

The Political Nature of Plato's *Symposium*

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Abstract: *The dramatic setting of Plato's Symposium obscures its function as a discourse that establishes the political philosophy of its author. The effort to identify the political within an ostensibly apolitical dialogue reflects the ancient attempt to use the casual and leisurely as a tool for prying open the more serious. I want to suggest that readings of the Symposium which do not attempt to uncover fully the political achieve only a partial understanding of Plato's program within the work. I also want to establish the possibility that Plato relies on a historical and literary intertext with writers such as Thucydides and Aristophanes in order to key the reader into the underlying, and potentially dangerous, political nature of the dialogue. When such historical intertext goes unnoticed or is dismissed, the reader constructs, I submit, an insurmountable obstacle for the understanding of the work. On the other hand, only when the reader recognizes Plato's use of historical material, can the Symposium be viewed properly as a forum for the development of political philosophy in the guise of a literary drama.*

“It seems to me that not only the deeds of fine, good men which are done
in seriousness, but also those done at leisure are worthy of mention”.

Xenophon, *Symposium* I.1¹

The dramatic setting of Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue concerning the nature of Love delivered in reported speech through a series of narrative frames, obscures its function as a discourse that establishes the political philosophy of its author. Details throughout the work concerning the dialogue's historical and dramatic setting alert the reader to the importance of the political which underlies the glossy veneer of its presentation. Plato's meticulous suppression of the internally binding political themes of the *Symposium* presents the reader with a difficulty in interpretation tantamount to the challenge of attaining the Socratic vision of the good. The process of erotic purification presented at the end of the work in Diotima's lessons to Socrates not only describes how an individual can use philosophy to realize a good life, but also rewards the attentive reader who understands Diotima's lessons as applicable to civic life within the community. Furthermore, this effort to identify the essentially political within an ostensibly apolitical dialogue reflects the ancient attempt to use the casual and leisurely as a tool for prying open the more serious, a sentiment expressed at the beginning of Xenophon's *Symposium*. Indeed, as Plato's work suggests, the political need not be at conflict with the leisurely manner of its presentation in the *Symposium*, but may in fact rely on the nonchalance of the dialogue to reach its full expression. Such a concept conforms with the Greek dichotomy between “leisure” (σκολή) and “zeal” or “seriousness” (σπουδή). In a paper examining the importance of leisure in the Platonic corpus, Benjamin K. Hunnicutt proposes that an investigation of the etymological link between the Greek word *scholē* and the words for school, scholar, etc. in many modern languages “will also demonstrate leisure's central place in Plato's ideas about the purpose of the state (politics and civility)” (212). Political freedom for Plato relies on the fulfillment of necessary tasks of everyday *spoudē* in order to escape into *scholē* (Hunnicutt 213). A difference in Plato, however, between leisure and idleness must be stressed. True *scholē* consists of one's freedom to engage in activities performed for their own sakes. Active contemplation, moreover,

¹ All translations are my own, except where otherwise noted.

in opposition to idleness, provides the politically free individual with a pure form of such an activity. On the path to become a politically responsible citizen, one cultivates intellectual freedom through a liberal education that eventually leads to the highest form of *scholē*: philosophy. Immediately, then, a link between leisure, politics, and philosophy is suggested.

Hence, I want first to propose that readings of Plato's *Symposium* which do not attempt to uncover fully the political achieve only a partial understanding of Plato's program within the work, just as Alcibiades at the end of the dialogue achieves only a partial understanding of the eroticism espoused by Socrates. This miscomprehension represents a failure to see that "[t]he understanding of Love that underlies Socrates' philosophic life...underlies political life as well" (Nichols 201), as a Socratic concern for the good of one's own (soul, family, city, etc.) allows for a politics transcending the necessity of everyday *spoudē* "as human beings seek to lead good lives" (ibid.). An understanding of this relationship between politics and philosophy results at least partly from what I have called Socratic eroticism, the knowledge of beauty itself gained by the lover upon the completion of his labors which allows him to give birth to true virtue, the process explained by Diotima through Socrates late in the dialogue. Secondly, I want to establish the possibility that Plato relies on a historical and literary intertext with writers such as Thucydides and Aristophanes in order to key the reader into this underlying, and potentially dangerous, political nature of the dialogue. When such historical intertext goes unnoticed or is dismissed, the reader constructs, I submit, an insurmountable obstacle for the understanding of the work. On the other hand, only when the reader recognizes Plato's use of historical material can the *Symposium* be viewed properly as a forum for the development of political philosophy in the guise of a literary drama.

From the opening of the *Symposium*, when Apollodorus is questioned by several companions concerning the speeches delivered at Agathon's dinner party, Plato carefully prepares the reader for the proper digestion of the *logoi* which are to follow. An important step in Diotima's conversion of the young Socrates into a more developed Socrates is her use in 202a of "right opinion" (ἡ ὀρθὴ δόξα) as an example of awareness between wisdom and ignorance (μεταξὺ σοφίας καὶ ἀμαθίας). The importance of opinion as opposed to knowledge is foreshadowed early in the work when the story of Glaucon's ignorance concerning the date of Agathon's dinner party is reported by Apollodorus to his companions in 172b7-173a7. Glaucon has heard an unclear version of the story of the party from someone who had heard it from a man called Phoenix. The imprecision of this account leads Glaucon to suspect that Apollodorus himself might have been present at the get-together, a suggestion hastily brushed aside by Apollodorus when he cites Agathon's absence from Athens for many years (οὐκ οἶσθ' ὅτι πολλῶν ἐτῶν Ἀγάθων ἐνθάδε οὐκ ἐπιδεδήμηκεν) and his own recent association with Socrates, not quite three years in the making (οὐδέπω τρία ἔτη). Why does Apollodorus specifically cite Agathon's absence and his companionship with Socrates while remaining silent about Alcibiades, a person directly mentioned by Glaucon in his initial question at 172b, when he asks about the speeches delivered about Eros (περὶ τῶν ἐρωτικῶν λόγων) at the gathering at which Agathon, Socrates, Alcibiades, and others were present (τὴν Ἀγάθωνος συνουσίαν καὶ Σωκράτους καὶ Ἀλκιβιάδου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων)? Apollodorus' association with Socrates makes it clear that the dramatic date of the dialogue is sometime before 399 BC, the year of Socrates' death. Apollodorus' silence about Alcibiades here, I submit, provides a further clue about the dramatic date, suggesting that we take the year to be 407, the year of Alcibiades' triumphant return to Athens from exile, when "he was crowned with garlands of gold, and was elected to the

post of military commander with full powers on land and sea” (Plutarch, *Alcibiades* 33)². As Plutarch’s account suggests, Alcibiades’ arrival in Athens made such a splash that no one could have failed to remember his previous exile from the city, and, therefore, any mention of his recent absence by Apollodorus to support the latter’s claim that the gathering was an event of the distant past would be frivolous. Nussbaum’s suggestion of a dramatic date of 404 (170) rests on sounder political assumptions than, say, Bury’s conjecture of 400, which merely aspires to arrive at the latest plausible date before Socrates’ death in order to make sense of Apollodorus’ comments that the gathering happened when he and Glaucon were still boys and that Agathon had been absent from the city for many years at the time of Glaucon’s inquiry (Bury lxvi). Bury’s claim, I suggest, risks ignoring Plato’s subtlety; moreover, it seems likely that Plato would have set Apollodorus’ eager descriptions of the party to Glaucon and, a few days later, to his unnamed companions at the height of excitement concerning Alcibiades, especially considering the politically sensitive nature of the temporal setting of the party itself, as we shall see.

And what is the evidence for Agathon’s departure from Athens? It seems he left for the court of Archelaus of Macedon around 408 or 407, where he enjoyed the “banquets of the blessed” (μακάρων εὐωχίαν), as Dionysus jokes at line 85 of Aristophanes’ *Frogs*. Although Dionysus’ language is “redolent of epitaphs” (Sommerstein *ad loc.*) in this and the previous line of the play, where he says that Agathon is a “good poet and missed by his friends” (ἀγαθὸς ποιητὴς καὶ ποθεινὸς τοῖς φίλοις), Aristophanes’ humor seems to lie in the Athenian opinion that, given Agathon’s permanent relocation to Macedon, the poet might as well be dead. As Sommerstein points out (*ad loc.*), the Greek epithet *makarōn* used to describe the feasts at Archelaus’ court is most likely a pun on the Greek for “Macedonians”, *Makadonōn*. Supposing, then, that the earlier date for Agathon’s leaving Athens is accepted, and considering that Plutarch reports Alcibiades’ return from exile as occurring in May of 407, the date of Athena’s Plynteria (*Alc.* 34), Agathon’s departure could have been anywhere from about five to seventeen months before Apollodorus tells Glaucon that the playwright has been away from Athens “for many years”. I suggest that Apollodorus’ amazement at Glaucon’s assumption that he was present at the dinner party and the ignorance of the cultural world of Athens that such an assumption implies are the reasons for hyperbole on Apollodorus’ part, as if he were saying to Glaucon, “Why would you think that? Agathon’s been gone for *ages*”. Apollodorus’ suggestion, then, is not that Agathon has been away from Athens longer than he himself has been an associate of Socrates, but, simply, that the party has not taken place since Alcibiades’ return and, indeed, not within the last three years. The party, as Apollodorus goes on to explain, was the occasion of Agathon’s first victory as a tragic poet at the Lenaea early in 416, over a year before Alcibiades’ appointment as a general of the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415. The party, then, that Apollodorus relates occurred about nine years before his encounter with Glaucon and his other companions. At the time of the party, he and Glaucon were still boys (παίδων ὄντων ἡμῶν ἔτι, 173a5). Assuming that the Greek definition of “boy” (παῖς) extended to at least the mid- to late teenage years, Apollodorus and Glaucon would at the dramatic date be somewhere in their twenties.

The dramatic date of the dialogue is significant in establishing Plato’s intertext with Thucydides, and, thereby, suggesting to the reader the potentially dangerous political nature of the speeches delivered at Agathon’s symposium. The allowing of a tacit admission of the

² Trans. Waterfield

fictional nature of the dialogue seems to be one reason for Plato's use of a series of narrative frames. Plato gives the reader an account delivered by Apollodorus who has heard the story from Aristodemus who reports a speech delivered by Socrates in which the priestess Diotima divulges "the complete and highest mysteries" (τὰ δὲ τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά, 210a1) of *eros*. It is unlikely, in other words, that what Plato has written down is the truth, since Plato himself implies that it is an account warped by several retellings. Within this fiction, Plato uses the dramatic date of Apollodorus' account and the date of Agathon's symposium to suggest parallels between the events of that evening in 416 and the events surrounding the Sicilian expedition in 415 when an oligarchic political group was charged with the mutilation of Herms throughout the city, while a separate charge concerning the profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries was put forward, as described in book 6 of Thucydides' *History*.

Thucydides reports that the profanation of the mysteries was lodged as an offense which occurred separately from the mutilation of the Herms, and, as Dover notes (*ad loc.*), there is no reason to suspect that the mutilation occurred directly before the departure of the expedition. Furthermore, Plato's setting of the symposium at the occasion of Agathon's victory at the Lenaea suggests another connection to the profanation, as officials of the Eleusinian mysteries presided over that festival along with the *basileus*.³ Plato, then, establishes an intertext with Thucydides throughout the dialogue to suggest that his account is a fictionalized version of the events of the profanation of the mysteries; however, as Strauss observes, "[t]he mysteries divulged were not those of Eleusis, but mysteries told by an entirely different priestess from Mantinea...and the man who divulged them was Socrates himself" (24). Followers of Socrates such as Apollodorus, Aristodemus, and Phoenix can only now, in 407, relate the story of the profanation of the mysteries in relative safety, after the hysteria initially aroused in 415 has been abated by Alcibiades' hospitable welcome back into the city.

In Plutarch's account, Androcles leads some slaves and metics in denouncing Alcibiades in 415, even going so far as to describe his portrayal of the High Priest in the mock mysteries, and saying "that other friends of his who were there had acted as Watchers and been nominated as Initiates" (*Alc.* 19)⁴. Among those depicted in Plato's *Symposium*, Eryximachus, Phaedrus, and Alcibiades were all eventually charged in the offenses. Indeed, the names of Phaedrus and Alcibiades have been confidently identified on a series of marble fragments (ML 79) referred to by Julius Pollux as the "Attic Stelae" at 10.97 in his work the *Onomasticon* (Fornara pp. 170ff.). These stelae, the latest of which are dated to the winter of 414-13 "with virtual certainty" (Meiggs and Lewis p. 245), record the confiscation of the property of the mutilators, the Hermokopidae. Moreover, the largest number of fragments was discovered at the site of the Eleusinion in the southeast corner of the Agora (*ibid.*). The location of the Attic Stelae and Pollux's description of them at 10.97 of his work as relating to a sacrilege "against the two goddesses" (Fornara p. 170, Meiggs and Lewis p. 245) suggest that they served as a public indictment not only of the Hermokopidae, but also of those involved in the profanation of the mysteries, a case which "was inextricably confused" (Meiggs and Lewis p. 245) with the former one. Despite the inscriptional evidence for Alcibiades' involvement in these affairs, in 407 he himself decided to lead the procession to Eleusis past Decelea, a fortification held by Athens' enemies, and he does so in such a majestic fashion that he is described "as a high priest and a sponsor of initiates, as much as a military commander" (Plut. *Alc.* 34)⁵. Alcibiades, then, in 407

³ Cf. "Lenaea" in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed: Hornblower and Spawforth, OUP, 2003.

⁴ Trans. Waterfield

⁵ *ibid.*

has so completely altered public perception that he is praised for assuming the role for which he had previously been exiled. Apollodorus in the *Symposium* is eager to talk about philosophy, as he tells his companions at 173c: “And I for my part, anyway, whenever either I myself make some speeches about philosophy or hear them from others, apart from thinking that I am being benefited, it’s extraordinary how I enjoy it” (καὶ γὰρ ἔγωγε...ὑπερφυῶς ὥς χαίρω). Now, within the safety of the 407 political climate, he eagerly relates the story.

The subject matter of the *encomia* in the account related by Apollodorus, moreover, allows Plato to establish more firmly his reliance on Thucydides’ depiction of the political hysteria surrounding the Sicilian expedition. Book 6 of Thucydides’ work depends noticeably on the language of erotic impulse in its descriptions of hasty political action. Thucydides reports in 6.19.1 that, after Alcibiades had made his speech in front of the Athenian assembly to encourage the departure of the expedition, an action decided on in an assembly four days earlier but then called into question by Nicias, “the Athenians were much more eager than before to make the expedition” (πολλῷ μᾶλλον ἢ πρότερον ὥρμηντο στρατεύειν). Nicias then responds with what he believes to be an extravagant assessment of the amount of resources needed to be successful in the venture, “thinking that he either would dissuade the Athenians with the magnitude of the preparations or, if he were compelled to serve in the expedition, would most in this way sail away in safety” (νομίζων τοὺς Ἀθηναίους τῷ πλήθει τῶν πραγμάτων ἢ ἀποτρέψειν ἢ, εἰ ἀναγκάζοιτο στρατεύεσθαι, μάλιστα ἂν οὕτως ἀσφαλῶς ἐκπλεῦσαι, 6.24.1). In fact, reports Thucydides at 6.24.3, Nicias’ speech served only to inflame the Athenians’ desire to depart on the expedition, as “lust (*eros*) to set sail once and for all infected (lit. attacked) all of them equally” (ἔρως ἐνέπεσε τοῖς πᾶσιν ὁμοίως ἐκπλεῦσαι).

Thucydides further reinforces the irrationality of Athenian policy-making concerning the expedition. In book 2 he foreshadows the faulty politics of post-Periclean Athens by claiming that the error regarding the Sicilian expedition “was not so much a mistaken choice of enemy as the failure of those at home to relate their further decisions to the interests of the force they had sent out” (2.65.11)⁶. Later in book 6 he prefaces Alcibiades’ recall from Sicily with an uncharacteristic digression on a love affair, the widespread misunderstanding of which has, in Thucydides’ view, influenced the Athenians’ hysterical fear of an oligarchic or tyrannical conspiracy in association with the profanation of the mysteries. Thucydides describes the actions of the tyrannicides Harmodius and Aristogeiton at 6.54.1 as “an enterprise which was undertaken because of an incident having to do with *eros*” (τόλμημα δι’ ἐρωτικὴν ξυντυχίαν ἐπεχειρήθη). Thucydides, therefore, associates the *eros* of the excursus with the extreme views of the Athenian people in their assessment of Alcibiades, and, furthermore, relates this impulsive behavior to the same type of *eros* that prompted the expedition in the first place. Indeed, E.A. Meyer has noted that the description in Pausanias’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* of the cultural shame conferred on the unsuccessful lover, *erastes*, in the pursuit of his beloved, *eromenos*, justifies “Hipparchus’ subsequent desire to take some compensating revenge” (Meyer 16) for the repulsion by Harmodius of his advances. In contrast to Hipparchus’ moderate, calculated revenge, implies Thucydides’ language, is the irrational erotic ὀργή (impulse/anger) which motivates Harmodius’ other *erastes* Aristogeiton.⁷ It is important, therefore, to identify Plato’s own version of the profanation of the mysteries within the context of the symposiasts’ *encomia* to *eros* with Thucydides’ use of erotic language throughout book 6, especially in connection with

⁶ Trans. M. Hammond

⁷ Cf. Meyer 16-18 further for a good discussion of how Hipparchus’ restraint of his own power parallels Thuc.’s favorable assessment of the Peisistratid tyranny in general.

the Athenians' impulsive recall of Alcibiades concerning his alleged involvement in that profanation.

Plato's version of the profanation of the mysteries relies on Socrates' display of *hubris* throughout the *Symposium*. It is not insignificant that the discussion between Apollodorus and Glaucon occurs on the road from the deme of Phaleron up to Athens. As Strauss observes, "Athens stands for many things [in Plato]...but especially for freedom of speech" (22), a concept reflected in the open nature of the discussion at the dinner party, one which takes place in the city. Evidence for the democratic atmosphere of the discussion is apparent throughout the preliminary description of the party. At 174e, for example, Aristodemus finds Agathon's door open and he is immediately ushered into the seating area by a slave (οἱ μὲν γὰρ εὐθὺς παῖδα τινα τῶν ἐνδοθεν ἀπαντήσαντα ἄγειν οὐ κατέκειντο οἱ ἄλλοι). Furthermore, when Aristodemus arrives without Socrates, Agathon demonstrates a host's generosity by dispelling any discomfort at the uninvited guest's arrival, saying "If you came on account of some other matter [sc. other than to eat with us], put it off until later, since just yesterday in my search to invite you, I wasn't able to find (lit. see) you" (εἰ δ' ἄλλου τινὸς ἔνεκα ἦλθες...οὐχ οἷός τ' ἦ ἰδεῖν). Later, Agathon entreats his slaves to serve him and his guests as if all the symposiasts had been invited by the slaves themselves. This liberality on Agathon's part is disturbed only upon Socrates' tardy arrival.

After Agathon expresses his desire for Socrates to sit next to him so that he may gain Socrates' wisdom by bodily proximity (τοῦ σοφοῦ ἀπτόμενός, 175c8), Socrates suggests that if wisdom were of the sort as to be transferred in this way, he would put a high price on sitting next to Agathon (εἰ γὰρ οὕτως ἔχει καὶ ἡ σοφία, πολλοῦ τιμῶμαι τὴν παρὰ σοὶ κατάκλινιν, 175d7). The implication is, of course, that Socrates does not take wisdom to be transferable in this way, and that, therefore, he does not place any value on sitting next to his host. Agathon immediately registers this veiled insult and responds at 175e7 by calling Socrates a man of insolent pride, of *hubris* (ὕβριστής εἰ). This brief preliminary exchange establishes Socrates' *hubris* early in the dialogue while also suggesting the confrontation between the poetic, represented by Agathon, and the philosophic, represented by Socrates, in a conflict which lends the work its political nature, as discussed below.

Further signs of Socratic *hubris* can be traced throughout the work. For example, a democratic process of agreement concerning the consumption of alcohol is arrived at by the symposiasts at 176d5-177a1, when Phaedrus approves Eryximachus' advice not to follow the previous night's excesses with heavy drinking. He suggests that the others will also agree, provided they "deliberate well" (ἄν εὖ βουλευόνται) on the matter. Assuming that the manuscript preserving the verb *bouleuōntai* is correct, it is significant that Plato has chosen here to use a verb directly related to the democratic process of deliberation within a council. That such a deliberation does take place is immediately suggested by Plato, as the narrator next reports that "after everyone had heard this, they came to an agreement" (ταῦτα δὲ ἀκούσαντας συγχωρεῖν πάντας). After Eryximachus has suggested in his response to this decision that the democratic process has resulted in nothing being made "compulsory" (ἐπ'ἀναγκες δὲ μὴδὲν εἶναι), he then in mock legal terminology makes the further motion to permit the flute-girl who has just entered to leave the men to an evening of conversation (εἰσηγοῦμαι...τὸ τήμερον). Notably, before Eryximachus goes on to propose the topic of the evening's discussion, he seeks the approval of the other symposiasts (εἰ βούλεσθε), and it is not until they have voiced their assent to all of his above proposals (φάναι δὲ πάντας καὶ βούλεσθαι) that he continues with his suggestion. At 177d6-7, after Eryximachus has proposed *eros* as the topic of discussion, Socrates

intervenes by saying, “No one, Eryximachus, will vote against you” (οὐδεὶς σοι, ὦ Ἐρυξίμαχε...ἐναντία ψηφιεῖται), and he effectively preempts further discussion by citing several symposiasts by name as very likely to agree with Eryximachus’ suggestion, before saying that he sees no one present who would vote against it (οὐδὲ ἄλλος οὐδεὶς τουτωνὶ ὧν ἐγὼ ὀρῶ). After such a statement, it is hardly surprising that the symposiasts, who have not been given a chance to disapprove, come to agreement (συνέφασάν) at 177e; moreover, because Socrates has already exhorted Phaedrus to begin his praise of *eros* (ἐγκωμιαζέτω τὸν Ἔρωτα) at 177e6, the others’ assent could be taken merely as approval of Phaedrus’ position as first speaker. Socrates here, then, uses political language to forego the democratic process in favor of a more tyrannical imposition of Eryximachus’ proposal. I do not suggest that any coercion or manipulation of the other symposiasts on Socrates’ part has taken place in true tyrannical fashion, but I do wish to maintain a reasonably sharp disjunction between Socrates’ more forceful application of Eryximachus’ suggestion and the earlier egalitarian atmosphere of Agathon’s welcome, coupled with the overtly democratic process of previous group decisions. When one denies such a dichotomy, one is in danger of missing out on Plato’s subtlety.

Plato’s development of this *hubris* in the character of Socrates extends to a *hubris* directed towards the subject of the *encomia* as a whole. The dialogue is the only Platonic text specifically devoted to the praise of a god⁸; however, Socrates explicitly denies the traditional divinity of *eros* in his own speech, a breach of protocol associated with the charges of impiety leveled against him by Athens in 399. Strauss identifies this transgression with the opposition of custom/law (*nomos*) and nature (*physis*) in the Greek sophistic thought of Socrates’ day (39-40). Ernest Barker, in fact, traces this essentially moral thought back to the theories of the early physical philosophers of Ionia. In an attempt to discover a universal basis underneath the flux of the material, corporeal world of perceptions, these early thinkers posited further corporeal bodies, such as Pythagorean numbers and the Anaxagorean *nous*, or Mind, which, “like matter, is corporeal and owes its power over matter to its fineness and its purity” (Kirk, Raven, Schofield 365). A conflict arises, however, when one tries to reconcile “the permanent basis of the world” (Barker 74) with the world of perceptions, both of which are material. In the resolution of this conflict, the world of perceptions was regarded as unreal, sacrificed for the reality of underlying nature. As Democritus himself states, “by convention there is sweet, sour, hot, cold, color, but in reality there are atoms and void” (νόμῳ γλυκύ...ἐτεῖν δὲ ἄτομα καὶ κενόν, DK B9 = KRS 549). Barker then explains how later moral thinkers appropriated this procedure, since “the permanent basis of morality which they sought was conceived as annihilating the many codes and laws of actual life” (74-5).

According to this thought, the gods themselves are the product of *nomos*, the content of a set of social constructs that establishes what is conventionally accepted. Opposed to this idea, however, is the overarching natural world, defined by reference to *physis*. The institutions of human convention, of which political activity is the most obvious, never in Greek thought break out of the overarching physical order. Not only does this concept imply the superiority of *physis* over *nomos*, but it also suggests that the theoretical activity which seeks to understand the physical as opposed to the conventional transcends the political and, in so doing, creates “a tension between intellectual perfection and political or social perfection” (Strauss 40). This incompatibility between the enlightened regard for *physis* and the need for *nomos* in the

⁸ It has been pointed out to me that the *Timaeus* could be seen as a praise of a god, the Universe itself, and its divine craftsman, but the context is noticeably different.

preservation of the political order hinders, suggests Strauss, a popular enlightenment. The result is that traditional mythical language is often used to express radical ideas, as it is in the *Symposium*. In this vein, Socrates' speech introduces a naturalistic account of *eros* that displaces a civic piety made manifest by the conventional gods of the city. Socrates' implicit suggestion that "Eros is not simply above men, in the way that Zeus is thought to be above men, but in men" (Strauss 39) reflects this preference for the universal over the civic and explains to some extent the accusation of impiety later brought against Socrates, who was convicted of introducing new gods to the city in favor of the traditional gods.

The conflict that establishes the *Symposium* as a political dialogue expresses itself in the competition between the poets and Socrates. Aristophanes' play *Clouds* presents the foundations of this opposition in its condemnation of Socrates as an essentially apolitical man. Socrates, characterized as a natural philosopher in Aristophanes, represents the sophistic transcending of the *nomos* in favor of the physical, and, as such, demonstrates that the philosopher "is blind to the context in which philosophy exists, namely political life" (Strauss 6). Poetry, on the other hand, suggests Aristophanes, is superior to philosophy in its ability to charm the people, to present the transcendent, universal themes of human life within a political context. This contest between poetry and philosophy relies, as it is presented in the *Symposium*, on an intertext with Aristophanes' play *Frogs*, performed at the Lenaea in 405.

In the play, Dionysus, god of wine, acts as a judge between the politics of the dead playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides in order to determine which poet he should lead from Hades back to Athens. One of the questions posed by Dionysus concerns the issue of Alcibiades, who had by 405 once again fallen out of favor with the Athenians and was living near the Hellespont. Aeschylus supports Alcibiades' acceptance by the city, while Euripides does not, and, in the end, Dionysus ushers the former away from Hades. Early in the *Symposium* at 175e7-10 Agathon tells Socrates that Dionysus will judge between their wisdom later in the evening (δικαστῇ χρώμενοι τῷ Διονύσῳ). Alcibiades' drunken arrival at the dinner party towards the end of the dialogue establishes him as a Dionysian figure, as we shall see, whose task is to judge between the wisdom of poetry and that of philosophy. Through this contest, Plato presents a defense of Socrates which reveals his true nature as essentially political and concerned with *eros*. In order to understand the political, suggests Plato, one must understand the apolitical, the *physis*, the state of nature upon which the political rests. *Eros*, which seems to lend itself most easily to expression in poetry, is reshaped in Socrates' hands into a naturalistic *daimon*, i.e. a universal deity in the non-traditional sense, which defines the apolitical and allows Socrates to view the political as it properly is: a resistance to philosophy. In his victory, Socrates reveals himself to understand not only the political more fully than the poets but also poetry itself, as it is expressed through *eros*.

Diotima's lessons on *eros* constitute a development in Socrates' thought. In the *Parmenides*, the young Socrates relates at 130b-d an undeveloped theory of forms that presupposes only the forms of the beautiful, while in the *Phaedo* at 97c, Socrates explains the delight he felt upon hearing a reading of Anaxagoras which subordinated the order of the world to the jurisdiction of mind (*nous*). Evident in these anecdotes is a disregard for the ugly and the base in favor of the beautiful and the well-ordered. Diotima leads Socrates to the discovery of the ugly (Strauss 187) and away from his description of *eros* as "a great god and love of the beautiful" (μέγας θεός...τῶν καλῶν, 201e5), a depiction similar to that put forward by Phaedrus moments before Socrates' account. His perception of *eros* as a mean between the beautiful and the base, neither immortal nor mortal, is founded on Diotima's distinction between right opinion

and knowledge. The story of *eros*' parents, Resource (Πόρος) and Need (Πενία), further crystallizes this image for Socrates. Diotima subjects *eros* next to a process of rigorous distillation which refutes earlier claims made by Agathon. At 204d10-11, Socrates' inability to explain to Diotima what it is the lover of the beautiful will gain when he obtains the beautiful (τί ἔσται ἐκεῖνον ὃ ἂν γενήται τὰ καλά;) contrasts with his suggestion at 204e7 that the lover of the good gains happiness (εὐδαίμων ἔσται) with possession of the good and indicates a separation of the beautiful from the good at this point in Diotima's presentation. In answer to Aristophanes' speech, Diotima at 205e1 explains that her line of thought (λόγος) admits love neither of the half nor of the whole, but of whatever is the good. The activity of *eros* in seeking the good is drawn towards the beautiful, explains Diotima in 206, because of the harmony (ἁρμόττον, 206d2) it exhibits towards the divine which allows the generation and birth (γέννησις and τόκος) of the good, the eternal possession of which men desire (206a11-12). In this way, love achieves its end not in sexual union inspired by beauty, but through the begetting which the beautiful facilitates. The transitional stage of beauty, then, represents a "ruse of nature" (Strauss 206).

Strauss acutely observes that the denial in this section of the dialogue of the love of beauty and the love of one's own not only represents the purification of the scientific procedure of analysis (213), but also negates the efficacy of the gods of the city. The broad definition of *eros*, here, is the desire for the possession of the good for eternity, which implies the desire for both the good and immortality. As men cannot achieve by nature immortality of the body, their *eros* must be directed towards the bodies of their progenies. This sempiternal extension of existence looks beyond the individual and encompasses the species (Strauss 209). This implied rejection of one's own contrasts the immortality of the species with the finitude of the city which depends on the traditional gods as embodiments of beauty to legitimize any political claim to justice as expressed through punitive action.

After this purification process has taken place, Diotima readmits love of one's own and love of the beautiful while dropping the language of the good when she presents the animalistic instinct for the protection of one's young (207a7-c1) as evidence for the argument of substitution, which states that "only in this way, by generation, is it possible [sc. for mortals to achieve immortality], since it always leaves behind another young one in place of the old" (207d2-3). After comparing the substitution of one being for another to the changes occurring over time in a single, what one would call the *same*, individual, Diotima is able to explain the love of one's offspring as love of one's own at 208b4-5. The brand of love for one's own which exhibits itself only in the human realm, and not in the animal, is that concerned with immortality through fame (κλέος, 208c5). This inherently human, selfish regard for one's own consists of a concern for prudence/wisdom and virtue (φρόνησιν τε καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετήν, 209a4) achieved through deeds almost literally poeticized (πάντες πάντα ποιοῦσιν, 208d8). This language of *poesis* and Diotima's earlier example in 205c of the musical art of poetry as an activity which has appropriated the title of the art of creation as a whole leads into Diotima's introduction in 209a of poets and creative craftsmen as begetters of things befitting the soul (ἃ ψυχῇ προσήκει, 209a2).

The poets' most important role lies in their capacity to educate statesmen and, in the process, to produce what is "by far the greatest and most beautiful kind of wisdom, the arrangement of both cities and households, whose name is both moderation and justice" (σωφροσύνη τε καὶ δικαιοσύνη, 209a8). The education which generates this moderation and justice, states Diotima at 209c6-7, is preferable to the generation of children because of its more extensive beauty and immortality. The glories of statesmen which Diotima enumerates in 209d

represent the politicians' deification while reserving the higher position for the poets, those who, through acts of *poesis*, create the moderation and justice which the politicians themselves embody. Socrates, then, in his concern for the affairs of statesmen, assumes the role of a competitor to the poets, yet, in his professed ignorance, does not produce as poets do, but displays a sterility suggested by the very absence of Socratic writing. The poets' pregnancy represents a selfish *eros* directed at fame (κλέος), something of their own, and, while Diotima presents the production of the political virtues as a higher form of generation than mortal reproduction, the poets still exhibit the qualities of the "the sick and erotically disposed" (νοσοῦντά τε...καὶ ἐρωτικῶς διατιθέμενα, 207a9-b1) animals described earlier by Diotima. The philosopher, however, in his sterility, is prompted solely by *eros* for the good, and, as such, is "concerned with discovering the truth, not with inventing it" (Strauss 229).

Diotima reveals the final portion of her lesson in language evoking the mysteries which Alcibiades was accused of profaning, when she expresses doubt concerning Socrates' ability to be initiated (μνηθεῖς, 210a1), firstly into the erotic affairs themselves, and secondly into the highest mystery (ἐποπτικά, *ibid.*) itself. This final, complete initiation involves a gradual ascension of love regarding the beautiful, culminating in a sudden vision (ἐξαίφνης κατόψεταί, 210e4) of that which is "by nature beautiful" (τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν, 210e5) and for which the initiates' previous toils (πόννοι) have been. The love of a single beautiful physical body, productive (γεννᾶν, 210a7) of beautiful accounts (λόγους), results in the recognition of similar beauty in all bodies, leading to the pursuit of the form of the beautiful (τὸ ἐπ' εἶδει καλόν). The recognition of the greater value of the beauty of the soul as opposed to the body culminates in the begetting of accounts which improve the young (βελτίους τοὺς νέους, 210c2-3). While these accounts make the young better, they do not necessarily exhibit the beauty of the speeches begotten by the lover of the single body. This difference suggests further the distinguishing characteristics of philosophical discourse as opposed to poetic creation, the former improving without regard for bodily beauty.

As Diotima suggests a shift from concern with the *psyche* to a regard for the beauty of institutions and laws, she replaces the language of *eros* with the language of beholding. This linguistic shift persists in the final stage leading to universal beauty, as the initiate sees at 210c7 (ἴδῃ) the beauty of the sciences/types of knowledge (ἐπιστημῶν κάλλος), looks (βλέπων) towards this vast beauty and, turning to "the vast sea" (τὸ πολὺ πέλαγος, 210d4) and observing it (θεωρῶν), gives birth to many beautiful speeches. When the universal beauty itself is attained, the language of love is again almost entirely absent, replaced, as it is, by that of sight. I suggest that *eros* as applied to the human body, even when directed to the soul accompanied by the body, is insufficient to describe human regard for institutions, knowledge, and universal beauty, all entities lacking physical form.⁹ Indeed, at 211a5f. universal beauty "will not in its turn appear" (φαντασθήσεται) in a human form, but, rather, will show itself "in regard to no other thing of which a body partakes". The language of revelation through mental imagery and vision satisfies the qualities of universal beauty more than does the language of *eros*. Furthermore, the importance of visualization in the final stages of the initiation suggests links to poetry, performed in front of an onlooking audience, while establishing Diotima's use of poeticizing language in her description of philosophy, at, for example, 210d in her metaphor of the sea of beauty.

Additionally, while Diotima presented beauty earlier in the work as a means of transition to the end of the immortality which accompanies the good through reproduction and substitution,

⁹ Cf. Strauss 241 for an instance in *Antigone* of *eros*' inseparability from physical form.

we see in 211d1-3 that the universal beauty attained by the initiate is the good itself, described poetically in terms of the beautiful. The value of life achieved by the person who gazes upon the beautiful itself (βιωτὸν ἀνθρώπῳ, θεωμένῳ αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν) induces him to disregard the worldly and bodily beauty he had before held in esteem. The immortality which accompanies the good arrives at the one who witnesses the beautiful itself in the proper manner (ὁρῶντι ᾧ ὁρατὸν τὸ καλόν, 212a2), and, because of this accomplishment, gives birth not to the mere shapes of virtue (εἰδῶλα ἀρετῆς, 212a4) but to the true virtue. The begetting of this true virtue which confers immortality on the initiate is an incidental byproduct¹⁰ which contrasts with the begetting of the mere shape of virtue achieved by poets seeking immortal fame, while paralleling the reproductive, and, thereby, infinitely substituting, end of the bodily *eros*' urge for sexual union initially prompted by the love of the physically beautiful. This assertion of the superiority of the initiated philosopher's vision over poetic production implicitly suggests the primacy of the unanticipated progeny of sterile philosophical activity over the aestheticism represented by the poets, tragic and comic. That Diotima's later words in the mouth of Socrates approach poetic expression further attests to the defeat of the poets by a man who only incidentally reveals his poetic, and, therefore, erotic knowledge, resulting from the philosophical pursuit of the good.

The close association throughout the dialogue of *eros*, the body, poetry, and Socrates' mastery of all three, crystallizes upon Alcibiades' late entrance. Nussbaum (182-4) notes interestingly that the 212c6 description of the entrance of Alcibiades echoes Diotima's use at 210e4 of the adverb "suddenly" (ἐξαίφνης) to introduce the philosopher's initial vision of the good. I submit that such linguistic parallels in the final sections of the work alert the reader to the appearance of the poetic vision before the philosophical and clearly establish the victory of the latter. Alcibiades' drunken state and his decorations of ivy and violets at 212e1 identify him with the Dionysian judge promised earlier by Agathon and portrayed by Aristophanes in his *Frogs*. Moreover, consistent with his Dionysian characterization, Alcibiades is a politician weaned on the poets¹¹, as his quoting in response to Eryximachus at 214b6-8 a few lines of Homer and his claim at 215a4-5 that he "will attempt to praise Socrates through images" (δι' εἰκόνων), i.e. metaphor, indicate. In this capacity, offers Strauss, he represents "the raw material out of which poets make gods" (256). The association of bodily beauty and decoration, poetry, and politics represents itself "to our sensuous imagination" (Nussbaum 184)¹², while firmly establishing Alcibiades as a product of the *nomos* implicit in his role as a politician tied to the city. Alcibiades portrays in his character, suggests Plato, the identification of poetry with bodily *eros*, and the importance of both in the construction of the political community as described by Diotima. Alcibiades' erotic understanding, steeped as it is in the *nomos* of the city, with its focus both on the beautiful and on the traditional gods, is shown to be inferior to Socrates' eroticism, which, through its understanding of the apolitical *physis* of philosophy, understands the political for what it really is.

Alcibiades' speech in praise of Socrates confirms the victory of the philosophical over the poetic, a victory symbolically represented by Alcibiades' conferring on Socrates fillets

¹⁰ I use the word "incidental" here because, unlike one whose concern for immortality leads him to focus on substitution by generation or, in the case of poets and politicians, on fame, the individual who reaches the conclusion of the philosophic journey prescribed by Diotima no longer desires immortality *per se*, but nevertheless achieves it. The philosopher, however, is closer to the lover than he is to the poet, since, like the lover, he begins with a concern for physical beauty.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Plutarch's anecdote at *Alc.* 7 about Alc.'s anger at not being able to procure a copy of Homer.

¹² Cf. Nussbaum 184-5 further for her focus on color and scent.

intended for Agathon, as he asserts at 213e Socrates' ability to win over people always, not only on a single day, as Agathon's tragedy has. The philosopher, therefore, displaces the poet not only in praise, but also in art, as Alcibiades at 215d5 describes the state of the audience after listening to Socrates' speeches as one of amazement, the physicality of which is expressed by the Greek word ἐκπεπληγμένοι, literally "struck by wonder". This description surely is more immediately applicable to the effect of tragic poetry on the observer (Strauss 266). While Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates' appearance to the small statues of Silenus "which sit in Herm-makers' shops" (ἐν τοῖς ἑρμογλυφεῖσις, 215b1) continues the speaker's poeticizing use of simile and metaphor, it also reminds the reader of the political circumstances surrounding Alcibiades' own alleged involvement in the profanation of the mysteries of 415. Indeed, Nussbaum has noted that the "atmosphere of mock threats and mock violence surrounding Alcibiades' speech" (171) foreshadows the mutilation of the Herms before the Sicilian expedition. As Plato has done throughout the dialogue, he supplies the reader with a Thucydidean intertext which draws the political nature of the *Symposium* to the fore.

The final tension between the poetic and the philosophical which supplies the skeleton of the political in the dialogue appears in Alcibiades' development of Socrates' *hubris*. In 216d, Alcibiades describes Socrates as erotically disposed towards the beautiful and aligns this temperament with Socrates' professed ignorance. Socrates, therefore, like the statues of Silenus, exhibits an exterior which conceals a contrasting interior. Observers, suggests Alcibiades, perceive only Socrates' immodesty and his ignorance, characteristics which notably foreshadow the charges of his denial of the gods (ignorance) and his corruption of the youth (immodesty) leveled at him in 399. Socrates' *hubris*, as vocalized by Alcibiades, consists in the former's modesty and repulsion of the latter's advances. So, while "Socrates' *hubris* toward Alcibiades is identical with his moderation" (Strauss 267) and contrasts, as Alcibiades discovers, with Socrates' external immoderation, his professed love of the beautiful, Alcibiades never realizes the internal opposite of Socrates' externally advanced ignorance. This hidden feature of Socrates is the erotic knowledge which Alcibiades desires. Socrates rejects Alcibiades' advances, as he explains at 218d6-219a4, for reasons of justice, lest one or the other of the two obtains a lesser beauty in his exchange than he had before. This justice, then, made manifest through Socrates' moderation, exhibits a political nature above that of Alcibiades. The erotic knowledge obtained by Socrates through Diotima has kindled in him his sense of moderation, and, in evading Alcibiades' grasp, prevents the recognition by Alcibiades of Socrates' justice. Furthermore, Socrates' comparison at the end of the speech of Alcibiades' words to a satyric drama implies that what came before was of a tragic nature. The symbolic crowning of Socrates with the wreaths of tragic poetry and Alcibiades' description of the tragic sway Socrates' speeches hold over their auditors indicate Socrates' profound poetic and erotic knowledge, which, obtained through philosophy, allows him to understand fully, as even Alcibiades does not, the unphilosophical, the *nomos*, the political. And so, like a Silenus statue, like Socrates himself, the external *nomos* of the *Symposium* conceals a deeper *physis*, its profound expression of the political.¹³

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