

Supporting Themes in the *Symposium**

PLATO's *Symposium* has so much charm but contains so little open debate over concepts that were it to have been his only surviving work, literary critics would seldom have conceded that its author was really a worker in the philosophical vineyard. It is only because Plato wrote a good many of his dialogues in the form of back-and-forth argument that readers have been conditioned to expect dialectic even in the most improbable frameworks. Otherwise they would hardly have glanced within the incisive characterization, the dazzling rhetoric, and the glowing mythology of the *Symposium*—and would accordingly have missed an extraordinarily subtle philosophic structure, a stately dialectical sequence that when laid bare astounds us.

There is a second tendency, opposite to the first, which finds in Plato not much more than a unitary doctrine, a dogma of love, and plays down all the dramatic and poetical touches as being delightful but excrescent. These critics, overly sensitized, perhaps, to the formalities of philosophy, have been hesitant to seek for "Platonic philosophy" in any discourse but that of Socrates, and they continue to think of the half-dozen other speakers as mere attractive foils to the hard going of the theory of ideas and the ladder of aspiration¹ or love.

To put my view bluntly, these critics, both the literary and the philosophical ones, are in their separate ways wrong. Their errors are all the more inexcusable because Plato himself has supplied literally dozens of clues to his double intention to set forth both a doctrine and an embodiment of it—a fusion of philosophy and life. We can go a step further by saying that this very fusion is both a doctrine itself and also a transcript of conditions of life. And Plato's only way of showing this, I think, is to furnish the broadest possible hints that the whole train of discourses,

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Phaedrus to Alcibiades, should be taken as integral to the very heart of this doctrine of love, virtue, and knowledge, and that, turn about, the exhibition of the persons in the drama in their respective postures, amours, and stages of inebriety would be no better than pointlessly entertaining, perhaps even degrading (even as the frivolities of Homer's gods are degrading), were it not that the gestures and the discourses were set end to end in an inescapable pattern of asseverations and meanings.

To neglect, then, the multiple clues to the intention of Plato that the dramatic and the philosophic be considered instinct one with another is to miss a good deal on both sides, and to lose hold of the special unity of the dialogue as well. Some of these clues are as trivial as the personal traits of Aristodemus, as outlandish as the hiccups of Aristophanes (surely more significant than any belch in Shakespeare!), or as hammered-in as the repeated references to wine. Relatively few of the studies made on the *Symposium* take it as all of a piece,² and especially are the speeches of Aristophanes and Alcibiades treated as extraneous to the ladder of Eros and whatever else is taken as *echt*-Platonism.³ Hence I propose to re-examine some of the passages that have excited interest largely for their "drama," "satire," "poetic fantasy," and see if these, too, cannot be found to fit nicely into the total scheme. But there is one proviso: I do not wish them to bear more than their just weight, nor overload them so that they cease to be exciting, or funny, or imaginative, as the case may be. The hoped-for result of my study will be, perhaps, to discover that the genius of philosophy and that of literature do not change places, yet are somehow the same; and if this conclusion involves getting rid of certain textbook conceptions of either philosophy or literature, this too will be all to the good.

At the outset, readers are confused about the philosophic purposes as soon as they see that rhetoric and poetic appear to dominate Agathon's party, and that even the plea for giving epideictic speeches on love has a most personal cause—hangovers. The excuse offered by Phaedrus (and Eryximachus) for talking about Eros is a rather incidental one—the poets have been remiss. Moreover, the chief feature of the dialectic in almost all the *other* dialogues lies in the control of meanings of words, and the consequent checking of definitions, by some one master—Socrates, Parmenides, the Eleatic Stranger, Timaeus, Critias, or the Athenian Stranger.⁴ In the *Symposium*, on the other hand, there is little attempt (except for a short colloquy between Socrates and Agathon) to alter directly the statements of previous speaker, or affect those whose turns are still to come. It must be, then, to other hints which we must listen

if we wish to discover the precise meanings of the terms that Plato would have us carry away: we must partly gather the dialectic from the sequence of characters and incidents of the piece.

It is, on the other hand, just as essential to keep the philosophy in mind if the human relations of the dialogue are to remain clear. A modern reader who failed to perceive the purposes of these for clarifying the connections of philosophy and literature and who came across Socrates for the first time here would think of him as an unaccountably tardy, informal guest with a hollow leg whose speech is elevated, paradoxical, difficult to follow, and who seems to be having a negative effect on a handful of the younger men as a result of having displayed a sneaky puritanism.⁵ Without the manifest skill in debate and the uncanny refutations of other Platonic dialogues it is hard to discover just how Plato could hope to achieve the necessity and universality ordinarily demanded for philosophic propositions. Discard the "philosophy," and the moral dignity of *all* the participants vanishes at once. This can be re-established only if we are willing to acknowledge the circularity in the work: the place of debate is taken by the patterns of applause and jocular criticism, drinking, and erotic companionship, by the placing of the guests and their order of speaking. These, I say, point up the doctrine and this *in turn* flashes a new light upon the personal relationships.

The *Symposium* depicts a situation in which encomium rather than analysis or exposition is to be the aim of discourse.⁶ Thus the applause after Agathon's talk is universal and prolonged, showing that he fulfills the common ideal of what encomium should be, and that his fanciful ascriptions really gather up a number of earlier threads of discourse and tie these together. The applause for Socrates is fairly general, but the thin-skinned Aristophanes attempts a reply to Socrates' slight correction of love as a blind seeking of another part to reconstitute a whole, regardless of the goodness of this whole. Then Aristophanes and the applause are both halted by shouts, just as Socrates' defense of himself as philosopher is interrupted by shouts in the *Apology*.⁷ But the shouts here are not those of a dicast but of a lover, Alcibiades, who later will praise Socrates, and whose irruption stops the applause as a way of hinting, first, that the applauders may have enjoyed the speech for the wrong reasons (let us say rhetorical rather than dialectical reasons),⁸ and, second, that what will ensue must be quite a different sort, taking rise from lower, less-taught and less teachable levels of man's nature, rather than the quite carefully instructed contrivances of the earlier speakers. (We remember that the teacher of Phaedrus was Hippias, or maybe

Lysias;⁹ of Pausanias, Prodicus;¹⁰ of Eryximachus a number of pre-Socratic thinkers and men of medicine; of Aristophanes, the Muse;¹¹ of Agathon, Gorgias;¹² and of Socrates, Diotima.) Not one of these men speaks altogether in his own name, though Socrates is the only one wholly to disclaim originality,¹³ regardless of how much he professes to know about matters pertaining to Eros.¹⁴ It is accordingly of high importance that Alcibiades be neither a man much instructed nor a man sober enough to exercise traditional restraints, but rather a man of miscellaneous experience who in his puzzled, groping way has divined a little of the real business of philosophy, which is not only to elevate men in words, as Agathon and Socrates had just elevated, but to give men the virtues in fact—in actions. The function of Alcibiades in the dialogue, in this connection, is not so much to praise Socrates before strangers as it is to differentiate him before friends from the sophistic temperament of Agathon, whose speech is quite like that of Socrates in its exaltation and poetic freedom, but unlike it in substance as a statement of what love really means for man.

Secondly, there is the wine, which has given pain to all the other guests (Socrates alone excepted) yet gives pleasure and freedom to Alcibiades, although Agathon cannot pour wisdom into Socrates or anyone else as he can water.¹⁵ Alcibiades can communicate to others his partial insight into the nature of Socrates with the help of this wine. There are, withal, several relations that the participants in the *Symposium* bear to wine—indeed, almost all possible. Wine brings pain to most, regardless of how much pleasure it has brought before—it is a mixed pleasure, according to the *Philebus*.¹⁶ To Socrates it is neither a pleasure nor a pain, nor is it useful or detrimental to promoting his intellectual insights. To Alcibiades, it is allowed to seem an unmixed good, because it permits his telling of the truth. The anonymous heedless ones who break in after Alcibiades, and who seem also to be drunk, put an end to all discourse.

Thirdly, the pattern of lovers and those loved cuts across that of drinkers. Thus Pausanias and Agathon form a pair within the group; Phaedrus is not distinctly paired with someone present, though in two other dialogues it is indicated that he and Eryximachus are lovers; and Socrates, though neither lover nor beloved in the sense intended by the other speakers, has two quite opposite sorts of admirers, Alcibiades and Aristodemus.¹⁷ The former desires actively, while the latter is the typical passive well-wisher, content with a few crumbs of attention and with no hope or need of further satisfactions.¹⁸ (In a way, Aristodemus is as

chaste as Socrates, but mere passive chastity is insufficient, in Plato's view, to constitute philosophic virtue. It is at the end of, not apart from, the climb up the great ladder that a man becomes a true lover.) Then there is the extraordinary bond between Socrates and his sublime prophetess: here it is impossible to decide in *ordinary* terms which is the lover and which the beloved; even in *Socratic* terms both seem to be ranged together as common lovers of a truth. Their differences arise from the unsureness of Socrates' step as he is about to enter into the great mysteries of Eros.¹⁹

What I have been trying to establish by these three examples is this: that the *Symposium* is neither a statement of philosophy with a delightful background, a "drama of ideas" pure and simple, nor is it a drama of persons who happen to be talking theory,²⁰ but rather it is a new form, which makes the two sorts of drama wholly integral one with another. Many scholars now agree that the highest kind of literature in Plato is philosophy; less often the critics insist that the supreme philosophy is literature. The objection that the *Parmenides* and *Sophist* are, after all, good philosophy and bad literature holds only if one looks to a more popular conception than Plato's of what literature should be. It seems to me that *both* these statements are true as parts of a completer truth: that for Plato *real* philosophy (not the bogus kind that the sophists teach in public or that Dionysius II would like to write) and *real* poetry (not even that of Homer and his great themes of war and human society and the intercourse of men and of gods,²¹ but something truer) are precisely the same. I do not suppose this fusion could have been completely written out, even by Plato. But for all his reservations regarding the written word, he endeavored mightily.²² In his dialogues the movement is from persons to ideas and back to persons; but equally it is from ideas and back to ideas. This, of course, is not all: *which* ideas (I mean here Platonic ideas) are presented in connection with *which* persons, and how they are substantiated or refuted, clarified or obscured, lies deep in the nature of Platonism, and manifests the rhetoricico-dialectical genius of Plato in its uniqueness rather than in its accidental similarities to other writers of dialogue. What this leads to is a reformulation of the connections between personality and that which is known. The person is most properly the way in which perfectly understandable ideas are *in fact* viewed, by reason of the confusions wrought by the senses²³ and the vagaries of popular education; and the ideas, in their turn, are indistinguishable from what the enhanced and instructed mind can apprehend by dialectical refection upon the widest possible variety of the

objects of experience. This knowledge must be intimate with the experience. Thus Socrates talks with two poets about the fundamental unity of intellect behind both comedy and tragedy. Even when they are weary and drunk the assertion seems plausible to them as it would not to persons mis-schooled and lacking native talents. For their common outlook upon *poiesis* derives from their having natural gifts beyond the others—had not Agathon, for instance, in spite of his Gorgian conceits, won a prize which neither Phaedrus, nor Pausanias, nor the irretrievably stuffy Eryximachus could ever have taken?

But the dialogue illustrates what I have said still more fully. There are no refutations in the *Symposium*, as we pointed out, except for the passage where Socrates forces upon Agathon an awareness of a possible mean between contrary opposites, politely pretending—or *was* he pretending?—that a similar distinction had been forced upon *him* by Diotima. At any rate, lacking any further recourse to refutation, the participants cannot launch interpretations of poetry either²⁴ and hence no valuing or disvaluing of poetic stories, except for the silence when there might have been applause. The only way to show where poetry resides is to show how it is incorporated into philosophy, and this is one function of the great speech of Socrates. Nearly everyone *laughs* after the tall tale of Aristophanes, but they all *applaud* after a tale almost as tall when it is told by Socrates. Even the general company can see that a story standing by itself is ludicrous when the dialectic it illustrates is shaky and indeed patently false, whereas a very similar story, exemplifying much more complex relations between parts and wholes of bodies and of souls and their progeny, strikes them as praiseworthy. This much of Socrates they do understand. The fact that the dialectic of Socrates is a complete statement of human aspiration is further driven home when, at the very end, he proves to the reposeful poets that their knowledge is fundamentally the same. This does not mean that Aristophanes could assume Agathon's role as a limited poet—indeed in some ways he can more easily change places with Eryximachus, the Chief Medical Officer of the group—but it means rather that the *real* knowledge which is at the bottom of comedy and tragedy, and which has the characters of both, is the poetically enriched dialectic of the philosopher. This next-to-last line of the dialogue makes little sense if we forget that the speech of Socrates, with its being-becoming-non-being triad, is preceded by a passage-at-arms with Agathon, who has a simple diremption of fixed contraries, and is followed by an attempted interruption of Aristophanes, who in his own speech had attempted to show compounds of contraries,

in a crude version of the Eleatic Stranger's blending of classes in the *Sophist*.²⁵ The contributions of Aristophanes and Agathon to the evening had much the same strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the identification of the two kinds of poetry is clear to anyone who can grasp the long speech of Socrates as a whole, that is, a fusion of the comic and the serious, or at any rate a mean between them. The two men, however, agree to this only half-heartedly. Their grasp is partial.

Let us go on to the famous hiccups. Either the critics have set these aside as a mere literary touch²⁶ or else they have pointed out that the purpose is get Aristophanes' harangue postponed, so that it could be made to fit the dialectical order of the speeches. It would seem that the first view could now be dismissed as an improbability because so many other "touches" seem to point in philosophical directions, just as the sequences of hands in Leonardo's *Last Supper* indicate the spiritual relationships of the disciples to each other and to Jesus. The second ignores the lack of economy of having two men trade their speaking-order, when they could have sat differently at the outset. I like to think that these hiccups are one of the surest indications in the dialogue that *nothing* is wholly casual and that if we follow them far enough they will give even more weight to the contention that Plato, in his dialectical poetry is composing a work of incredible, if often unappreciated, tidiness. First of all, of course, the hiccups are a disharmony of the diaphragm, which in the *Timaeus* is listed as the point of separation between the respective seats of appetitive and the ambitious parts of the soul.²⁷ It is the maladjustment of bodily love and ambition which for Aristophanes is the very point in question—Zeus splits four-legged men not because they are lovers but because they are overly ambitious, and he is jealous of his ramparts. This turns men back upon themselves, eliciting their most abject sexuality. Second, if this harmony goes awry, the cure is not so easy—three remedies must be applied. But more important still is the fact that when Aristophanes begs for a prescription or a substituting speech, Eryximachus gives him both. This can only mean that the two speeches, rather than the two men, are somehow transposed, in their subject matter and manner of treatment. Normally, Aristophanes would be expected to talk about love in a very general way, making it a universal and perhaps blind passion; and Eryximachus would then talk about the phylogenesis of love, its possible mutations.

Because it is plainer, we may look at the discourse of Aristophanes first. His strange assortment of limbs and heads is more than likely a parody of the Empedoclean view (reported by Aetius)²⁸ that the generations

of animals and plants do not breed true, but are altered radically from parental to filial; and of the related Empedoclean assumption (reported by Aristotle)²⁹ that faces without necks sprang up, arms without shoulders, and so on.³⁰ I do not need to labor the fact that love and strife, which are not contraries anywhere else in the *Symposium*, are related and opposed by Aristophanes, though admittedly he scarcely applies them as Empedocles applies them. Moreover Aristophanes' threefold combinations of like and unlike may stem directly from Empedocles; but that they stem from him alone would be dubious, inasmuch as the like-unlike principles could be taken from Heraclitus and others. But certainly Empedocles was the chief influence upon medical thinkers of the period and his four-phase cosmology is indeed a vast expansion of simple chemical elements, changes, and their causes: a projection of them on a grand scale. Were a poet asked to speak imaginatively on Empedoclean biology and cosmology, taking a physician's place, no doubt this would be his subject matter.

Eryximachus, for his part, makes an equally radical shift away from the materials that a doctor would be expected to deal with. The talk is about physiology not at all, but rather about the arts—music, the mantic art, poetry. And Eryximachus dwells at length upon the extension of the same knowledge throughout earth and heaven; and this it happens, is a point that the real Aristophanes had already made in *The Clouds*.³¹ The doctor turns the tables on Aristophanes by advocating the very type of cosmic knowledge which the comic playwright had already disparaged in his play about Socrates; and as he does this he also sets up a vague hierarchy which makes his speech seem structurally the one most nearly akin to that of Socrates with his ladder of love.³² In sum, the speech of Eryximachus turns the Aristophanic attack on Socrates upside down; the speech of Aristophanes reduces the Empedoclean cosmology of Eryximachus to a relatively puny human scale and shows by implication (when contrasted with the addresses of Agathon and Socrates) that physiology is unable to account for the psychic aspects of Eros. If the *Symposium* is in part about the lover, Socrates, then Aristophanes and Eryximachus nullify the implied attack of the other upon Plato's heroic, daimonic philosopher. The two men, outwardly doctor and patient, deliver speeches that are also related by their diverse transformations of Empedoclean and other sources, and by their quite different direct bearings upon Socrates and his view of Eros. As with Phaedrus and Pausanias, one builds upon the other, but also each has a different relation to Socrates.

This hints at something not often remarked concerning the order of speeches; it is a twofold order. The speakers recline in a circle, so that their discourses must be arranged serially, and if you like cumulatively. This is indicated by the frequent backward references to the distinctions set forth earlier.³³ But the effect of this arrangement taken by itself, would be either total dialectical indigestion or else total cancellation of the positive results of each speaker. (Remember, there is practically no refutation, as there is in *Republic I*, to separate out what is worthwhile from what is trivial or false.) So there must also be a different order, which is indicated not by physical placement at all but rather by the dramatic prominence given to one central personage, Socrates. This is conferred upon him by Apollodorus' opening remarks, by the bath, the cryptic episode under the neighbor's porch, the banter with Agathon, the very length of Socrates' speech, not to mention the ambivalent enthusiasm and jealousy of Alcibiades, and by the final departure and second bath at the end—all these establish the centrality of Socrates, his position at the hub of a dialectical wheel.

Let us look at the serial order first. The patterns of contrary pairs of terms selected by the seven speakers to explicate love are of some interest. Thus Phaedrus speaks of lover and non-lover, though the latter is a shadowy creature indeed, and the former is hard to make out; Pausanias, of the heavenly and popular, to his mind similarly related as are good and bad; Eryximachus divides love into the healthy and the sick, while Aristophanes takes love to be good if it be between like persons, bad if between unlike; for Agathon there is a contrast between the ugly and the beautiful, to be corrected only by Socrates' insistence that these contraries (along with certain others) have intermediates. The contraries in all these pairs are what might be called *ideas* or principles; the two chief opposites in Alcibiades' bibulous eulogy are *persons*—himself and Socrates.³⁴

Running side by side with these is a very important discussion of the virtues, which are used throughout to interpret either what love does for man or what man should do for love. These virtues are the same four that occupy Socrates in the *Apology*, in the *Republic*, the *Laches*, and elsewhere. Thus Phaedrus refers only to courage (a bad mark against him, inasmuch as it appears to be the least rational of the virtues, and least implies the other three). For Pausanias, good love, heavenly love, is really the same as temperance, though what is temperate is fixed according to extrinsic standards of custom; where wisdom intrudes, it is only as an adventitious education of the beloved. Eryximachus, who quite

naturally sees all things in terms of health (harmony) and disease, looks upon the former as a kind of temperance, or, if you like, justice; here wisdom enters in the guise of a rather superficial knowledge of the arts—an "integrated course." Aristophanes, taking justice as the paramount virtue, treats it as a restraint, a holding-back of ambition to supersede the gods; courage now becomes subordinate, but exists as one of the kinds of love, that of man for man. Agathon, the rhapsodic Agathon, tries to say that love is *all* the virtues, or at any rate that love promotes them, but he fails to order them in the right way, because he leaves wisdom as nothing more than the poet's skill. This is soon corrected by Socrates, who points out (in the context of a long account of the virtues) the identity of love and wisdom which is in turn the knowledge of the good and of beauty, and which implies the knowledge of what is everlasting.

Now comes Alcibiades. He is drunk, he has no tricked-out discourses, he will tell the truth. (The point of this is that when he praises Socrates the goodness of the master is to be estimated in terms of a *universally* felt standard, not one taught for special occasions.) It is remarkable now that he puts all four of the virtues in fairly good order: Socrates is said by him to be temperate, courageous, just (he takes no bribes), and finally he has wisdom, as manifested in his persuasive, indeed stunning use of words.³⁵ But Alcibiades, while he gives a fair description of what it means to be temperate and brave (the two conspicuous virtues of a soldier), is woefully weak on the other two virtues.³⁶ How, then, is his speech internally related to that of Socrates? The relations are indeed very many, and the closeness that Plato intends is hinted at by the inordinate amount of banter between the two men, by their continued sitting next each other, even though they change places; and of course by the contents of their respective discourses, the second of which draws a picture of the life of the true lover, in near-ignorance of the nature of true love. But these are only pointers.³⁷

Briefly, his chief function is not unlike that of the chilling description of the degradation of states in Books VIII and IX of the *Republic*. There is a kind of external ambiguity in the culminating account of the best state—it looks as though man states having a temperate populace and a well-trained soldiery would fit the account, and certainly the curriculum, in Book VII, for the philosopher-king is politically a trivial thing unless we are talking abstractly, about an ideal, never-never city. But what Books VIII and IX show is that *no* existing state can be made to fit that description of the best one, that as the discrepancies between

them and this best one become ever greater they in fact are worse and worse. There is a similar external ambiguity and abstractness about the speech of Socrates in the *Symposium*; but dialectic as a matter of fact always requires supplements of various kinds to show that it can fit real-life situations, or that ordinary life really differs significantly from the description he gives.³⁸ Socrates has a little of the weakness of Agathon—his *talk* makes one think of an emotionally charged situation in which we simply keep our eyes glued to something unshakeably wonderful—but not very important in our lives. Alcibiades, at the price of describing successive degradations of himself, shows that the difference between what Socrates is really talking about and what *might* be taken as satisfying that account in the lives of men is of vast import: Socrates cannot live up to Diotima's discipline of love simply by being a *Feinschmecker*, fixing his gaze upon eternal beauty as Max Beerbohm's Oscar Wilde fixes *his* gaze upon a delicate flower, and committing the indiscretions which Athens would have cheerfully tolerated but which in London were enough to land a man in jail. It is noteworthy in this context that Alcibiades, though a frequent hearer of Socrates, is not really a pupil of his, as Theaetetus would have been; and he picks up the plainer features of Socrates' talk, without paying close attention to the rest. Thus he says that Socrates speaks only of packasses and cobblers,³⁹ which is interesting in that in the speech just finished there was scarcely any reference whatever to anything so homely; the artisans and horses are back in Book I of the *Republic*, where they are used to illustrate the deficiencies of a conception of justice as an art of money-dealing.

I suppose that one ought to say something of Alcibiades' political position, the fact that he was a great tactician on the eve of his first triumph and disgrace, the fact that he came to a bad end; perhaps Plato would have had us see his weaknesses implicit in his speech of the evening, leading to his undoing. But it is really just an accident that Thucydides and Plutarch (among others) have supplied us with details of his life over and above what we learn in the *Symposium*, and that there is scarcely any clear testimony regarding the other participants, even Socrates, beyond what Plato chooses to let us know. According to Plutarch, Alcibiades met his death under a hail of arrows and javelins, but what we know of him at Agathon's party from Plato's portrait is that he was, as they say, stoned. Not only is he drunk, but even sober he is made by Plato to seem the almost totally unphilosophical man.⁴⁰ He is not a real philistine, for he admires Socrates, has some eye for statuary, and quotes Aristophanes, all very aptly; but for all that the man is

wholly immersed in particulars. It is to the point to say here that Dionysius II, in the Seventh Letter, is another kind of unphilosophical man, and that the two differ in Plato's mind as the dilettante differs from the soldier, as the man who wants to copy doctrines differs from the man who wants to copy deeds, though both waver so that as often as they advance toward philosophic insights they fall away from them too. But both men have a dialectical service to perform, clarification of what philosophy is *not*, and this they do in their several ways. Alcibiades has Thomas Gradgrind's respect for fact, sir, nothing but fact; yet the facts are remarkable, not trivial, and the attitude of Alcibiades, which may be summed up in the phrase, "It beats *me*!" is an indispensable part of the milieu in which a philosopher, the real Socratic kind, the sort that Nietzsche himself speaks of as the Superman, must live and have an impact upon his multifarious companions.⁴¹

We have already said that Socrates is at the hub of a wheel of discourse and of discourses. Each speaker at the perimeter is related to him in a way differing uniquely from the way in which every other one is related. To explore these ways in detail would take a long time. Distinctions both horizontal (the opposites having the same value) and vertical (the opposites having unequal value), hierarchies, myths—all these dialectical devices are present in the first five speeches, and Socrates takes over from each of them in a new fashion; but they cannot borrow from and improve upon each other. As well as sharing a cumulative, serial relation to the speakers, Socrates is *directly* inclusive and sublativ of each of them.

We can read the description of the "greater mysteries" in such a way that its relationships to the other speakers become fairly clear. The obscurities stem from the fact that one cannot merely add speaker to speaker to get Socrates; there must be principles of selection. Had Socrates done nothing more than place them end to end, every reader would have noticed this long ago; but as it is, many students find no dialectical order at all.

Let us assume that Socrates is expounding love in nine stages:⁴² (1) we encounter beautiful bodies; (2) love one particular body; (3) discover the similarity of beauty of one body to another; (4) love all beautiful bodies and discount the one; (5) value beauty of souls more than beauty of body; (6) love the beauty in institutions and laws; (7) love sciences; (8) love a single knowledge; (9) contemplate the one. The speech of Phaedrus makes two emphases: these are to be found in the first and fifth of Socrates' steps. Pausanias plays upon the second and

sixth, Eryximachus upon the third and seventh. Now comes Aristophanes with his recent hiccups, which betoken a temporary overturn of the order established: he sums up all seven of the steps so far set forth, but in so doing he gives a twist to each one, to make it advocate the opposite of what is intended in words by its original proponent and in fact by Socrates. The love of institutions and laws, to take the sixth rung at random, is intended by Pausanias to be merely a willingness to abide by local customs; by Aristophanes it is twisted into overweening pride in man to storm the bastions of the heavens, and into Zeus' pride and efforts to keep his divine prerogatives whatever the costs to man.

Agathon now, with his notion of universal beauty as belonging to all, approached through a unitary art, of poetry, reinterprets the fourth step and adds the eighth, but leaves the philosophy of love open at both ends by failing to include either bodily nature or the divine essence. Socrates must straighten out the dialectic again, which he does by adding the last stage, which is no doubt the same One that he introduced in Book VI of the *Republic*.

It now devolves upon Alcibiades to explain what all this means in human terms. He clarifies the discourse of Socrates, chiefly by giving the ladder in what amounts to a reverse order—thus he begins with contemplation of the one, though it is now the one Socrates, and ends with silly flirtatious talk about changing places on the couch. In between he touches upon practically all the rungs of the ladder, but there is a great weakness in his discourse: in order to explain what real love is in concrete terms, he must adopt the most concretely human attitudes of all, and these are philosophically ambiguous. However, this reversal is precisely what Plato would like to include as explanatory of the full meaning of love; we affirm the ladder and then turn it upside down to show its direct application to the human condition, much as old Father Parmenides thought it necessary to deny whatever is said about the one and the others, as well as affirm.⁴³ I think too that not only do these speakers expound and advocate certain rungs of the ladder, but also they *represent* them. Thus Alcibiades, with his lack of general knowledge and his jealousies over particular persons, stands lower than the others, and his character sets a limit to his dialectic. Aristophanes, too, is jealous, though it is over his ideas and the way they are viewed by others. Socrates can live upon all the rungs with ease, but it requires the speech of Alcibiades, to show this to the other guests, and to the readers of Plato's dialogue. So he interprets love by depicting Socrates, but at the

same time—Plato is nothing if not subtle—he all but jettisons all the distinctions and all the rigor by which Socrates had constructed the theory. Small surprise, then, that the only possible conclusion to this is a party of revellers, several hurried departures, and a bath before facing the problems of the next day.

Oh yes. We were talking earlier about hiccups. Why did Aristophanes have them when he had had not a drop to drink that night, and why was Alcibiades free of them, though he was far gone in his cups? This would be a question for Socrates to answer, not Eryximachus. Aristophanes was hiccupping from a surfeit of *speeches* from which Alcibiades had fortuitously stayed away. Would the latter have been able to make head or tail out of the second-hand vapidities of Phaedrus, the confused travel-diary of Pausanias, or the professional sententiousness of Eryximachus? Would *any* man, unless he had a Socrates to set him right, and put him back on the plain path of mules and packasses and reason and inwardly-lived divine poetic philosophy?

NOTES

¹ I use this word here and there, following Professor J. M. E. Moravcsik, whose acute paper on the ladder in Socrates' speech was presented at the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy in 1961. It was intended by him as a workable translation of *Eros*, and will be used on occasion here. Cf. Francis M. Cornford, "The Doctrine of Eros in Plato's *Symposium*," in *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, England, 1950), p. 72: "Just as the word 'making' (*poiesis*) really means creation of any kind . . . so the name of Eros . . . really means 'any and every desire for good things and for happiness.'"

² A happy exception to this is Meyer W. Isenberg, who in his *The Order of the Discourses in Plato's Symposium* (privately printed, Chicago, 1940) attempted to find the real dialectic of the speeches. This is a doctoral dissertation, buried so deep that I have found it referred to in very few places, even other dissertations. I differ from Isenberg in many questions of detail, and I miss in his dialectical zeal a sustained interest in the literary side of the work; but his interpretation of Plato's metaphysical point of view seems to me right. Another paper that does excellent justice to the relation of the persons who participate in the religio-philosophical ideas presented is that by John P. Anton, "Some Dionysian References in the Platonic Dialogues" (too modest a title!), in *CJ*, LVIII (1962). R. Hornsby's "Significant Action in the *Symposium*," printed in the same journal in the 1956-57 volume (37-40), approaches a slightly different problem, but with comparable methods. A note, "More on 'Action' in Plato's *Symposium*," was added (200-21) by R. G. Hoerber. I differ from these four men in minor points, but find their conceptions very fruitful.

³ See, for example, G. C. Field, *Plato and His Contemporaries* (London, 1930), p. 154: "There is one other dialogue of importance in which other interests seem to occupy a place at least as important as that occupied by the philosophical interest. And that is the *Symposium*. This also, though to a lesser degree, differs in form from the other dialogues. The serious argument occupies a relatively small place, there is a much greater amount of narrative, and in particular there is the intervention of Alcibiades."

⁴ For a sketch of some of the principal differences in the ways that the six chief interlocutors manipulate their dialectics, see G. K. Plochmann, "Socrates, the Stranger from Elea, and Some Others," *CP*, XLIX (1954): 223-31.

⁵ Warner Fite, *The Platonic Legend* (New York, 1934), strings together adjectives and allegations even more damning than these.

⁶ At this point it should be clear that I do not think of the dialogue as reporting an actual occasion. If there *was* such a party, it probably occurred in 416 B.C., but as I hope to show later, it is unnecessary for our understanding of the function of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* to know that he was just a year away from his expedition to Sicily, or indeed that he ever went to Sicily at all. It would have taken but a stroke of Plato's pen to have hinted at this major event in the life of Alcibiades and his mother city. On the other hand, Aristodemus is represented as having repeated the dialogue to Apollodorus many years later, long after Alcibiades' impulsive duplicity had shown itself publicly. But I still think there is a riskiness in W. Hamilton's conjecture "that one object of the *Symposium* in general and of Alcibiades' speech in particular is to make plain that Socrates was in no way responsible for Alcibiades' betrayal of his country in the Peloponnesian War two years after the dramatic date of the dialogue" [*Plato's Symposium* (Baltimore, 1951), p. 29].

⁷ E.g., *Apology*, 30B.

⁸ It is always dangerous to import statements of other dialogues while interpreting some one work, as this must be done with insight equal to what is necessary when keeping to one. But I think it fair to borrow the conclusion of the *Phaedrus*, anyway (270E), that dialectic is like rhetoric, but higher.

⁹ *Protagoras*, 315C; *Phaedrus*, 228A.

¹⁰ *Protagoras*, 315D.

¹¹ *Symposium*, 189B.

¹² *Ibid.*, 198C.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 201D; 212B.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 177E.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175D-E.

¹⁶ 31B. The limit that the drinkers set upon their portion of wine was dictated by the body primarily, not the mind.

¹⁷ I do not count Apollodorus, as he was not present at Agathon's party.

¹⁸ The question whether these two men were *really* like this, historically speaking, might be of interest, but it is certainly not the primary one in a philosophico-literary analysis. I do not wish to disintegrate Plato's writings as testimony to leading figures of Athens and other cities; but it

appears reasonable to insist that we reserve judgment upon Plato's "accuracy" until we have exhausted the possible literary and dialectical purposes why these personages should be depicted as they are. My own guess, though, is that Plato had such a rich experience of men in public and private life to call upon as he wrote, that there was little trouble in finding characters to fit his dialectical schemata and at the same time to fit many, though probably not all, the facts.

¹⁹ *Symposium*, 210A.

²⁰ F. J. E. Woodbridge, *The Son of Apollo: Themes of Plato* (New York, 1929), *passim*.

²¹ *Ion*, 531C.

²² This, by the way, is true in every one of the dialogues, even the driest and seemingly most impersonal of the "late" ones. For the relations between persons and dialectics in the *Parmenides*, see Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Plato on the One* (New Haven, 1961), part I.

²³ *Timaeus*, 43B-44D.

²⁴ Poetry is carefully interpreted, for example, in the *Protagoras*, *Republic*, and *Ion*.

²⁵ 225E ff.

²⁶ So A. E. Taylor says in *Plato, The Man and His Work* (New York, 1936), p. 216: "Aristophanes, one of the sturdy toppers of the party (176B), is held up, when his turn to speak comes, by an accident which is a small joke in itself; the medical man of the group, who also happens to be a sober soul (176C) not able to carry much liquor, gives him professional aid and fills up what would otherwise be a gap in the evening's programme. There is nothing here which calls for a 'serious' explanation."

²⁷ 70A.

²⁸ *Aetius* (V, 19, 5).

²⁹ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, III, 2, 300b 30.

³⁰ Incidentally, Zeus and Apollo, who as gods represent the powers of reason, severally disjoin and rejoin the whole man and his parts. This is exactly similar to the "god" of *Phaedrus*, 266B, whose dialectical method consists of separating and recombining. The use of reason, Aristophanes seems to be saying, at first splits the ambitious sensualist and then reconstitutes him, although he is no longer able fully to gratify either his passions or his ambitions. He is both greater and less than he was before. Note how closely this approximates the unconscious self-portrait of Alcibiades later in the *Symposium*.

³¹ The parade of this play is really an account of knowledge as it ranges through the cosmos and over things terrestrial. But I do not insist that Eryximachus' list of arts is taken from *The Clouds*.

³² Eryximachus is complimented by Socrates at 193E for his speech in general.

³³ Pausanias refers to *Phaedrus*, Eryximachus to Pausanias, Aristophanes to all earlier ones, Agathon to all, Socrates generally to all and specifically to Agathon. Alcibiades refers not to what Socrates has *said* but to what he *is*.

³⁴ This is not an unusual sort of dialectical situation in Plato, where Athens and Atlantis, or Zeus and Apollo, are made contraries, though these appear in myths, not in patently historical outlines.

³⁵ Socrates is shown in a good light in military and private life. In the *Theaetetus*, using similar extrinsic criteria, Socrates sketches the philosopher in ordinary society and public life as something of a fool (173B ff.).

³⁶ His notion of wisdom derives purely from an emotional response to a great teacher; he knows little about justice—and here I am willing to concede that Plato may have been thinking of the future shortcomings of the real Alcibiades.

³⁷ At least these pointers help to show that Paul Shorey is wrong when he calls the entrance of Alcibiades an "afterpiece" [*What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1933), p. 196].

³⁸ There is another correspondence, between the speech of Alcibiades and the closing pages of the *Laws*, 968A ff., where the Athenian and his two comrades, having agreed that their account of legal theory is virtually complete, further agree that it is absolutely necessary that their next move should be the practical one of setting up the actual state they envisage and participating in the councils.

³⁹ 221E.

⁴⁰ Professor Anton, in the paper cited earlier, persuasively argues the dionysiac, poetic, and tragic aspects of Alcibiades' nature. This is almost certainly right, and in stressing his unphilosophical character I have not tried to remove its dark romanticism. Alcibiades could easily have a temperamental affinity to Orphism (or even to the ladder of aspiration) and yet lack both the words for describing it and the reason whose control is needed for its full understanding.

⁴¹ A point commented upon too infrequently is that Diotima, when she was instructing the younger but not youthful Socrates, entertained strong doubts about his being able to enter into "the greater mysteries." Let us take this seriously. The speech of Alcibiades gives a close account of what changes have been wrought in a man who actually *is* able to enter the discipline of Eros-philosophy. But of course his teacher would have entertained doubts regarding the *ultimate* success of her instruction.

⁴² 210A–211A. A brief summary which can best be read as seven steps, not nine, is given at 211B–C.

⁴³ *Parmenides*, 135E–136A.