, underscoring his preference for the dramatic over the narrative mode of representation. Euclides has heard from Socrates a *narrative* (142D 1) of the latter's earlier *dialogue* (142C 7, C 8–D 1) with Theaetetus, has taken notes at the time, written it all out later, checked it repeatedly with Socrates, and now possesses a complete written transcript of it; when asked specifically for the *narrative* (142D 5), however, Euclides explains that his account is written in *dialogue* form (143B 7), not in *narrative* form (143B 6–7: each term occurs twice, for the sake of emphasis), because, he says, 'I wanted to avoid in the written account the tiresome effect of bits of *narrative* interrupting the speeches, such as "and I said" or "and I remarked" wherever Socrates was speaking himself, and "he assented" or "he did not agree", where he reported the answer. So I left out everything of that sort, and wrote it as a *dialogue* between the actual speakers' (143B 8–C 5; trans. Cornford, with modifications). The procedure described by Euclides exactly reverses what Plato has done in the case of the *Symposium*. Plato's deliberate avoidance in the *Theaetetus*, then, of both oral transmission (in the work's dramatic register) and of narrative structure (in its formal register) must be programmatic for that *Dialogue* and is doubtless intended to contrast with the representational strategy chosen by Plato for the *Symposium*.

The elaborate and bizarrely complex compositional form of the *Symposium* can be accounted for in at least two ways that do not refer directly to the philosophical doctrines enunciated in the Dialogue. First, Plato's choice of historical setting and his spacing of the various conversations at temporal removes from one another create a retrospective irony: by granting the reader more knowledge about what life has in store for the interlocutors than any one of them possesses at any given moment, Plato imparts to their words a significance of which they themselves are unaware. He thereby puts the reader in a position to judge 'how the mettle of their characters, the value of their aspirations—their loves—have withstood the test of time'.¹⁰ Their lives and loves can now be measured against their words and convictions, which lie under the posthumous judgement of history and fate. Plato invites his reader, in short, to subject the symposiasts' respective notions of *erōs* to 'biographical criticism'. Second, Plato projects the speeches about *erōs* backwards to a period when Athenian power was at its height and all of the speakers were enjoying great personal prosperity.¹¹ The exuberance of Agathon and his guests, the brilliance of their conversation, and their supreme sense of self-confidence express not only a certain personal vitality but also the cultural energy of Athens at the moment of its hollow triumph in the first phase of the Peloponnesian War. All the persons depicted in the *Symposium*, moreover, with the possible exceptions of Aristophanes and Socrates (depending on how much of a Platonist you are), are poised on the brink of disastrous personal and political careers. By glancing back to a moment in time when the consequences of these men's convictions and choices had not yet unfolded, by retracing the stages of their precipitous decline to its imagined inception, Plato seems to locate a cause for the fall of Athens and for the ruin of its leading citizens in a failure of love, in the vicissitudes of a misguided *erōs*.

III

The receding narrative frames accomplish another purpose, however, in which the erotic theory adumbrated in the *Symposium* appears to be directly implicated. The complex structure of

¹⁰ Brentlinger, 5.

¹¹ For much of what follows I am indebted to Brentlinger, 5–6.

Apollodorus' narrative serves to illustrate that theory. For it manifests the workings of desire.

Erōs, according to Diotima, is a principle of self-perpetuation in mortal natures: it springs from a sense of lack, of limitation, pursues a fullness of being that forever eludes it, and in the course of that continuing struggle establishes a tenuous hold on existence, on presence. As a great daemon, *erōs* mediates between the divine world of being and the mortal world of becoming (202E 3–203A 1); as the offspring of *Penia* and *Poros*, of Poverty and Means, *erōs* is neither mortal nor immortal: rather, it oscillates continually between being and non-being, between presence and absence, by turns thriving and dying and coming back to life on the very same day (203D 8–E 3). These fluctuations reflect more than the periodic waxing and waning of sexual appetite. They describe the dialectic of presence and absence—of possession and loss, gratification and frustration, pleasure and pain—that structures the phenomenology of desire and informs the relation of the erotic soul to its objects. For it is the nature of beauty, and of all the objects we most passionately desire, everlastingly to renew the desire they defeat, at once ministering to our sense of lack and deepening it—like Shakespeare's Cleopatra in Enobarbus' famous description, who 'makes hungry | Where most she satisfies'. In such a precarious fashion *erōs* maintains identity through time: it represents an element of fixity amid the endless cycles of change; it is the source of whatever (illusory) permanence or continuity obtains in the realm of mortal affairs.

Erōs achieves its ends by means of procreation—by the continual production of something new or young to replace what is old and dying (207D 2–3, 208B 1–2). Among the beasts (207A 7–D 3, 208A 7–B 5), and among those human beings who resemble them in so far as their erotic desire expresses itself in a bodily fashion (208E 1–5), procreation is a physical process of giving birth (*genesis*): one member of a species produces another to replace it and the race as a whole endures over time (207D 2–208B 6; cf. *Laws* 721B–C). But procreation is not confined to the replacement of one individual by another in a species: it also takes place *within* each individual and secures a kind of identity for that person through time. Just as our hair and flesh and bones and blood and all our body is constantly dying and being renewed, so are our habits, character, opinions, appetites, enjoyments, pains, and fears all subject to fluctuation: the self is destroyed and reborn from one moment to the next (207D 2–E 5). The mind itself is

not exempt from our mortal condition (in Diotima's view, 207E 5–208B 4, if not according to the Socrates of the *Phaedo*).¹² The *tropos* (208A 7) or *mēkhanē* (208B 2), the procreative manner or mechanism internal to the human individual that is responsible for implanting permanence in the flux of thought, thereby enabling us to retain knowledge, is not *genesis*, or giving birth, however, but *meletē*: 'care', 'study', or 'practice' (208A 3–7). Practice preserves knowledge by recreating it anew and preventing it from being lost through forgetfulness.

The compositional form of the *Symposium* appears, in the first instance at least, to corroborate Diotima's erotic doctrine. The sequence of inset narratives effects the recovery of some historical incidents and some intellectual insights that might otherwise have been lost; it rescues them from human forgetfulness, enabling them (in Diotima's phrase) to partake of immortality (208B 3). Indeed, on a pious reading of the *Symposium*, the continual renewal and successful preservation of Diotima's discourse by means of the self-regenerating narrative represented in the Dialogue may furnish a clue to the sublime wisdom and beauty, perhaps even to the divinity, of her erotic doctrine. In any case, the series of receding narratives has the effect of making present to the reader a number of moments in the past, plucking them from the eternal flow of time and preserving them, stabilizing their identity without, however, denying their transience. The attempt to recapture lost time is marked by Plato (no less than by Proust) as an expression of desire: the successive narrators and enduring narrative of the *Symposium* enact the very processes of loss and renewal, of emptying and filling, with which Plato's Dialogue as a whole is concerned.¹³ Such processes are familiar and characteristic effects of *erōs*. Desire makes itself felt in the impulse of each narrator to leave behind him another narrative to replace the one he had heard, which would otherwise have consumed itself in the course of its delivery and disappeared without a trace. Apollodorus' series of nested narratives exemplifies, then, the procreative labour of *meletē*: only by means of that continuing oral tradition has the knowledge of what was said and done at Agathon's victory-party been preserved—

¹² See R. Hackforth, 'Immortality in Plato's *Symposium*', *Classical Review*, 64 (1950), 43–5, and cf. J. V. Luce, 'Immortality in Plato's *Symposium*: A Reply', *Classical Review*, NS 2 (1952), 137–41.

¹³ On the imagery of emptying and filling in the *Symposium*, see Steven Lowenstam, 'Paradoxes in Plato's *Symposium*', *Ramus*, 14 (1985), 85–104, esp. 88–97; also Rosenstock, who argues that 'The narrative frame of the *Symposium* . . . represents the life-giving power of philosophic speech.'

been captured and held fast in a force-field of desire—and thus been saved from dissolution in the endless cycles of becoming.

The opening clause of the *Symposium* explicitly identifies the preservation of the story as a product of *meletē*: *dokō moi peri hōn punthanesthe ouk ameleitētos einai*, Apollodorus declares (172A 1), and he repeats his words, for additional emphasis, at the close of his introductory speech (*hōste, hopēr arkhomenos eipōn, ouk ameleitōs ekhō*: 173C 1). The expression has given Plato's translators some difficulty,¹⁴ but its significance is unmistakable: Apollodorus' language both anticipates and confirms Diotima's understanding of *meletē* as the procreative mechanism that rescues knowledge from oblivion by renewing it, by transmitting it from the old to the young—in this case, through an unbroken (albeit tangled) chain of oral narrative. Apollodorus effectively, if inadvertently, represents his account of Agathon's party as the product of a self-regenerating tradition of story-telling animated by the dialectic of desire. The *Symposium* is not only about *erōs*, then: rather, its complex narrative structure is itself designed to manifest and to dramatize the workings of *erōs*.

Narrative is the transmission of a *logos*—of a unitary discourse, a speech or story that is designed to be told. Narrative is thus the process or activity by which one *logos* gives birth to another. *Logos* is a vehicle of knowledge. The retention of knowledge over time is a product of *meletē*. *Meletē* represents an instance of the procreative impulse which achieves a certain stability and permanence in the boundless sea of becoming by replacing what is lost with a new version of itself. Procreation is the immediate aim of *erōs*. Therefore, the ultimate cause of narrative is desire.

But narrative can also be the object, as well as the manifestation, of desire—especially if it is a good narrative. The epic narratives of the archaic poets are a case in point. Both those poems themselves and the heroic deeds that inspired them are products of *erōs*, according to Diotima, in so far as they express a mortal creature's desire to perpetuate itself in the eternal memory of mankind. Lovers who are

¹⁴ Shelley renders it 'I think that the subject of your enquiries is still fresh in my memory'; Jowett, 'Concerning the things about which you ask to be informed I believe that I am not ill-prepared with an answer'; Michael Joyce, 'Oh, if that's what you want to know, it isn't long since I had occasion to refresh my memory'; Walter Hamilton, 'I think I may say that I have already rehearsed the scene which you ask me to describe'; Nehamas and Woodruff, 'In fact, your question does not find me unprepared.' Closest of all to Plato's Greek is Bruce Rosenstock (in 'Socrates' New Music'), 'I believe I am not out of practice in what you are asking me about.'

spiritually pregnant give birth not to mortal children but to *aretē*, to 'virtue' or 'excellence'—precisely those heroic qualities of word and deed that achieve fame (*kleos*) and that make heroic accomplishments memorable across the generations (208C 4–209E 4). The goodness of the actions of Alcestis or Achilles arouses in us a desire to preserve the memory of such actions and of the persons who performed them, to possess them perpetually. The poet ministers to this desire and is himself its most eloquent instrument: his desire manifests itself by prompting him to conceive a virtuous offspring, an epic poem, which fixes the glorious deeds of the heroes for all time by enshrining them in a self-regenerating narrative—that is, in a narrative which is itself, by virtue of both the excellence contained within it and its own excellence as a narrative, an object of desire, something we wish to possess for ever. The narrative is preserved by being told, by being handed down in an oral tradition like the one responsible for preserving the story of Agathon's victory celebration. All such narratives, as well as the actions that inspire them, are 'images of excellence' (*eidōla aretēs*), declares Diotima, reserving the phrase 'true excellence' for what is generated by the man who ascends by means of contemplation to the vision of 'the beautiful itself' (212A 2–7).

Further details in this sketch of the erotics of narrativity can be filled in by glancing at Socrates' critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*. Although earlier in that Dialogue Socrates had declared that there is nothing disgraceful in the mere writing of speeches (258D 1–2), in the myth of Theuth he attacks the art of writing on the ground that it will promote forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it by allowing the memory to fall out of 'practice' (*mnēmēs ameleṭēsiai*: 275A 2–3). Writing will therefore destroy knowledge. For knowledge must not be conceived as something that can be captured by a written formula. Rather, it is a dynamic, self-regenerating possession of a living soul, dependent upon *meletē*; it is a continuing capacity to understand, and so it cannot be reduced to a set of mere propositions: it cannot be fixed in any static form. Writing can only remind us of what we already know (275D 1–2). The only sort of writing that can actually impart knowledge is writing that is inscribed upon the soul of the learner by means of dialectic—that is, by an art of living speech (276A 5–9) which takes into account the nature of its subject and the nature of the specific audience to whom it is addressed (270B 1–272B 2). Only such discourses as are engraved upon the soul deserve to be called 'legitimate children' (278A 6): these refer primarily to the *logoi* one has

conceived within one's own soul (278A 6–7), presumably as a response to the procreative stimulus afforded by an erotic encounter (cf. *Sym.* 280E 1–209E 4, 210A 7–8, C 1–3, D 4–6), and secondarily to whatever 'sons and brothers' (*ekgonoi te kai adelphoi*) one's own *logoi* may have engendered and properly raised up in the souls of others (*Phaedrus* 278A 7–B 2).

When these arguments are carried over to the context of the *Symposium*, they suggest that the discourse of Socrates—and, to varying degrees, of the other speakers at Agathon's dinner-party—was 'a living and animate speech by one who knows' (*Phaedrus* 276A 8), a progeny conceived and produced (in his case, at least) by a philosophical *erōs* for being and truth (cf. *Rep.* 485A 10–B 3, 490A 8–B 7, 501D 1–2) and/or by a more personal *erōs* for the beauty of Diotima's soul. It was itself a beautiful child, an image of excellence in both its content (Diotima's wisdom) and its form (which was superbly adapted to the needs of the audience), and it aroused in others the desire to acquire it, to retain it, and to make it their own. Thus, it engendered an entire family ('sons and brothers') of *logoi*, of reported speeches, any one of which is capable of awakening in a listener the same desire as the original—for the very reason that each is the living possession of its speaker, whose own *erōs*, expressed in the exercise of *meletē*, fixes the essential features of the *logos* (its message, rather than the specific verbal medium in which it is expressed) in the memory and thereby preserves its identity over time.¹⁵ In the *Symposium* it is Alcibiades who makes this point. Turning to Socrates, he says, 'At any rate, whenever we hear other *logoi* from some other speaker—even a very good orator—virtually no one cares anything about them; but when anyone, whether a woman or a man or a little boy, hears you speak or hears your *logoi* from another speaker, even if the speaker is a very poor one, we are seized and swept away by them' (215D 1–6).

Here, then, is Plato's official explanation of his representational strategy in the *Symposium*. I call it 'official' because it seems to agree almost perfectly with the precise terms of Diotima's erotic theory. Alcibiades' remark, taken in the context of the *Symposium* as a whole, would appear to authorize something like the following set of

¹⁵ The distinction between message and medium can be illustrated by the process of retelling a joke. A good joke retains the same power and punch, as well as much of the same propositional content, each time it is told, but each person who tells it changes somewhat the particular words in which it is expressed in order to adapt the joke to his or her own personality, to the character of the audience, and to the context of its telling.

inferences. Socrates' sayings, even when they reach us by second- or third-hand accounts, impress themselves in our memory by their beauty or excellence and thereby arouse in us a desire to retain the wisdom encapsulated in them; the *erōs* they awaken sets in motion the mental faculty called *meletē*, our capacity for attentiveness, care, or alertness, and we exercise that capacity in order to hold Socrates' discourses in our minds and memories, preserving the gist of what he said or what we heard. This highly charged erotic process is what gives rise to the elaborate and labyrinthine tradition of oral narrative which Plato portrays at the beginning of the *Symposium*.

The anti-type to Socratic dialectic is Lysianic rhetoric. Phaedrus is obliged to carry a written copy of Lysias' speech about with him: he is unable to retain it, because its glittering sophistries will not take root in the soul; he was struck by Lysias' declamation of it (*Phaedrus* 227A 1–C 5), evidently, and it is only this enduring enthusiasm which reanimates, however feebly, the speech in his own delivery of it (234D 1–6). But not even Phaedrus' charming delivery is sufficient to make Socrates remember Lysias' speech, and when he and Phaedrus wish to criticize it they are obliged to pore over the written text.¹⁶

IV

The *Symposium*'s apparently perfunctory dialogic opening plays a crucial role in Plato's larger argument for the erotics of narrativity. For it testifies in a direct and unmediated fashion to the allure of narrative; it presents narrative as an object of intense desire. The amazing strength of the longing precipitated in the listener by the excellence of Socrates' narrated words, of his reported speech, is dramatized in the dialogic preamble to the narrative in the *Symposium* by the eager insistence of Apollodorus' nameless interlocutors. Their determined request, voiced (apparently) before our text begins, reminds Apollodorus of the similarly pressing entreaties of Glaucon, only two days before, who—not content with an incoherent account originating with Aristodemus and passed on to him via *two* intermediaries—called after Apollodorus and said such things as 'I've just been looking for you', 'so tell me the story yourself', 'don't make fun of me—tell me

when the party took place', and 'so tell me the story, won't you?' (172A 6–173B 7). A similar urgency drives Apollodorus' acquaintances to express annoyance with his protracted anecdote about Glaucon and to betray their lack of interest in Apollodorus himself (they dismiss his remarks as old news: he's 'always' the same, they say—the word *aei*, applied to Apollodorus, occurs three times in six lines to underscore their impatience with him—and they've heard everything *he* may have to say many times before: 173D 4–10); they have no use for him except as a conduit for the narrative, which they have resolved to hear: 'Just do what we asked of you—tell us the story of who said what' (173E 5–6).

To be sure, Apollodorus' interlocutors are not seekers after truth. They are wealthy businessmen (173C 6), *hommes d'affaires*, and—if we are to believe Apollodorus, an admittedly hostile witness—they are motivated not by philosophical *erōs* but by vulgar curiosity. Hence, Plato's dramatization of their desire in the dialogic opening of the *Symposium* has the effect of marking Apollodorus' narrative as an instance of gossip, a piquant and mildly scandalous tale repeated by one inquisitive neighbour to another. But to say that is not to join Apollodorus in denigrating the motives of his companions (or those of the other intervening narrators) as being different in kind from his own. For gossip itself reflects the operation of *erōs*. Plato, our supreme poet of the mixed motive, has devised in the form of Diotima's teaching a totalizing theory designed to explain the moral psychology of everyone—even, or especially, of those who repudiate or ignore it. 'Vulgar curiosity' expresses the same desire to obtain and retain noteworthy deeds, and reflects the same appeal exerted by Socrates' reported speech, as the reverent attentiveness of Apollodorus. Gossip, then, is a low-level form of philosophical discourse, and philosophy—whatever *else* it may be—is at the very least a high-class kind of gossip. Diotima's account of *meletē*, after all, was not intended to describe the mental equipment of the philosopher but to define the procedure by which we all preserve whatever knowledge we possess. If the story of Socrates' speech and conduct at Agathon's party is passed on from one person to another in the form of gossip, that is just another testimony to the reflected excellence of Socrates' words and deeds which inspire in others such a desire to retain them that they are told and retold until they achieve a perpetual hold on the collective memory. Or so the 'official' doctrine of the *Symposium* would have it.

Plato's combined use of dialogue and narrative in the compositional form of the *Symposium* may be understood in this light. Plato uses the

¹⁶ Ultimately, however, Socratic dialectic proves no more immune to human forgetfulness, no more successful at achieving its own retention, than Lysianic writing. For more on the 'unofficial' doctrine of the *Phaedrus*, see n. 18 below.

dramatic frame of the *Symposium* to stage the erotics of narrativity, to reveal narrative as both an expression and an object of desire—a means of gratifying the desire it incites and of renewing the desire it gratifies. Narrative itself is erotic in so far as the illusion of dramatic immediacy it provides typically serves to collapse the distance between the occurring and the recounting of an event, or between the characters in a tale and its audience, while the very fact of narrative serves to consolidate that distance, to institutionalize and perpetuate it. For narrative itself is a sign of a gap that has opened up between the 'now' of a telling and the 'then' of a happening, a gap that demands to be continually crossed and recrossed, if we are to succeed at reconstituting in imagination, however fleetingly, the lost presence of a past that is forever slipping away from us. By endlessly abolishing the distance it interposes and interposing the distance it abolishes, by making the past present without actually bringing it back, narrative at once satisfies and (re)generates desire: that is why we are both eager and sorry to come to the end of a good narrative. That is also why we never tire of retelling the same old stories (*Sym.* 173c2–5). The erotics of narrativity display the same dialectic of presence and absence, of loss and renewal, that informs the erotics of sexual passion.

The *Symposium's* dramatic frame also enables Plato to insert the reader into the erotic circuit that connects those who transmit and those who receive a narrative. By placing the reader outside the charmed circle of Socrates' personal acquaintance, by making the reader a stranger to Socrates as well as to those for whom his words were originally intended and thus withholding from the reader—initially, at least—unmediated access to Socrates' charismatic presence, Plato identifies us with Glaucon and with Apollodorus' other, nameless interlocutors and he offers their desires as a model for our own. Their eagerness, their lively anticipation serve to boost the value of what we are about to hear, making us especially keen to hear it; like the laugh-track accompanying a televised situation comedy, their repeated requests for the story advertise its appeal and construct our own responses.

V

But it is precisely at this point that we can no longer avoid confronting a significant problem for what I have been calling the 'official'

doctrine of the *Symposium*. For although Plato locates us, his readers, squarely within the oral tradition of Socratic narrative (in which he often must have found himself), he also removes us, as the readers of a *written* text, from that tradition. *We* do not need to exercise the kind of care or practice required to hold words of wisdom in our memories, nor shall *we* be expected to transmit them to others by means of oral narrative, for we possess a finished transcript, and when in doubt we can always refer to the text. We share with Apollodorus' interlocutors only the experience of receptivity, of being the incidental and unintended audience of a narrative, those into whose hands it has fallen of its own accord. Otherwise, our relation to the narrative is a different one, an entirely *literary* one, and all the work to be performed by *meletē* has been transferred, in our case, to the sphere of interpretation.

At the conclusion of this paper I shall have something to say about the erotics of interpretation. For the moment, however, I want to linger over the multiple ironies occasioned by Plato's use of the *written* medium to celebrate the erotics of *oral* narrativity. These ironies proliferate beyond the simple *mise-en-abîme* effect, familiar from the *Phaedrus*, produced by any criticism of writing *in* writing; they go beyond the mere paradox that Socratic orality is the offspring of Platonic inscription,¹⁷ that the logocentric world apparently glorified in the *Symposium* turns out, on closer inspection, to be an entirely logographic effect. They even go beyond the fact that Plato's 'official' justification of his representational strategy in the *Symposium*, a justification that revolves around the erotics of oral narrativity, is accessible only to a careful *reader* of the *Symposium's text*—inasmuch as that justification can be arrived at solely by means of the kind of intense, minute scrutiny and comparison of individual passages that a written text alone makes possible—and would not be accessible, I believe, to even an orally trained auditor of a vocalized performance. Rather, the ironies I speak of strike at the heart of the 'official' explanation of the relation between the compositional form of the *Symposium* and the erotic doctrine contained in it. Indeed, they even

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', in *La Dissémination* (Paris, 1972), 69–197. For a brilliant and wide-ranging exploration of this paradox see the writings of Harry Berger, jun. In what follows I have been especially influenced by his 'Phaedrus and the Politics of Inscription' (unpublished MS), a somewhat garbled version of which has appeared in Bernard P. Dauenhauer (ed.), *Textual Fidelity and Textual Disregard* (American University Studies, ser. 3, Comparative Literature, 33; New York, 1990), 81–103.

call into question whether Plato's *Symposium* contains any erotic doctrine that can confidently be ascribed to Plato himself, whether the very notion of an erotic *doctrine* is not in Platonic terms a self-cancelling, self-refuting one.

Let us turn, then, to what might be called the 'unofficial' story about the erotics of narrativity that Plato has to tell us. The first thing to notice is that even in the dramatic register of the *Symposium* the theory of narrativity officially promoted by the Dialogue breaks down. According to that theory, the beauty or excellence of Socrates' discourses—even when they are conveyed by 'a very poor speaker' (*Sym.* 215D 4)—is supposed to focus the attention of the hearer and to impress the gist of those discourses indelibly on the hearer's memory, thereby facilitating the preservation of Socratic wisdom through oral transmission. The compositional form of the *Symposium* is supposed to testify to the triumphant power of this erotic dynamic, but Apollodorus' opening narrative of his recent conversation with Glaucon testifies instead to its failure. For, as Apollodorus tells his companions, Glaucon had been unable to obtain a clear account of Agathon's party from the person who had told him about it (172B 3–5), despite the fact that Phoenix, who had informed this nameless intermediary, had got the story directly from Aristodemus, just as Apollodorus himself had done (173B 1–4). The person who told the story to Glaucon, then, is no further removed in order of descent from 'the true account' than is Apollodorus' own audience—or the reader of Plato's text. And yet, Glaucon's informant "couldn't say anything clear" about it (172B 4–5). Indeed, he even left Glaucon under the impression that Agathon's party had taken place relatively recently, whereas in fact it took place more than a dozen years before, "when we were still children", as Apollodorus represents himself as telling Glaucon (172B 6–173A 8). In short, the *Symposium*'s dialogic opening dramatizes the *loss* of Diotima's *logos* as much as it signals its retention (see also *Sym.* 178A 1–7, 180C 2).¹⁸ Far from rescuing the memory of what was said and done at Agathon's from forgetfulness,

¹⁸ Plato undoes the 'official' doctrine of the *Phaedrus* in a similar fashion, except that the subversive gesture occurs at the end of that Dialogue, rather than at its beginning. Socrates' living, dialectical exchange with Phaedrus climaxes in the working out of a rigorous distinction between rhetoric and dialectic, which Socrates arrives at by means of a laborious procedure calculated to exemplify the dialectical operations of division and collection. When the task is completed, Socrates triumphantly concludes, 'Now I think we have pretty well cleared up [*dedelōsthai*] the question of art.' To which Phaedrus replies, 'Yes, we did think so, but please remind me [*hupomnēson*] how we did it' (277B 2–4, trans. Hackforth). So much for the vaunted ability of Socratic dialectic to

far from securing the preservation of Diotima's precious teaching, the process of narrative transmission is evidently just as liable to dissipate as it is to save valuable knowledge.

The clearest signal of despair, the most eloquent confession on Plato's part of his own lack of confidence in the *Symposium*'s official doctrine of the erotics of narrativity, occurs when Apollodorus acknowledges that, not content to have got the story of Agathon's drinking-party from Aristodemus, an eyewitness, he checked 'a number of things' (*enia*) directly with Socrates, who confirmed the accuracy of Aristodemus' narrative 'with respect to each particular' (*kathaper*) contained in it (173B 4–6). Rather than trust to reports, to the all too obviously fallible vicissitudes of oral transmission, that is, Apollodorus goes straight to the source, blithely vaulting over the mediating narrator and collapsing the intervening narrative frame. What seems most disturbing about this procedure in the context of the *Symposium*'s erotic theory is not that Apollodorus' decision to check Aristodemus' testimony against a more reliable source bespeaks an essentially *documentary* anxiety, one more appropriate to the correction and recension of a written transcript than to the verification of an oral history: the comparison of verbal eyewitness accounts, after all, is a standard element in Greek historiography (e.g. Thucydides 1. 22. 2–3). Instead, the truly discordant effect produced by Apollodorus' scientific collation of verbal texts—by this Platonic fiction of authentication, this dramatic illusion of historical accuracy—is that it ultimately serves to authorize one particular inscription: it privileges the version of events and speeches set down in the written document we happen to be reading at the moment; the accreditation it provides helps to underwrite the dramatic 'truth' of the individual narrative inscribed in the text of Plato's *Symposium*. Far from vouching for the efficacy of oral transmission and thereby vindicating the erotics of narrativity, Apollodorus' scruples merely establish the pedigree and authenticate the veracity of the story contained in a single text—a story whose precise features have at last been stabilized, fixed for all time, and conveyed into our hands by means of Platonic inscription. In this

arouse the hearer's attentiveness, to reproduce the content of its wisdom in the soul of the learner, and thereby to preserve itself from oblivion! Cf. G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge, 1987) [Ferrari] 207–8, who notes Plato's earlier, and pointed, use of *hupomnēsai* at 275A 5, D 1, 276D 3, 278A 1, but who concludes merely that Phaedrus 'risks dealing with the spoken word as if it were written'; Derrida, 'La pharmacie', emphasizes Plato's use of *hupomnēsai* and its derivatives without noting Phaedrus' terminal request for a reminder.

way, the conversation between Apollodorus and his friends that opens the *Symposium* does at least as much to privilege logographic inscription as it does to dramatize the erotics of narrativity.¹⁹

Furthermore, Plato calls into doubt the extent to which any narrative that actually succeeds in reproducing itself, as Aristodemus' narrative at least occasionally manages to do, can escape Socrates' critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* and qualify as a genuine instance of dialectical speech. In what way, after all, does Apollodorus' narrative distinguish itself from those stories that disintegrate in the process of transmission (such as the story of Agathon's party that reached Glaucon via Phoenix)? Does it not distinguish itself in being relatively stable and fixed in its features (not to say canned)—a recital that may require practice but that, once committed to memory, can be produced at any moment for the asking? Is there any indication that Apollodorus' narrative is in fact adapted to the needs of his specific audience, as true dialectical speech is said to be (*Phaedrus* 270Bff.)? The evidence, such as it is, tends to point in the opposite direction. Apollodorus seems to be reciting, without much discernible regard for the intervening change of audience, the very story that he had recited to Glaucon only a day or two before. Indeed, he promises his nameless companions that he will 'attempt to narrate' the story to them 'from the beginning, [just] as [Aristodemus had] narrated it' originally to him (173E 7–174A 2): being 'well practised' appears to signify to Apollodorus nothing more than the ability to reproduce exactly what Aristodemus had recounted to him. He never refers or even alludes to his auditors in the course of his recital, nor does he seem to take account of their personal attachments or predilections in the actual framing of his tale (except, perhaps, for his inclusion of moneymaking, along with gymnastics and philosophy, among the human pursuits that spring from an erotic impulse: 205D 3–5), so it is hard to know in what sense the story he tells is geared specifically to the persons he is ostensibly addressing. In fact, Plato implies that Apollodorus' story is *not* so geared: when Apollodorus gets to the end of it, he simply shuts off, like a gramophone record that has finished playing.

In this respect Apollodorus' narrative represents an instance of the

kind of oratory that Plato likens to writing.²⁰ In the *Protagoras* Socrates complains that 'if you should ask an orator a question, *they are like books*—unable to make any reply or to ask any question themselves; even if you enquire about something they said, however trivial it may be, they are just like a bronze gong that has been struck and that goes on noisily ringing unless someone takes hold of it—so these orators, in response to the slightest enquiry, spin out a long speech' (329A 2–B 1). The inability to answer questions and the tendency to go on saying the same thing for ever—which seem to be characteristic of Apollodorus and to account, at least in part, for his success at preserving and transmitting Socratic *logoi*—are cardinal features of writing, in Plato's eyes. He comes back to the topic²¹ in a famous passage of the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates compares writing to painting and complains once again that written words 'seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on signifying the same one thing for ever' (*Phaedrus* 275D 4–9, trans. Hackforth, adapted). Apollodorus' narrative, then, does not so much resemble dialectical speech as it does a written text. Instead of championing the erotics of oral narrativity, the dramatic frame of the *Symposium* would seem to promote a rhetoric of textual inscription.

A similar conclusion can be drawn from a glance at the philosophical pretensions of Plato's narrators. Apollodorus and Aristodemus claim to be living a life devoted to intellectual enquiry and (in that sense if in no other) to be Socratic philosophers. Apollodorus constantly rebukes his acquaintances for failing to follow his, or rather Socrates', example and for considering anything else to be of value besides philosophy (173A 1–3, C 2–D 1). He represents himself, via Glaucon, as a 'companion' of Socrates (172B 6) and he prides himself on the fact that for almost three years now he has been consorting with Socrates and making it his business to know, each and every day, everything that Socrates says and does (172C 4–6). He believes everyone to be wretched, save only Socrates, and although he does not except himself from the general human condition, he merely *supposes*

¹⁹ The *Theaetetus* once again offers a point of comparison, inasmuch as the text of that Dialogue is an inscription that portrays a live, viva voce reading of the written transcript of a live conversation. 'So the Platonic dialogues seem to constitute both a reified displacement and a preservative "emplacement" of Socratic dialectic', comments Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, 1987), 31.

²⁰ A number of the contributors to Charles L. Griswold, jun. (ed.), *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings* (New York, 1988), emphasize that Plato's criticisms of writing extend to spoken discourse as well: see, in particular, Kenneth M. Sayre, 'Plato's Dialogues in the Light of the *Seventh Letter*', and Rosemary Desjardins, 'Why Dialogues? Plato's Serious Play', 93–109 and 110–25, esp. 110–11, respectively; so also Ferrari, 204–16.

²¹ Cf. Derrida, 'La pharmacie', 156, who connects the two passages.

himself to be in a bad way, whereas he *knows* this to be true of non-philosophers (173D 1-E 3)—a sly rhetorical move that seems to caricature the Socratic style of formulating knowledge claims.²² Similarly, Aristodemus figures (in Apollodorus' characterization) as 'the greatest lover of Socrates among the men of that era' (173B 3-4). But his devotion seems to express itself most visibly in an exaggerated aping of Socrates' personal mannerisms: like Socrates, Aristodemus is 'always barefoot', for example (173B 2; cf. 203D 1, 220B 6)—though Socrates himself dons footwear on special occasions (174A 4). For Apollodorus and Aristodemus alike, then, philosophy seems largely to consist in a personal, not to say idolatrous, cult of Socrates.²³ Instead of engaging in Socratic enquiry, they tell stories about Socrates.²⁴ They do not give birth to discourses themselves (but see *Sym.* 173C 3-4); they memorize and recite the discourses conceived by others. (If Aristodemus actually did deliver a speech about *erōs* at Agathon's party, he [or Apollodorus] seems to have forgotten it—a fact that is neatly obscured, in one of Plato's most inspired bits of dramaturgy, by Aristophanes' critically timed disruption of the original order of the speakers at the symposium.) Plato never represents either of his narrators *doing* philosophy: we never see either of them advancing or examining philosophical claims; we only see them recapitulating uncritically the philosophical claims made by others, most of all by Socrates. Far from being true philosophers, Apollodorus and Aristodemus appear to function entirely as sites of Socratic inscription.

In short, Plato would seem to have used the *Symposium's* dialogic opening to dramatize both the defeat and the excessive triumph of the erotic doctrine officially sanctioned by the Dialogue. On the one hand, the doctrine proves to be unsuccessful in so far as narrative is shown not to work as well as it might have been supposed to do: even a living tradition of oral narrative is insufficient, evidently, to capture, hold, and preserve precious knowledge. On the other hand, the official doctrine proves to be too successful in so far as narrative is shown to work better than it ought to do: when narrative does manage to contain

²² Cf. Gregory Vlastos, 'Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1985), 1-31.

²³ For this, and for what immediately follows, I am indebted to Martha Nussbaum's formal commentary on the original draft of this paper.

²⁴ In this (as Nussbaum observes) they resemble Alcibiades, who similarly substitutes for an original discourse in praise of *erōs* a series of personal anecdotes in praise of Socrates and who, more than any other character in the *Symposium*, embodies the disastrous consequences of such a misdirected narrative desire.

and to transmit wisdom, to reproduce itself repeatedly and accurately, it reduces human storytellers to mere sites of textual inscription.

This combination of failure and over-achievement makes it possible to pinpoint elements in the *Symposium's* official doctrine that ought to have aroused suspicion on first encounter. Let us look again, for example, at Alcibiades' testimony to the excellence of Socratic speech—the passage that is supposed to provide the key to understanding the bizarre compositional form of the *Symposium*. According to Alcibiades, 'whenever we hear other *logoi* from some other speaker—even a very good orator—virtually no one cares anything about them; but when anyone, whether a woman or a man or a little boy, hears you [Socrates] speak or hears your *logoi* from another speaker, even if the speaker is a very poor one, we are seized and swept away by them' (215D 1-6). This statement, if descriptively accurate (as the *Symposium's* 'official' erotic doctrine implies), would bear witness to a quite remarkable, and highly unlikely, phenomenon. It would indicate that Socrates' discourses are so excellent that they transcend their specific verbal medium: they effectively trump any rhetorical strategy used to convey them and overcome any rhetorical ineptitude on the part of the speaker, acting as a kind of universal solvent on the words in which they are transmitted. A report of Socrates' *logoi* is therefore bound to be a sure-fire, fail-safe hit, because its value is supposedly independent of the form of its utterance. But is this in fact the case? Not only is Alcibiades' assertion suspiciously grandiose; not only is it belied as much as it is confirmed by the *Symposium's* dramatic opening; not only would it, if true, render Plato's Dialogues indistinguishable in their effects from the writings of Xenophon and other Socratics: it also makes a mockery of the claims advanced on behalf of dialectical speech in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates' sayings, on Alcibiades' view, are intrinsically well adapted to the needs of *any* audience, no matter how deficient (woman, man, or boy). They do not have to be inscribed on the soul of each hearer by an art of living speech that takes into account the nature of its subject and of the specific audience to whom it is addressed. The speech of Socrates is allegedly universal speech, equally suited to any audience.

Now there is a kind of speech that *is* designed to be passed around indiscriminately among everyone and to work its effects indifferently on any audience it may reach. Socrates describes it in the *Phaedrus*: 'Once a *logos* is put into *writing*, it drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those

who have no business with it' (275D 9-E 2, trans. Hackforth, adapted). Alcibiades' claim, which sounded suspiciously grandiose when taken to refer to the speech of Socrates, becomes much more plausible when applied to the writings of the Socratics, especially to Plato's Dialogues (even though the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus* would be the first to repudiate such an application of that claim). A *written* speech by Socrates, after all, will be just as good on every reading as it was on the first reading, and it is guaranteed not to suffer in transmission. Socrates' oral disquisition on *erōs* at Agathon's party might qualify, within the dramatic terms of Plato's fiction, as a true instance of dialectical speech and might claim to owe its preservation, within the fictional world of Plato's Dialogue, to being superbly well adapted to the needs of its original audience, but it is the written version of that disquisition, the version recorded in the text of Plato's *Symposium*, that would seem to have been designed to suit the needs of any audience, 'whether a woman or a man or a little boy'. In short, Alcibiades' praise ultimately redounds less to the virtue of Socratic speech than to the power of Platonic writing.²⁵

Inscription is a trope of identity. It figures the repetition and reproduction, the maintenance and the preservation, of the same. As such, it can function as an image for the central and defining activity of *erōs* in Diotima's view, namely procreation. Diotima had described *erōs*, after all, as a principle of fixity in the realm of mortal affairs, a source of permanence or continuity amid the endless cycles of change. Like *erōs*, inscription also maintains identity over time, ensuring the transmission of the same: as Socrates repeatedly says, written discourse goes on saying the same thing for ever. But there turns out to be something highly questionable about the use of inscription to figure the procreative operations of *erōs*. For inscription maintains identity in a slightly but importantly different fashion from desire: it works by eliminating change, whereas erotic procreation works by means of change, by continually producing something new to replace what is being lost. Significant consequences result from this difference between inscription and procreation. Offspring are formally but not numerically identical to their parents, for example, whereas a text is numerically identical to itself in all of its inscriptions. Similarly, good sons (on the Greek view) resemble their fathers—but not to the extent

²⁵ Cf. Charles L. Griswold, jun., *Self-knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven, 1986), 224: 'Thus Plato's written dialogues are also better suited to creating that "immortal" [*Phdr.* 277A 2] chain of philosophers than is Socrates' spoken dialectic.'

of being identical to them, or mere simulacra of them, which is how a written copy or a transcript resembles its original. Procreation is not replication: the process of substitution, replacement, and renewal can never be perfect; if it could, *erōs* would enable us to achieve immortality in our own persons instead of only a pale semblance of immortality through our offspring.

Socrates demonstrates some recognition of this in the *Phaedrus*. Although he includes writing with sowing and begetting among the activities that figure dialectical speech and that by so doing serve to distinguish it, ostensibly at least, from rhetoric, he also describes the *logoi* that one's own *logoi* engender in others as 'sons and brothers' (*ekgonoi te kai adelphoi*) of the original *logoi*—as merely *related* to the original *logoi*, then, rather than as perfect copies of them (278A 7–B 2).²⁶ Still, Socrates' figurative use of writing alongside his metaphors of sowing and begetting has the effect of blurring the distinction between procreation and replication, making insemination (whether sexual or agricultural) into a trope for the regeneration of identity while making inscription into a natural mode of reproduction. As Harry Berger puts it, 'the emphasis is on the reproduction of the same, the suppression of otherness, and the more secure transmission guaranteed by the automatism of natural process'.²⁷ The result is to represent philosophical instruction from the student's perspective as an act of intellectual insemination by the teacher and to represent it from the teacher's perspective as an exercise in male parthenogenesis, an attempt to reproduce himself and his doctrines in the student. In this Socratic fantasy, philosophy is ultimately figured as homotextuality.

VI

What I have been trying to suggest is that the *Symposium*, like the *Phaedrus* in its own way,²⁸ while seeming to privilege the erotics of narrativity, actually privileges writing over dialectical speech. Or, rather, it privileges dialectical speech in certain passages and privileges inscription in others. The Dialogue's 'official' position is balanced against, and undercut by, an 'unofficial' critique of that position, and

²⁶ See also *Phaedrus* 276E 6–277A 4, in which the notion of achieving immortality through procreation recurs in language reminiscent of *Sym.* 212A 5–7.

²⁷ Harry Berger, jun., 'Phaedrus and the Politics of Inscription'.

²⁸ See Derrida, 'La pharmacie', 171–2.

the praise we might have expected to be reserved for narrativity is in fact displaced on to—or, at least, shared with—textuality. Like Alcibiades, who arrives at the victory celebration intending to crown Agathon but who crowns Socrates instead of, or in addition to, him (213D 8–E 6), the *Symposium*'s purpose is deflected from its ostensible goal and redirected towards an unanticipated result. Despite its lack of a concluding logical or definitional impasse, then, the *Symposium* can still be reckoned an aporetic Dialogue, in so far as it calls into question the positive doctrine it seems to put forward.

Like Berger (and Stanley Rosen),²⁹ then, I read Plato in opposition to Derrida not as a metaphysical dogmatist but as a kind of deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, a cunning writer fully alive to the doubleness of his rhetoric who embraces *différance* and who actively courts in his writing an effect of undecidability.³⁰ The *Symposium* exhibits a series of alternating doctrinal and counter-doctrinal pressures, and interpreters of the Dialogue need to remain sensitive to each set of pressures. It would be wrong to conclude from my reading of the work that it contains no positive doctrine, that it lacks any genuinely Platonic philosophical content, or that it merely spoofs the notion of an erotics of narrativity, being wholly ironical in purpose and designed simply to demonstrate the futility of philosophical enquiry or to satirize the quest for a true doctrine. Such a conclusion would ignore the very real and considerable intellectual energy that Plato puts into the construction of theory and the formulation of doctrine. It would mistake the enormous seriousness with which Plato approaches the philosophical enterprise and it would fail to acknowledge the extent to which the erotic theory propounded in the *Symposium* actually succeeds in attaining to a high degree of both logical rigour and experientially descriptive power.³¹ But without denying the positive philosophical thrust of the *Symposium* and the other Dialogues, we must also learn to come to terms with Plato's equally serious deter-

²⁹ In 'Platonic Hermeneutics: On the Interpretation of a Platonic Dialogue', in John J. Cleary (ed.), *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, i (1985) (Lanham, Md., 1986), 271–88, [Rosen], Rosen similarly defends Plato from Derrida's critique, though on somewhat different grounds.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'La différance', in [Ouvrage collectif], *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris, 1968), 41–66. Heraclitus had earlier pursued in his writings a similar effect, according to Harold Cherniss, 'Ancient Forms of Philosophic Discourse', in *Selected Papers*, ed. Leonardo Tarán (Leiden, 1977), 14–35, esp. 16–18.

³¹ Within these methodological limits, then, I continue to stand behind the account of Plato's erotic theory which I offered in 'Platonic *Erôs* and What Men Call Love', *Ancient Philosophy*, 5 (1985), 161–204.

mination not to leave his readers with a body of dogma.³² If my reading of the *Symposium* is justified, it would seem that Plato—in this one Dialogue, at least—systematically goes about undermining and subverting the very theories that his philosophical personae propound and that many elements of the Dialogue systematically combine to promote.

Plato's *Symposium*, then, leaves both its philosophical and its literary critics with a series of pressing questions which they will be hard put to answer positively and decisively. For example: Is Plato proposing a theory of the erotics of narrativity or is he criticizing such a theory? Does the literary form of the *Symposium* reflect or contradict the Dialogue's philosophical content? Does Platonic writing sustain or subvert the themes of Socratic speech? Does Plato do what Socrates says or does Socrates say one thing while Plato does another? If in fact there do not seem to be satisfactory answers to these questions, that is because both halves of the disjunctions they present accurately describe the textual strategies of the *Symposium*; it is because Plato has gone out of his way to withhold from his readers the means of sacrificing in good conscience one of the alternatives to the other.³³ The result, which the contemporary field of Platonic studies dramatically exemplifies, is to leave Platonic interpreters in a state of restless and urgent desire.³⁴

And therein lies the clue, some readers will say, to solving the unresolvable contradictions in the *Symposium*'s theory and practice. The way to devise a new unified or synthetic reading of the *Symposium*, on this account, is not to attempt to reconcile its various internal contradictions but rather to transcend them by moving to a higher level of interpretation—to what might be called either a meta-philosophical or a metadramatic level of interpretation (it is not immediately clear which term would be more appropriate, for reasons that are significant and that will be explored below). Instead of attempting to discover the philosophical and dramatic unity of Plato's *Symposium*, to specify in exact terms its thematic and formal coherence, it might be possible to recuperate a unified, systematic

³² I am grateful to Helen Bacon for emphasizing this point to me.

³³ Cf. Ferrari, 210, on the question of the authenticity of the speech attributed to Lysias in the *Phaedrus*: Plato 'would have known . . . that he was seeding his text with a question that was likely to prove unanswerable'.

³⁴ Most recently dramatized by the essays collected in Griswold (ed.), *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*.

interpretation of the Dialogue as a whole if one were to seek it at the level of the work's textual strategy, which, after all, is such an erotic one. This appearance-saving project should appeal to philosophers and to literary critics alike, inasmuch as both subscribe to principles that recommend it—to the principle of charity, in the case of philosophers, and to the Jamesian precept of granting the artist his (or her) *donné*, in the case of literary critics. At all events, the enterprise is not particularly strenuous: in order to salvage the unity and coherence of Plato's *Symposium* from its self-cancelling textual practices, one need only emphasize the erotic dimensions and consequences of its overall textual strategy.

Here is how such an interpretation would run. Plato's various doctrinal and counter-doctrinal gestures, his deliberate alternation of positive and negative moments, of theoretical construction and critique, produce in readers of the *Symposium* continual cycles of comprehension and incomprehension, constantly shifting proportions of blindness and insight. The perpetual loss and renewal of understanding on the part of the interpreter, to which such a procedure gives rise, reflects a familiar erotic operation, namely the dialectic of presence and absence that structures the phenomenology of desire—in this case, the phenomenology of hermeneutic desire.³⁵ True to its own theory, the *Symposium* lures us to interpret it and frustrates our efforts to interpret it, and the doctrine embedded in it seems forever to dissolve in our hands just when we thought we had finally grasped it. More truly an *erōtikos anēr* than the speaking Socrates whom his writing constructs as both an irrecoverable and a perpetually recovered philosophical presence, Plato artfully withdraws from us in the very act of appearing to surrender himself and his 'doctrines'. If, in short, the *Symposium*'s erotic theory ultimately fails to justify the compositional form of that Dialogue, at least it succeeds in describing and accounting for the dialectical alternation of comprehension and incomprehension that the *Symposium* generates in its interpreters.

VII

There are difficulties with this appearance-saving move, not the least of which is the uncritical fetishizing of such values as 'unity', but it

³⁵ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975) [Gadamer], 329–32.

would seem at first to be well grounded in the text of the *Symposium*. For Diotima treats interpretation itself as an erotic enterprise. One of the daemonic functions of *erōs*, she informs Socrates, is to serve as an interpreter between gods and men, filling and bridging the gap between beings who otherwise would never meet (202E 3–203A 4).³⁶ Hence, the whole art of prophetic interpretation (*hē mantikē*) depends on *erōs* (202E 7–203A 1); in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates teaches that *mantikē* and *erōs* are akin to one another in so far as they are both forms of beneficial madness (244A–245C, 265B 2–5).³⁷ But *mantikē* also has a role to play in the inner life of the human individual: it is needed to decode the prophetic language of the soul and to mediate between the levels of the psyche. Prophetic interpretation is therefore required in order to give human beings access to themselves, to negotiate the gap between the surfaces and depths of human motivation. Nothing so palpably breaches an opening in the soul, disclosing undreamt-of chasms within it—and, thus, nothing so urgently calls for an art of prophetic interpretation to reveal human beings to themselves—as the experience of erotic passion.³⁸

It is a consequence of Plato's theory of desire, and of the transcendental ontology connected with it, that the lover's conscious wishes, the content of his or her mental representations, do not make manifest the objective structure of his or her intentionality: as Plato's Aristophanes establishes by means of his famous myth in the *Symposium*, the ultimate aim of erotic desire may remain enigmatic even to the most experienced lovers.³⁹ Those who spend their entire lives together 'could not say what they wish to gain from one another', according to Aristophanes. 'No one would think it was sexual intercourse, or that for the sake of sex each partner so earnestly enjoys his union with the other. But it is clear that the soul of each lover wants something else, which it is not able to say, but it divines (*mantheuesthai*)

³⁶ On the mediating function of *erōs* see Jerry Stannard, 'Socratic Eros and Platonic Dialectic', *Phronesis*, 4 (1959), 120–34 [Stannard]. On interpretation as a power of *erōs*, see Rosen, 271, 283. On the connection between Plato's metaphysical theory of beauty and the metaphysical assumptions of modern hermeneutics, see Gadamer, 434–44.

³⁷ But cf. *Tim.* 70B–72D, where Plato appears to retreat from this sanguine view of mantic enthusiasm.

³⁸ Nothing, perhaps, except Socratic dialectic: for the correspondences between Socratic dialectic and Platonic *erōs*, see Stannard.

³⁹ I have argued for the interpretation summarized in this paragraph in 'Platonic *Erōs* and What Men Call Love', 168–9, 183–4, and in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York, 1990), 125–7.

what it wants and hints at it' (192C-D).⁴⁰ Similarly, when Diotima announces to Socrates that the aim of desire is procreation, he remarks that it would take the art of divination (*manteia*) to figure out what she means (206B 9): Socrates, in other words, stands just as much in need of an art of prophetic interpretation to decode the enigma of the erotic aim, when Diotima articulates it, as do the most experienced lovers, when their own souls obscurely grope for a way of representing it.

Without successful interpretation, without the benefit of a glimpse into the deep structures of his or her motivation,⁴¹ every lover would remain ignorant of the reason and purpose behind his or her own *erōs*—what Aristophanes and Diotima alike call its *aition* (192E 9; 207E 7; cf. 207B 7, C 7). The same model might be applied to reading, which resembles *erōs* in so far as it often seems to consist of apprehending something meaningful about a work without being aware of exactly what that something is. Only an art of interpretation can make the levels of literary meaning transparent to a reader, on this account, just as prophecy is necessary to render legible the depths of the human psyche. In love as in literature, human beings evidently require a Platonic analysis, of the sort Diotima performs on Socrates, in order to learn how to interpret the cryptic, prophetic messages that their souls are continually sending them.

Erōs breaches an opening in the soul only to close it; its prophetic utterance at once voices its meaning and necessitates an art of prophetic interpretation, an erotic hermeneutics,⁴² to decode it. Interpretation, like desire, like narrativity, is both the solution to its own problem and the problem posited by that solution. For interpretation arises, on Diotima's view, only in response to a perceived loss of understanding;⁴³ it is only when meaning eludes an interpreter, when it starts to slip away from her, that she marshals the arts of interpretation in order to recapture it. Just as *meletē* manifests itself to the exact degree that knowledge is constantly departing from the knower,

⁴⁰ In the *Republic*, Socrates uses language similar to that employed by Aristophanes in the *Symposium* in order to describe our difficulty in apprehending the nature of the good: it is 'what every soul pursues, that for the sake of which it does everything, something whose existence it divines (*apomanteuesthai*)', but cannot seize upon; rather, the soul remains 'at a loss and unable to grasp adequately what it is' (505D-E).

⁴¹ For Plato as a 'depth psychologist', see the eloquent and persuasive discussion by David K. Glidden, 'The *Lysis* on Loving One's Own', *Classical Quarterly*, 31 (1981), 39-59, esp. 46-53, and cf. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Sather Classical Lectures, 25, Berkeley, 1951), 218.

⁴² This is Rosen's phrase.

⁴³ Cf. Gadamer, 301, 345-9, 429.

according to Diotima (208A 3-7), so hermeneutic *erōs* comes into being neither when meaning is fully present (and there is no need for interpretation to recover it) nor when it is entirely absent (and its presence is never missed) but only when it ostentatiously withdraws, leaving a trail of tell-tale traces behind it. At the same time as interpreters set out to regain lost meaning, however, their very activity is a sign of the distance that has intervened between the objects of their investigation and their own understanding of those objects, for interpretation effectively posits a lack of understanding as the condition of its own activity.

It is no accident, then, that Diotima, the personage who stands at the end of the hall of narrative mirrors that constitutes Apollodorus' tale in Plato's *Symposium*, is herself a prophetess—a professional interpreter. For Diotima is a figure of *différance*: she is a woman in a man's world whose characteristic gesture is one of deferral, of postponement or delay (staving off the plague), a mantic performance that mimics the work of the interpreter who, by her recuperative activity, both announces and, for the moment, prevents the arrival of understanding: she signifies that its advent—fatal to the continuing practices of philosophy and literary criticism alike—is imminent but not yet upon us.

VIII

The unitary reading of the *Symposium* just proposed ultimately rests on the common element that Plato seems to find in desire, in narrativity, and in interpretation. Good narratives and cunning texts are like beautiful bodies, according to Plato: they excite desire and provide certain kinds of temporary, local gratification, without however yielding up the secret of their fascination. Rather, they renew desire even as they gratify it because the quality in them that awakens desire in the first place tends to recede as one approaches it, transcending as it does the particulars that instantiate it. Just as *erōs*, in Diotima's myth, mediates between being and non-being, constantly perishing and reanimating itself, so narrativity mediates between the past and the present, at once articulating and traversing the distance between them, and interpretation mediates between interpreters and the objects of interpretation, simultaneously advancing our understanding and deferring it. Chief among Plato's many achievements in the *Symposium*, on this reading of it, would be to have established an

analogy between sexual desire, narrativity, and interpretation in erotic terms and, at the same time, to have figured that analogy in his text. What Plato would seem to have done in the *Symposium*, then, is to construct a reflexive relation between the representation of *erōs* and the erotics of representation.

A similar strategy, carried out by quite different means, might also be discerned in the thematic disposition of the *Phaedrus*, in its joint meditation upon *erōs* and rhetoric. Although each topic is treated separately from the other, in its own half of the Dialogue, Plato seems to establish a dialectical interdependence between them by the mutually referential treatment he accords them. For in the *Phaedrus*, unlike in the *Symposium*, Plato does not depict people in the actual throes of erotic passion—he does not, that is, directly represent the experience of *erōs*. Instead, he stages erotic *fictions*: he has his characters make *speeches* in which they represent themselves as the subjects of hypothetical passions and he has them compete with one another in composing rhetorical simulations of *erōs*. Conversely, when the topic of the Dialogue turns from *erōs* to rhetoric, Phaedrus and Socrates do not merely discuss literary techniques in the abstract. Rather, they evaluate different kinds of compositions about *erōs* and they judge different methods of literary technique, at least in part, by their relative degrees of efficacy at seducing the mind (*psukhagōgein*) of the reader or listener. It is this very fusion of erotic and literary themes, this intimate association between the rhetoric of *erōs* and the erotics of rhetoric, that since antiquity has baffled those interpreters of the *Phaedrus* who insist on discovering the dialogue's unitary theme, its 'one true subject';⁴⁴ only recently, as Derrida reminds us, have commentators ceased to complain that the *Phaedrus* is badly composed.⁴⁵

It is profoundly ironic, and potentially quite instructive, that the Platonic Dialogue responsible for introducing into the arsenal of literary-critical analysis the criterion of 'organic unity' (264c 2–5) should itself have been most persistently vulnerable to the charge of artistic disunity; it is similarly ironic that the Platonic Dialogue most centrally and explicitly concerned with questions of compositional form—of 'logographic necessity' (264b 7)—and, hence (one has every reason to believe), most deliberate and self-conscious in its textual strategies should itself have been most severely and protractedly

criticized for its alleged compositional flaws, most thoroughly interrogated about its own structural coherence (that is, its own *ananke logographikē*). What all these ironies suggest is that some relation of reflexivity between the representation of *erōs* and the erotics of representation obtains not only in the thematic structure of the *Phaedrus*, spanning and uniting the discussions of desire and rhetoric, but also in the interpretative situation that the Dialogue establishes with its readers, implanting in them a mingling of critical suspicion and hermeneutic desire that exactly mirrors the play of oppositions and correspondences between erotic desire and rhetorical technique in the thematic field of the Dialogue. That Plato's interpreters should have scrutinized the *Phaedrus* in exactly the same terms in which the *Phaedrus* represents its interlocutors as scrutinizing literary texts indicates, among many other things, something of the extent to which Plato's texts mimetically construct the desires of their readers, engaging them in a hermeneutic activity that imitates the philosophical activity of the interlocutors represented in the Dialogues. (Plato's texts read us, evidently, as much as we read them, even if they also seem to write, to *prescribe*, our own responses to them.) A similar claim might be made about the *Symposium*: Plato engenders in his readers a hermeneutic desire that prompts them to make speeches to one another about *erōs*, to discuss and theorize it in ways that mirror the philosophical activity of the interlocutors in the Dialogue. In so far as Plato can be said to have devised a reflexive relation between the interpretation of his erotic texts and the erotics of textual interpretation, and in so far as he can be seen to have dramatized that relation by means of the hermeneutic situations in which both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* mimetically place their readers, Plato would seem to have secured the formal and thematic unity of those Dialogues. If in the case of the *Symposium*, then, the unity of form and theme had earlier broken down when the theory of the erotics of narrativity, on which it had been founded, collapsed, that unity can now be recovered—not at the level of philosophy or drama, to be sure, but at the level of interpretation.

IX

But is *interpretation* what Plato wants us principally to do with his Dialogues? Do we read Plato rightly when we take his works as texts to

⁴⁴ See R. Hackforth, trans., *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge, 1952), 8–9, for a survey of the ancient critical controversy.

⁴⁵ Derrida, 'La pharmacie', 74–5.

be endlessly interpreted, thereby treating them in effect as works of literature? And to the extent that our hermeneutic activity mirrors the philosophical activity of the interlocutors in the *Symposium*, will it be vulnerable to the same deconstructive critique? These questions bring us to our final topic, which is Plato's philosophy of writing—or, it might be better to say, his erotics of reading. In an earlier essay, I once argued that Plato's use of dramatic dialogue 'represents an attempt to recapture the original and authentic erotic context of philosophy—the exchange of questions and answers from which emerges, dialectically, an image of excellence: the lover's beautiful speeches. By its very form, then, the Platonic dialogue aspires to engage the reader . . . to awaken *erōs* in the reader—to arouse, in particular, his [*sic*] hermeneutic *erōs*, "the desire of the text"'.⁴⁶ But what is the *aim* of this textual desire, this hermeneutic *erōs* that Plato arouses in his readers? More specifically, does the reader of a Platonic text feel inspired to interpret the text, to reflect on the philosophical issues addressed in it, or to set about deconstructing the very distinction between philosophy and literature? The facile assumption of much current academic work in the field of ancient philosophy has been that there is little practical difference between the literary and philosophical approaches, that in order to interpret a Platonic text one has to philosophize and that in order to understand and criticize Plato's philosophy one has to know how to interpret his texts. Accordingly, my earlier formulation silently elided the distinction between literary interpretation and philosophy by emphasizing the erotic element shared by each and by invoking a hermeneutic *erōs* that supposedly spans both literary-critical and philosophical activity. It is now time to confront more squarely the difference between these two responses to Plato and to ask which of them answers more exactly to the desire that a Platonic text evokes in its reader.

The question proves, characteristically enough, to be undecidable. For Plato's philosophical representatives repeatedly assail the value of the very kind of literary interpretation which their creator repeatedly demands of his readers.⁴⁷ In the *Ion*, for example, Socrates scathingly characterizes all those who interpret the poets as 'interpreters of interpreters' (535A 9). In the *Protagoras* he goes further and mounts an

⁴⁶ Halperin, 'Plato and Erotic Reciprocity', *Classical Antiquity*, 5 (1986), 60–80, esp. 78–9.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of various ancient attempts to reconcile Socrates' denunciation of *mimēsis* in the *Republic* with Platonic practice, see Haslam, 23–4.

attack on the seriousness of all criticism of poetry: 'some say a poet means one thing, others say something different, all of them engaged in discussing [*dialogomenoi*] a matter that they are unable to resolve [*exelenxai*]' (347E 5–7). Socrates recommends that the assembled company turn its attention to philosophy instead, and the result—though identically inconclusive—proves to be more valuable. For now the irresolvable disagreement arises not between several interpreters but within a single philosopher, namely Socrates, who finds himself both affirming and denying the proposition that virtue can be taught, thereby discovering his own ignorance and acquiring fresh impetus for further enquiry.⁴⁸

In the *Symposium*, what Socrates and Diotima say is pointedly at odds with what Plato does. The dramatic action of the Dialogue, especially the interaction between Aristophanes, Agathon, and Socrates, establishes the latter's erotic, intellectual, and even Dionysiac triumph over his rivals among the poets; in the terms of Plato's allegory, Socrates' ascendancy plainly represents the ascendancy of the life of philosophy over that of poetry.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Diotima's failure to include literary texts (or other works of art) among the objects specified in her erotic curriculum implies that literature is not a worthy object of desire in its own right and that the study of it represents a dead end for the lover who aspires ultimately to apprehend the Form of the Beautiful. To fix one's gaze on a literary object, on the offspring of someone else's erotic activity, is a perversion of correct desire. And to interpret a Platonic Dialogue is in some measure to duplicate the idolatry of Aristodemus and Apollodorus, who confuse the vehicle of philosophy with its tenor and who canonize for others what they should be reinventing for themselves. For all that, and despite its own undeniable philosophical ambitions, the *Symposium* itself remains beyond dispute the finest work of fiction, of prose literature, to survive from the classical period—as well as one of the trickiest texts of all time to interpret.⁵⁰ If Plato did not want us to interpret it, why did he write it, and why did he write it that way?⁵¹

⁴⁸ I wish to thank Nicholas D. Smith for this reading of the *Protagoras*.

⁴⁹ See Bacon; Brentlinger; and Diskin Clay, 'The Tragic and Comic Poet of the *Symposium*', in John P. Anton and Anthony Preus (eds.), *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ii (Albany, 1983), 186–202.

⁵⁰ In his essay on the *Phaedrus*, Harry Berger makes a similar point about the contradiction between what Socrates says and what Plato does in that Dialogue: 'It's a fine irony that the Platonic text whose aporetic play solicits the conflict of interpretations should represent speakers who propose the notion of a writing that is not

This question leads rapidly and directly to another impasse, to a final crux of Platonic undecidability. I am happy to report to those readers of Plato who may be worried that they are about to receive the sort of ultimate answer that will extinguish their desire and put an end to the dialectical play of erotic alternatives sustaining their tenuous existence—I am happy to report that this crux is an absolutely insoluble one. For in order to determine why Plato writes the way he does, whether he wants his reader to philosophize about the subject of a Dialogue or to take that Dialogue as an object of interpretation in its own right, it is necessary finally to determine whether Plato intends his Dialogues to be read as works of philosophy or as works of literature. And that question is notoriously unanswerable,⁵² because—in the case of the *Symposium* at least—Plato says one thing and does another.

When it comes to taking sides, then, in what Socrates calls 'the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (*Rep.* 607B 5–6), Plato turns out to be a double agent—and to be such an extraordinarily skilful and devious one that it may ultimately prove impossible to determine where his primary loyalties lie. Plato's readers may try to remove the difficulty, to discover their author's allegiance, but in so doing will they be engaging in philosophy or in literary criticism? Plato exacts a high price, in short, from those who would presume to set a limit to the erotic play of his dialectic: he obliges them to recapitulate that dialectic in their own lives, to inscribe the very dialectic they had hoped to abolish in their own activity, and thus to become undecidable enigmas to themselves. So while we await the moment—if it should ever arrive—when we are catapulted out of uncertainty, out

something to be read, questioned, and interpreted but is, on the contrary, an ideal of psychic programming that would eliminate the danger and power of interpretive or interrogatory reading.'

⁵¹ Perhaps Plato wished to demonstrate to his readers the futility of interpretation, but—if so—the lesson he wished to teach us is one we can only learn by failing. Like Alcibiades, who had to fall in love with Socrates in order to discover (if he ever did) how misguided it is to love Socrates as an individual, we can only realize how futile it is to interpret a Platonic text by trying to interpret it. Plato, on this view, does not want us to fall in love with his texts and so he invites us to fall in love with his texts so as to cure us homoeopathically, as it were, of our folly. Even on this interpretation, then, interpretation is both disease and cure, and the only solution to interpretation is more interpretation.

⁵² Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, 1979), 103, observes, Plato is one of those figures 'whose work straddles the two activities of the human intellect that are both closest and the most impenetrable to each other—literature and philosophy' (the other figures in de Man's reckoning include Augustine, Montaigne, Rousseau, and Nietzsche).

of the joy and agony of desire, into a realm of pure transcendence, the best that we can hope for is to work productively within and among the contradictions Plato has devised for us, not to put an end to the dialectic by resolving it in favour of one alternative or another and thereby closing down the circuit through which our desire circulates but to keep it moving so as to prolong the erotic tension that animates our existence as readers and lovers of Plato's texts. Platonic questions demand answers from us but at the same time they ask us to recognize, as we set about trying to answer them, that our task is one in which—to borrow the words of a favourite contemporary philosopher—there's no success like failure, and failure's no success at all.

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