

The Agathon Interlude

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THE SYMPOSIUM follows a definite pattern of development. After setting the opening scene of the narrative, Apollodorus, the narrator, recalls Aristodemus' account of the symposium, the event itself and the speeches given on that evening in 416. The speeches discussed in this paper are the last in the sequence, delivered by a writer of comedies,¹ a writer of tragedies,² a philosopher, and an ambitious young statesman.³

¹ Aristophanes, who had already presented *Clouds* at the Dionysia of 423, when he was in his mid-twenties and Socrates was forty-six, is now in his early thirties. He must have known when he wrote *Clouds* that Socrates was no longer the *physikos* he caricatured. Probably the comedian meant nothing more than a portrait of the early Socrates when he was thinking in the manner of Anaxagoras. But Aristophanes needed a stereotype of a rising Athenian thinker, and he got it by reviving the youthful image of Socrates, little suspecting that some day the playful distortion would cause the older friend irreparable harm. That Aristophanes knew Socrates well should be evident from his presence at the gathering in honor of Protagoras at Callias' house in 433, when he was no more than seventeen and Socrates thirty-five, defending his thesis of the unity of virtues.

² Agathon is mentioned in the *Protagoras* as a *meirakion*. In 433, the dramatic date of the dialogue, he was probably around thirteen. Seventeen years later, at the time of the celebrated symposium, when he won his first major victory at the Lenaea in 416, he was close to thirty. The latest date of his birth must be placed *ca* 445. He died in 401 in Macedonia. The expressions used in the *Symposium*, νεανίσκος (198A), μειράκιον (223A), are in jest. He is described as a νέος, at 175 E. It was not unusual for a dramatic poet to win the first prize at his age. Euripides produced his first work at the age of twenty-eight and Sophocles at the age of twenty-six. On the other hand, the production of comedies seems to occur earlier. Eupolis appears as a writer of comedies at the age of seventeen, in 429, Aristophanes at the age of eighteen or nineteen (? *cf. Nub.* 530, hinting at his first comedy, *Daitales* [now lost], which, on account of his youth, was produced in 427 by Kallistratos), and Menander at the age of twenty in 322. As Wilamowitz noted, "it is perfectly normal for a comic genius to produce his works sooner than a tragic poet: U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, "Über die Wespen des Aristophanes," *SBerl* 1911.1, 286; see also K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley 1972) 13.

³ Alcibiades (450-404) is now thirty-five. At *Prot.* 320A-B, Socrates remarks that Pericles feared lest Alcibiades—then much younger—might corrupt his

This central part of the pattern shows Plato's masterful way of stringing together poetry (mainly practitioners of dramatic poetry), philosophy, and politics. After the *encomium* delivered by a late comer, the statesman, the event ends in an exchange that adumbrates the conciliation of poetry and philosophy; the latter became the real victor.

The Agathon interlude in the middle of the *Symposium* consists of the following parts: the end of Aristophanes' speech, a brief exchange between Socrates and Agathon, the latter's encomium, Socrates' refutation of Agathon's definition of Eros followed by Phaedrus' decision to end the session of dialectic. At the beginning of this sequence, Socrates had departed from the convention of the series of epideictic and epainetic speeches by shifting to his mode of questioning.⁴ It was an illicit move. Phaedrus notes that the theme of Eros, disconnected from the celebration of the poet's victory, is transferred to the poet himself. Socrates had focused attention not on the art of the poet but on his soul: a move from creation to creator. A special thesis is now at work. If the creator is not virtuous, it is only by accident that the creation is good. In fact, the literary product can be good only when the intention of the creator is controlled by wisdom and goodness. The same holds for the relation of the man of politics to his resultant political actions.⁵

There are two important parts in the Agathon-Socrates exchange: (1) Agathon's speech and what comes immediately after the end of Aristophanes' speech, and (2) the interlude itself, *i.e.*, the dialectical exchange, the only example in a Platonic work

younger brother, Cleinias, and decided to place him in Ariphron's house to be educated. The move failed, for Ariphron, after trying for six months, decided that Cleinias was not given to learning anything and asked him to leave.

⁴ In anticipation of Diotima's questioning of Socrates as a young man (201D), who soon will admit to having held views once similar to Agathon, Socrates' questioning is a replica of a model already familiar to him.

⁵ It may be objected, as Diskin Clay has done *per litt.*, that the Agathon episode is more concerned with Agathon's conception of Eros than with his character. In view of the Socratic principle of the intimate relation between person and ideas, conceptions and character intertwine to meet the demand for coherence. Socrates' exchange with Callicles in the *Gorgias* has already prepared us for the encounter with Agathon in the *Symposium*. To think and act by employing two different sets of principles, even if they are not in opposition, violates the rule of coherence in conduct and prevents the person from maintaining unity of character. I wish to thank Professor Clay for drawing attention to this issue and also for making useful suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

that is not itself a dialogue. It may be said in anticipation that the delivery of Agathon's speech is deliberately placed between two distinct moments. The first sets the trap just after the end of Aristophanes' speech at 194A–D, when Socrates asks Agathon about courage and shame when facing the multitude and when addressing a few "people like us." The second exchange directly follows Agathon's speech. Socrates, it seems, will not speak unless he has his moment of dialectic to clear the air and prepare the audience for what he has in mind to deliver as a eulogy to Eros. One wonders at this point, after what Agathon has said concerning the virtues of Eros, whether there is anything left for the last speaker to add. It is significant that Agathon endows Eros with all the cardinal virtues save *eusebeia*, but what he praises is a version of Eros far removed from the human scene. He speaks about a god.⁶

What, then, is the real function of the dialectical scene? I would like to put the question this way: Socrates cannot begin his own *encomium* where Agathon left off. He needs to establish the ambience for a new beginning. The new approach has to be functional. The correlative object of Eros must be stated explicitly. Eros, made the equivalent of desiring, must always be the pursuit of something, for if Eros were perfect, it would only have the status of a Form. Socrates must show that Eros is neither man nor god, but a *daimon*, and as Diotima told him at 202D, a great *daimon*.⁷ If the *daimon* is to be somehow in us, the Aristophanic conclusion 192E, τοῦ ὅλου οὖν τῆ ἐπιθυμίας καὶ διώξει ὄνομα ("Eros then is a name for the desire and the pursuit of wholeness," 143), has to be woven into the Socratic view. Since Eros as desire is not the whole man, it can only be a part, albeit basic and special. Agathon, the poet, had gone too far. Socrates inserted a note of irony when referring to Agathon's speech: "who could fail to be astonished at hearing the beauty of its words and phrases?" Agathon had made a serious

⁶ In Agathon's encomium, Eros as a god does not need the virtue of *eusebeia*. Aristophanes has correctly tied this virtue to the human need to relate to the gods (193D): ἡμῶν παρεχομένων πρὸς θεοὺς εὐσεβειαν; and πάντ' ἄνδρα χρὴ ἅπαντα παρακελεύεσθαι εὐσεβεῖν πρὸς τοὺς θεοὺς (193A).

⁷ When Socrates asks what power Eros possesses, she answers (202E): ἐρμηνεύον καὶ διαπορθμεύον θεοῖς τε τὰ παρ' ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν ("interpreting and conveying things from men to gods and things from gods to men" [146]). The translation here and throughout is by R. ALLEN, *The Dialogues of Plato, II. The Symposium* (New Haven 1991: hereafter 'Allen').

blunder. He transferred the beauty of Eros from Eros himself to the words and phrases of his speech. Socrates must soon weave his way between the Aristophanic formulation of eros as desire of wholeness and Agathon's view of Eros as divinity.

A Note on the Event

We must distinguish between the event of the symposium of 416/415 in Athens, and the narration of the event in 401 or 402 when Socrates was still alive.⁸ Perhaps this is Plato's way to let the reader know that a pertinent and important witness could authenticate the narrative. The 'dramatic' narrator, Apollodorus of Phaleron,⁹ on account of his age alone, could not have been at the banquet. He heard about it from Aristodemus, who was there but no longer on hand in 402, when Apollodorus described the event to a group of friends. Nor was Agathon present.¹⁰

The narrative returns to the symposium celebrating Agathon's victory for tragedy (ὅτε τῆ πρώτῃ τραγωδίᾳ ἐνίκησεν, 173A) at the Lenaea of January 416. At this time Plato was eleven or twelve years old. Socrates, in his ironic way, states that the event brought a moment of glory for Agathon, as some 30,000 Hellenes (πλέον ἢ τρισμυρίας, 175E) were present at the theater of Dionysus, although the capacity of the theater could seat no more than 15,000.¹¹ In 416 Agathon is about thirty, no

⁸ If the dramatic date is 402, it is probable that Agathon also was still alive. See Allen 4.

⁹ *Ap.* 38B, where he offers 30 minae to free Socrates; also *Phd.* 117D, where he bursts into crying after Socrates drinks the hemlock; Xenophon (*Mem.* 3.2.17) refers to Apollodorus as Socrates' constant companion.

¹⁰ Agathon had left Athens in 411, the year of Antiphon's trial: *Arist. Eth. Eud.* 1272b6. He was still at the court of Pella in 405 and probably attended Euripides' *Bacchae* in that year as a guest of King Archelaus. Besides Euripides, who wrote an *Archelaus* during his stay in Pella, other illustrious guests were the Athenians Plato (epic poet) and Andocides (orator), the Milesians Melanippides (dithyrambic poet) and Timotheus (musician), and Nicoratus of Heracleia (epic poet).

¹¹ See J. Sykoutris, *Plato's Symposium* (Athens 1934) 21 n.1; n.5 *ad* 175D. The inflated numbers serve the two implied ironical asides: (a) Socrates calls the viewers "Hellenes" instead of Athenians, and (b) he doubles the number of the audience. The expansion makes the flattery obvious but draws no protest from Agathon.

longer the young boy (μειράκειον) of the *Protagoras*.¹² Details of Agathon's career are lost in the folds of events. He probably died in Macedonia in 401.

We need at this point to settle at least tentatively chronological issues and the ages of the symposiasts, all of whom are conspicuously young, except for Socrates. Phaedrus is very young; he was still living in 385, when he was the target of a comedy by Alexis and when Plato was writing or had finished writing the *Symposium*. Eryximachus, son of Socrates' friend, is at this time in his mid-twenties; Pausanias, just over thirty-five.

The Agathon-Socrates Exchange

At the end of his own speech (193E), Aristophanes turns to Eryximachus and says (193D-E): "That's my speech about Eros, of a different kind than yours. As I begged you, don't poke fun at it, so that we may also hear what each of the remaining speakers will say—or rather, what each of the two will say: for only Agathon and Socrates are left" (134). Aristophanes is not staving off criticism but preventing "poking fun" that could obscure or lessen the importance of his message. Agathon, self-confident, makes no such request at the end of his speech. Socrates, however, does not hesitate to make his move; instead of "poking fun" he engages in refutation. Yet Agathon is the man of the day. As victor and host, he receives at 198A the best applause, which suggests another victory, this time for his rhetoric. Agathon had said that Dionysus will decide between him and Socrates, and indeed the prophecy is fulfilled later with the coming of Alcibiades.¹³

In the sequence of the *encomia* the tragic poet follows the comic poet. Plato designs the *Symposium* so that Agathon's claim that Eros is a god will be refuted later by Socrates.

¹² *Prt.* 315D-E: παρεκάθηντο δὲ αὐτῷ ἐπὶ ταῖς πλησίον κλίμαις Πausανίας τε ὁ Κεραμῶν καὶ μετὰ Πausανίου νέον τι ἔτι μειράκιον, ὡς μὲν ἐγῶμαι, καλόν τε κάγαθὸν τὴν φύσιν, τὴν δ' οὖν ιδεάν πανυ καλός. ἔδοξα ἀκοῦσαι ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἀγάθωνα, καὶ οὐκ ἂν θαυμάζοιμι, εἰ παιδικὰ Πausανίου τυγχάνει ὦν.

¹³ When this favorite of Dionysus entered and was about to crown the tragic poet with the garlands he had brought, he recognized Socrates, took some of the garlands, and honored the beloved (213A). See H. Bacon, "Socrates Crowned," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 35 (1959) 415-30; J. Anton, "Some Dionysian References in the Platonic Dialogues," *CJ* 58 (1962-63) 58.

Phaedrus made a similar statement at the beginning. The refutation aptly comes after Agathon's speech, which had summarized everything that could be said about Eros as god. Agathon, before giving his speech, turns to Socrates and says prophetically: "we will be judged on the matter of wisdom by Dionysus" (175E), which is indeed what eventually will happen, though contrary to his expectations.

Analysis of the Exchange

In the first brief exchange between Agathon and Socrates, at the end of Aristophanes' speech, there is a surprising and unexpected testing of the young tragedian's character. Socrates presses Agathon on his sense of shame before the multitude and the sensible few and their ideas, whether willfully misleading or honest and sincere. Socrates reminds the symposiasts that yesterday he was a member of the mob at the theater while Agathon was bold, self-confident, anything but intimidated. Today, Agathon insinuates, Socrates is the intimidating intellectual who might make Agathon self-conscious (194A, 134): "Really, Socrates, said Agathon. You surely don't believe I'm so full of theater that I don't even know that to a person of good sense, a few intelligent men are more formidable than many fools."

A member of yesterday's mindless multitude is present today as one of the intelligent few. How is it that the same person can be both and that so sudden a change can happen in a day's time? There is more to the phrase "who intimidates whom," suggested in Socrates' earlier remark. Aristodemus had remembered the following (135): "So Socrates said: Yes, Eryximachus, because you yourself competed so well; but if you were where I now am, or rather perhaps where I'll be once Agathon also speaks, you'd be very afraid and quite as bewildered as I am now." Agathon takes this to mean that Socrates is trying to intimidate him (135): "You mean to cast a spell on me, Socrates, so that I'll be thrown into confusion by thinking my theater has great expectation I'll speak well."

Socrates' praise of Agathon's fearless demeanor at the theater helps introduce the feeling of fear in relation to shamelessness. What Socrates is trying to do is to shift attention to Agathon's character. Agathon showed self-confidence at the theater but today he exhibits a different attitude; the signs indicate that he is

indeed capable of being intimidated. As he says, today he is not facing yesterday's multitude, which included Socrates as well as tonight's fellow symposiasts, indeed a gathering of sensible people.

Socrates is leading up to a case of self-refutation: Agathon is and is not self-confident. Whereas Socrates, who was a member of yesterday's multitude and one of today's sensible few, remains the same person, Agathon does not. There are two Agathons; and each behaves differently, depending on what each addresses, the multitude or the sensible few. Agathon admits that he intends to behave differently today, because "a few intelligent men are more formidable than many fools."¹⁴ Socrates appreciates the admission and assures Agathon that he does not therefore think him boorish. But he also seizes the opening to expose Agathon 'one' to Agathon 'two'. The characters of the two Agathons differ significantly: one is shameless, the other shameful. But Socrates takes it a step further. He insists that those present, because they were part of yesterday's multitude, are not wise, and if so, they are not intimidating, given Agathon's understanding of "intelligent people." Hence, there is no reason to be afraid of them (194c, 135):

– I know well that if you met someone whom you believed wise, you'd give heed to them rather than the multitude. But maybe we're not they—for after all, we were also there, and among the multitude—but still, if you met others who are wise, you'd perhaps feel shame before them, if you thought you were perhaps doing something shameful. Do you agree?

– You're right, he said.

– But wouldn't feel shame before the multitude if you thought you were doing something shameful?

Phaedrus, being the symposiarch, senses the dangerous turn and urges Agathon not to reply, reminding him that his duty is to present his *encomium*, not to engage in dialogue.

Let us suppose for a moment that the present exchange between Socrates and Agathon had continued. What would Agathon's answer be? No matter what the reply, the self-contradiction would follow and ruin the festive atmosphere once

¹⁴ The point of calling all speakers at the party "senseless" is also pointed out by W. Cobb, *Plato's Erotic Dialogues* (Albany 1993) 68: "Socrates ... catches him in a mindless platitude that implies he would have no qualms about doing something shameful as long as it was not witnessed by anyone who knows better."

the host is ridiculed. But what does all this have to do with how the *Symposium* ends? Agathon the tragedian and Agathon the citizen are two different persons. If so, which of the two is worse or less trustworthy than the other? Can the art of dramatic poetry from the pen of a bifurcated person be good and true, edifying and useful? Perhaps the time has come to raise the issue about the symposiasts' affinity to truth and beauty and the rôle of dramatic poetry as the new undisputed educator of the multitude. Yet Phaedrus saved the day for Agathon and tragic poetry (194A, 136):

– My dear Agathon, if you answer Socrates it will no longer make the slightest difference to him how anything else turns out there, if only he has someone to converse with, especially someone handsome. But though I enjoy hearing Socrates converse, I am necessarily concerned about the encomium of Eros, and I have to extract a speech from each one of you; so the two of you may talk this way only after rendering what is due to the god.

– Why you're right, Phaedrus, and nothing prevents my speaking; for it will be possible to converse often with Socrates later.

Thus Phaedrus, in the name of the god, stops the exchange. Piety demands so; but the consequence is still the same: Agathon, the host, is not embarrassed. Nor will he absolve himself before the symposium ends; not even later in his life. It was reputed that, like Alcibiades, he took part in the mutilation of the Herms and left Athens to escape punishment. Later he went to the court of Archelaus in Pella.¹⁵

¹⁵ A. Daskalakis, *The Hellenism of Ancient Macedonia* (Thessaloniki 1965) 234: "Archelaus was the best disposed towards Athens of the Macedonian kings, in this respect following the example of his grandfather, Alexander the Philhellene." Archelaus ascended to the throne in 413, in which case we may surmise that Agathon arrived in Pella close to this date. We have no reliable information about this residence after the beginning of the move to persecute the perpetrators of the mutilation. Thrasy-machus of Chalcedon, who lived in Athens during the second half of the fifth century—the Thrasy-machus of *Resp.* Bk 1—refers to Archelaus in his *For the Larissaeans* as a "barbarian," accusing him of wanting to subjugate Larissa and the whole of Thessaly. The use of "barbarian" in the speech is a bit excessive, given that Archelaus and the Macedonians were as Greek as the rest of the Hellenes. Daskalakis explains Thrasy-machus' "barbarian" as a metaphor to suggest a difference between advanced and backward Greeks.

The Structure of Agathon's Speech

The speech entails two quests: what Eros is and what Eros does.¹⁶ The opening insinuates a subtle criticism of the preceding speakers for addressing the effects of Eros on human beings and the fruits of his favors to them (194E–95A, 136):

I wish first then to say how I must speak, and then to speak. For all who spoke before seem to me not to offer encomium to the god, but to felicitate men for the good things of which the god is to them cause; but of what sort he himself is who gave them, no one has spoken. There is one right way to praise anyone in anything, namely, to describe in speech the nature of the subject of the speech, and the nature of that of which he is the cause. It is right then for us to praise Eros this way to: first his nature, then his gifts.

Agathon is right; he is also pious. The previous speakers failed to focus their attention on the identity of the cause. Agathon deserves credit, just as Socrates does, for aiming at the right target: to reveal in the manner of hymnic poetry (a) a god's nature and (b) his *aretai*. In this way, Agathon sets the stage for Socrates' speech, except that he is ignorant of the logical grounds of the procedure. Later, Socrates will show that the nature of Eros is not as Agathon claims; rather, Eros is the lover, not the beloved; the desiring subject, not the desirable object. Hence, the properties Agathon attributes to Eros are not what defines Eros. It will take the skills of Socrates' dialectic to get Agathon to admit that the emphasis must shift from the nature of Eros' *aretai*, read into him qua divinity, to what Eros is, an intermediate, a *daimon*, in pursuit of what is needed and not yet possessed. By calling Eros a god, Agathon inadvertently commits a contradiction, one that invalidates his own criticism of his predecessors. He rejects what he seeks by confusing the nature of his subject. Socrates will also seek the causal origin but it will not be Eros; the cause is that which Eros loves, the beloved: Beauty as Idea.

¹⁶ The literature on the refutation of Agathon's thesis is vast, and commentators have repeatedly discussed Socrates' logic to drive the argument home. For a recent discussion see Allen 41–45.

The Traits of Eros as God

The tone of the speech gives Agathon an air of apparent superiority. In a moment of barely concealed self-flattery, Agathon exclaims in the middle of his speech: "the god is a poet so wise that he also makes others poets." And a few lines later he adds: "one could not give someone else or teach another what one neither has nor knows" (196 E, 138). Eros has all the virtues; therefore Eros is the right teacher. If we take the passage literally, however, as declaring a general principle, we need to determine whether Agathon understands what he thinks he knows, before we can say for certain that the can also teach it. If what he possesses is shamelessness, a trait that now seems a long stride from the graciousness mentioned at 175D, then this is what he can teach. But perhaps the god can come to his rescue and save him by suddenly turning him into a wise poet. Continuing in the mode of self-reference,¹⁷ Agathon adds: "do we not also know in the craftsmanship of the arts that he of whom this god becomes teacher turns out to be notable and illustrious, but he whom Eros leaves untouched remains in the shade?" (197A, 138).

If being famous and illustrious are signs of having been loved by the god, then Agathon is certainly one of the blessed. Agathon leaves no doubt that he is one of the god's works. He thus speaks with authority about the god. The effect reveals the nature of the cause. The other side, the multitude, has confirmed god's choice. And the speech ends in a panegyric of Eros. Agathon, being in the god's service, expresses gratitude for the favor. The speech, as Socrates says with a touch of obvious irony, was worthy of a Gorgias: "The speech reminded me of Gorgias" (198C, 140).

Agathon claims to know the nature of this god. He is the poet turned theologian.¹⁸ And here in summary is what he knows: Eros is the happiest and most beautiful of the gods, also the youngest of the gods. Eros loves the young and the talented, not the old and decrepid or barren. Eros is beautiful, soft, delicate, supple, pliant. Agathon can claim that he has received his

¹⁷ J. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Savage [Md] 1991).

¹⁸ I think we should add this to the other features of Agathon's treatment of the nature of Eros. The style of his speech is Gorgian, as many have shown; the mode of disclosure is that of the poet-priest, an old tradition that Agathon follows faithfully. The poet may not be speaking for god but he speaks of god confidently and with the authority that tradition has established.

beauty and suppleness directly as a gift from Eros and that the model for Eros' beauty is Agathon. Eros possesses all the cardinal virtues: justice, temperance, courage, and wisdom—though not, of course, *eusebeia*—but is still perfect. For a god, possession of *eusebeia* would be superfluous. Eros is the locus of the unity of the virtues. Eros is the poet, in fact the best poet, and in his wisdom Eros creates all living things and practical arts, just as he inspires all poets to create in beauty; they are the effects of Eros. Eros also produces in human beings peace and kinship, gentleness and goodwill, generosity and graciousness, the desire for beauty and the love of order.

The Basis for Socrates' Refutation

Eros, to be understood correctly, must be treated as a relative, a *pros ti* thing, always as eros of something.¹⁹ Eryximachus had already spoken of the power of Eros: μᾶλλον δὲ πᾶσαν δύναμιν ἔχει ξυλλήβδην, also τὴν μεγίστην δύναμιν ἔχει (188D). If Eros is desiring and possesses the *dynamis* to pursue something, to know what Eros is requires the identity of the object to which it is attracted. Diotima will reveal that this object is Beauty, and by extension the Forms. The value of Eros lies in what it can do for the lover: to lead the lover from what is desirable in the sensible world to the desirable or beloved objects in the intelligible world. Though not a Form, Eros leads to the Forms, and though not a knower, it stirs the soul to know, and though not wise, it moves the soul to seek wisdom. Eros, seen for what it is, a relative and a disposition, should be taken out of the mythical dress and its nature made clear. As Eros is always in need, in a state of privation, desiring is a movement towards that which fulfills the wide range of human needs in their order of priority. By way of 'theology', as the gods are perfect, Eros must be excluded from the order of divine beings, and hence Eros cannot possess all those attributes Agathon had claimed, especially wisdom and the other virtues. Therefore, the range of the desirable must be carefully redrawn. In the speech within

¹⁹ Allen (45 n.71) has correctly pointed out that this is Aristotle's original source for the genus of being πρὸς τι, the *symbeketos* translated as "relatives." I should like to add that eros, being a disposition, would also be a case of *qualium*. The genus relative calls for stating the correlative object of Eros, whereas the genus *poion* or *poiotes*, requires the identification of dispositional being, and hence the identity of eros could also come under this genus.

the speech, Diotima's own disclosed to Socrates the proper objects on each rung of the erotic ladder that are available and native to the soul in love.²⁰ The ascending order leads the aspiring lover from beauty in a single body to the same in all bodies, then to the beauty in the soul and to that of laws and institutions, rising then to reach the beauty and order of the sciences and the beauty manifested in dialectic and philosophy, ending with the vision of knowledge of Beauty itself.

A fundamental difference emerges at this point. Whereas Agathon calls Eros a *sophos*, Socrates insists that Eros can only be a *philosophos*. It gradually surfaced in the course of the evening that at least one of the arts, dramatic poetry, had to be compared with philosophy. If wisdom was what these activities pursued and dispensed, the value of their benefits to the citizen as their recipient had to be brought out in the open. Hence, this parallel theme in the *Symposium* may be understood as anticipating the quarrel between philosophy and poetry in the *Republic*.

It would be unfair to treat Agathon's speech mainly as a bag of empty words, merely an imitation of Gorgias' style. Clearly, Agathon is not a subscriber to Gorgias' relativism and subjectivism, although he has imitated his rhetorical model. It would seem that Agathon is sincere, although enthusiastic, hasty, and conceited. What he says, however, about Eros, when viewed in the context of human, not divine, experience, and especially in the context of Socrates' (=Diotima's) speech, makes sense and shows a high degree of understanding of what human beings do as they try to be lovers at their best. Agathon is fully aware of what noble deeds human beings in love can do. It is his theorizing about Eros that is wrong-headed.

A Comparative Note

Agathon, the dramatic poet-artist, trained in Gorgian rhetoric, proves unskilled in the art of definition. Despite his valuable insights, he does not know how to draw the line between the nature of the works of Eros. He failed to offer the functional definition he promised at the opening of his speech. He left Eros in the lofty region of rhetorical praise of a god, not human desire. Socrates gently elicited Agathon's admission to error after making him aware of the wrong way to pursue the truth

²⁰ For parallels and distinctions in Diotima's disclosure, see Allen 39f.

about the nature of Eros. Agathon may be flamboyant and facile in bestowing praise, but as an account of Eros his is far from empty. Hasty and conceited, in the hour of intoxication more with victory than wine, this gracious host of the symposium, after falling prey to his own craving for applause, masked his fallacy with the best of perfumed flowers.

Socrates was long prepared to speak of Eros, and when the right occasion presented itself he gives a true account. The implication of what he shared with his friends that evening would not become clear until the night was almost over; but he could not discuss it until what he said about the nature of Eros was understood. If Eros is essentially a *philosophos*, so are the arts and the activities that bring us close to the corresponding objects of desire.

This concurrent theme, forming as it does part of the background of the *Symposium*, emerges with full force in Plato's critique of the poets in the *Republic*, where it is argued that the poets who cannot give an account of reality are limited to representing appearances. The criticism there sounds harsh; all the flights of the poet's imagination never quite succeed in taking him beyond the limits of the sensible world. Like the painter, the dramatic poet presents his themes without knowledge of their reality. What, then is the truth, if any, contained in the poet's creation? At *Resp.* 601A-B Plato has Socrates speak as follows:

the poet, knowing nothing more than how to represent appearances, can paint in words his picture of any craftsman so as to impress an audience which is equally ignorant and judges only by the form of the expression; the inherent charm of metre, rhythm, and musical setting is enough to make them think he has discoursed admirably about generalship or shoemaking or any other technical subject (tr. Cornford).

On the night of the symposium, some years before the dramatic date of the *Republic*,²¹ Socrates had kind words to say about Agathon's encomium of Eros but nothing about the tragedy that won him the victory. His mind had been made up about tragic works, but the speech of Agathon was a different matter. It was making a point. Agathon had correctly drawn attention to what was to be defined: the nature of Eros. Yet no sooner

²¹ As W. K. C. Guthrie points out, the dramatic date is still a matter of conjecture: *A History of Greek Philosophy, IV: Plato: The Man and His Dialogues: Earlier Period* (Cambridge 1975) 437.

did Agathon promise to deliver the result of the quest than he switched to embellishments: *nobility*, *solemnness*, *richness*, *magnificence*, and *variation*. Although the speech failed to find its target, it was received with a great round of applause, indeed, θόρυβος. Soon Agathon was to feel the cutting edge of elenchus. Socrates said (198E–99A, 140f):

It was earlier proposed, it seems, not that each of us should offer an encomium of Eros, but that each of us should seem to offer an encomium to him. That's why, I suppose, you stir up every kind of story and apply it to Eros, and claim he is of such sort and cause of such great things, so that he may appear as beautiful and good as possible; and clearly to those who do not know him—not, surely, to those who do—your praise is beautiful and impressive. But I really didn't know the manner of praise, and not knowing, I agreed with you to take my turn in praising him too. So, "the tongue swore, but not the mind." But let it go. For I don't any longer offer encomium in this manner—indeed, I cannot, but I am nevertheless willing to tell you the truth, in my own way, if you wish, though not in competition with your speeches, so that I may not incur your laughter.

The fusion of Agathon, the dramatic poet, and Agathon, the orator, was obvious to Socrates. Agathon's two sides work with appearances to produce what Plato's Socrates calls (*Resp.* 5.497D) "the many conventional notions of the mass of minding about what is beautiful or honorable or just" (*cf. esp. Resp.* 10.604E). The issue is put squarely. An informed and intelligent audience would not accept Agathon's account of the nature of Eros. Socrates implies that the speech is designed for people who do not understand that truth demands more than rhetorical and dramatic skills. Agathon's art has no wisdom to impart nor does it lead to wisdom. By saying this, Socrates is scolding his fellow symposiasts for indulging in enthusiastic applause, implying that they are not the "chosen few," the *ὀλίγοι*. Agathon has persuaded them without the benefit of truth. Socrates is 'willing to tell the truth'. Those who preceded him praised appearances.

In Agathon's speech the force of the appeal is that of the poet, akin to the orator; both stir the appetitive, not the rational, part of the soul. Had Agathon known this, he might have come closer to the truth, namely that Eros is a *philosophos*, not a *sophos*, and indeed not a *theos*. But Agathon is a dramatic poet and can only work with the tools of his craft. Functionally, all he can do is persuade. But acceptance of the message of the dra-

matic poet is due to powerful evocation, not confirmation of its claim to truth.

At this point we expect Socrates to take over and show the way of truth. Before taking his turn, he must clear the path. First he shows that the nature of Eros is that of a relative term requiring always a correlative: lover and beloved. As stated earlier, if Eros is desiring, Eros is in need of that which it does not have: the correlative. Without explicit reference to the latter, desiring becomes opaque. Agathon had at some point declared that Eros is the love of beauty. If so, Eros does not possess, only wants to possess beauty. He is neither rich nor poor, neither beautiful nor ugly. By occupying an intermediate position, Eros lies between two contraries, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, knowledge and ignorance, richness and poverty. Socrates insists that Eros cannot be a divinity, not even the youngest of the gods, as Agathon believes. Eros is only the intermediate power that secures the needed connection between the soul and its beloved ideal beings. We do not possess beauty, goodness, wisdom, but the gods do, and hence we can depend on Eros to show us the way from mortality and immortality. Everyone can learn from Eros, including those who handle the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices, mysteries and charms, and all prophesy and incantation (202E–203A).

Eros is a philosopher, a seeker of wisdom. This being the case, there is no way out of Agathon's difficulty except to try the new path of philosophical Eros. This is the way the new poet must choose in place of the old tradition. The time has come for both poetry and philosophy to listen to the rational part of the soul and by so doing learn how they differ in the results they produce. The ultimate source of inspiration is the same for both poet and thinker: it is the good and the beautiful and the true, the permanent Forms. Only thus can the new poet, like the true philosopher, become a noble lover, a lover of wisdom.

Socrates and Diotima

At the end of Agathon's speech and before relating the story of how Diotima set him straight, Socrates tells Agathon (201D–E, 144):

It is necessary then, Agathon, as you explained, first to recount who Eros is and of what sort, and his works afterwards. Now, I think I can most easily recount it as she used

to do in examining me. For I used to say pretty much the same sort of thing to her that Agathon was saying now to me, that Eros would be a great god, but of beautiful things; but she refuted me by these arguments I offered him, that Eros by my account would be neither beautiful nor good.

As Socrates concedes that he too held at one time a position similar to Agathon's, that Eros is a beautiful and good god, what, we wonder, can we make of this statement? Does it have any autobiographical value? Was it meant to comfort Agathon and set him at ease after the refutation? If it contains a germ of autobiography, what was the original version of that view and when did Socrates hold it? Assuming that he once held such a position, this must have been, as he informs the symposiasts, prior to the encounter with Diotima. But, then, when did the two meet? To put the question differently, if Diotima is a piece of Platonic fiction, when did the Platonic Socrates develop the new thesis he is about to disclose in his speech? A few lines earlier, as part of the preamble, he says (201D, 144): "But the account of Eros I once heard from a Mantinean woman, Diotima, who was wise in this and many other things—she once caused the Athenians, when they offered sacrifices before the Plague, a ten-year delay in the onset of the disease, and it was she who instructed me in the things of love."

Which plague? Where was Diotima at that time? Either she had visited Athens at the invitation of the Athenian authorities or a delegation visited her in Mantinea. If the latter, was Socrates, one of the delegates? Nothing is said about this in his speech and no hint is provided. Thucydides (2.47) says that many oracles (*μαντεῖαι*) were in circulation about the war in the Peloponnese and the plague that occurred *ca* 440. At that time Socrates was twenty-nine. If so, one may conjecture that he was still modifying and extending the theory of Forms he once held, the one Plato wants us to think he had developed in 450 at the age of seventeen, as the dramatic date of Plato's *Parmenides* allows to conjecture.²² What was his theory of the Forms and what were its implications for a view on Eros and the correlative values when Diotima induced Socrates to reflect on the erotic lessons? Was her teaching, aside from what Parmenides had said, responsible for initiating a new phase in his

²² For discussion of the dramatic date of the *Parmenides*, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, V: *The Later Plato and the Academy* (Cambridge 1978) 34f.

recasting of the original theory of the Forms? If so, then either Diotima or Socrates, in a mood of self-examination, corrected his early theory of the Forms especially by adding the psychology of desire and introducing the theory of contraries with intermediaries to strengthen the part that makes Eros relational. The result, to speak in mythic terms, was to think of Eros as a *daimon*.

Even if Diotima never existed and hence did not instruct Socrates, we must infer that it was *ca* 440, when he was twenty-nine, that he recast the theory of the Forms, after seeing what was needed in order to include forms of values, contraries, and an account of desires and their objects. If Diotima is not an historical figure and hence there is no *bona fide* identifiable teacher of Socrates, what is the alternative?²³ We must resort to another source or accept the possibility of self-illumination.²⁴ In the absence of information about the existence of Diotima, we are left with the latter. Still, for self-illumination actually to occur two elements are needed: a certain disposition or state of personality, such as a 'trance state', and the stimulus to self-enlightenment, assuming that the right disposition exists. The narrator says that Socrates had a tendency to fall into a state of trance. Aristodemus informed Apollodorus that Socrates experienced such a state before entering Agathon's house. There are other instances as well, e.g. the incidence in Potidea, as Alcibiades reports in the *Symposium*.²⁵

²³ Sykoutris (*supra* n.11: 152–59) does not reject the possibility that Diotima was a real person. He notes that the encounter between Socrates and Diotima must be placed *ca* 440, when Socrates was close to thirty years old. The historicity of the event aside, Socrates' performance in the *Protagoras* at the age of thirty-five requires that we imagine Socrates trying—or at least making the first public attempt—to apply the erotic lessons in the form of a dialectical refutation of a rival theory concerning the teaching of virtue. It would seem that by the time he talked openly about Eros in the *Symposium*, at the age of fifty-two, he had at least twenty years of experience during which to train himself in self-illumination and translate the erotic lessons into traits of personal conduct.

²⁴ *Symp.* 210E may actually provide the needed clue: ὅς γὰρ ἄν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά παιδαγωγηθῆ, θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰὼν τῶν ἐρωτικῶν ἐξαίφνης κατόψεται τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν καλόν. What the soul sees suddenly is αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ μεθ' αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς αἰεὶ ὄν (211B).

²⁵ There is a passage in *Ep.* 7, where Plato gives us a clue as to how self-illumination happened to him at a certain stage in his life. He talks about the written words and why "there is not, nor could there ever be, a treatise of mine concerning the things I care about most deeply; for this is nothing that

If we accept the age of twenty-nine as the dramatic date of the 'encounter' with Diotima, then six years later, Socrates meets Protagoras, and presumably is ready for the great debate about education and the unity of the virtues. That victory remained in balance at the end of the *Protagoras* need not surprise us. Socrates was too new in the art of dialectic to score very highly, as we see him doing in other dialogues. He certainly had to overcome the difficulties of articulating the insights gained while in states of trance. In the *Protagoras* the stakes were high and the hour was pregnant with signs for the future.

At the time of the *Symposium*, Socrates is in his mid-fifties and recalls events that had taken place twenty-four years previously, events related to his development during a period when learning was still under way and apprenticeship, most likely the teacher being his own disciple, was far from finished. But how does it follow, from the early view of the Forms as seen in the *Parmenides*, that the Platonic Socrates once held a view similar to the one Agathon presents in 415? The admission made in passing remains opaque. Perhaps more important is the question how Socrates at the age of twenty-nine *began* to ascend the ladder of Eros, if he did, for the potential was there, as Diotima's gesture intimates at 209E-10A. One cannot help but wonder on which rung of the ladder Socrates found himself when he tried refute the great Protagoras by adding to the power of the dialectic the persuasive force of his understanding of Simonides' poem. That education, his own as well as that of his friend Hippocrates, was at stake we have no reason to doubt. But that poetry had to be included in the counterattack is a bit more than the reader can accept, unless of course one is prepared to admit that Socrates at the age of thirty-five was still exploring ways to make his method and thesis stronger. Put another way, Socrates could still be seen climbing at the age of thirty-five. If so, it would be an injustice to him to dismiss as fallacious the arguments in the *Protagoras* by assuming that he had full command of the higher dialectic we see in the *Symposium* or the *Republic*. The problem here is not *when* Plato wrote these dialogues but rather how carefully he constructed the philosophical development of his celebrated *dramatis persona*.

can be set down like other subjects of instruction. Rather it is something that from much conversation about the matter itself, and from a life lived together, suddenly, like a light kindled from a leaping flame, is born in the soul and thenceforth feeds on itself" (tr. W. K. C. Guthrie, "Plato," *Paideia* 5 [1976] 11).

Eros-Diotima, a special event in Socrates' life, is used in Plato to mark Socrates' development that goes back to the latter's early period of pre-Socratic theorizing, beginning with the *Parmenides*, where Socrates *qua dramatis persona* makes his debut. Socrates, at the age of seventeen, conceived the Forms to be mainly physical constants. But when he makes his second dramatic appearance in the *Protagoras* at the age of thirty-five, his main concern is the unity of the virtues and whether the virtues can be taught. In the foreground the Forms of values take precedence over the Forms of natural things. How can we account for this theoretical refocusing from nature to culture? The explanation may well be due, if we believe Plato, to the 'encounter with Diotima', to a 'turning point' that happened several years before Socrates' performance at the famous meeting of the sophists in Callias' house in 433. But what is important in this connection is that Socrates never spoke of such an encounter before Agathon's symposium.

We may now return to the two Agathons. Going back to this remark about the host in the *Symposium*, we may also entertain the possibility that there is not one Socrates but two, in this case without the self-contradiction of Agathon. In the Socratic speech and via Diotima's disclosure, in particular, we have Socrates the narrator who instructs by sharing his experience, and also Socrates the pupil who on the surface of the narrative is Diotima's disciple. The odds are more in favor of the view that Socrates has been the pupil of himself. He is engaged in self-education as an on-going movement—as Aristotle would have it—from first to second entelechy towards *autarkeia*. The trances we hear of are perhaps major events in the process of self-discovery, and these in turn are the disclosures that lead to the revisions in the theory of the Forms. Assuming that Diotima is a fictional *persona*, even if such an historical person existed, it is unlikely that she was Socrates' teacher of the erotic mysteries. How, then, are we to explain the origin of his speech? The only reasonable alternative is self-illumination.

A close study of Socrates' speech shows that the lesson in erotic mysteries is not carried out in the form of argument. The doctrine is not demonstrated. It is reported as an event in the course of personal history. What is disclosed is the nature of Eros, together with the range of its beloved objects. It seems that the nature of desiring had to be understood first and properly defined before the results of its effects could be assessed. The nature of Eros is primary as well as primitive. The

objects that Eros pursues, the values that constitute the desirable, are discovered in the course of life, instituted in culture and confirmed through experimentation in experience and social interaction. Whereas the nature of Eros is non-debatable, its effects are open to discussion and call for justification, whereby the justifier must appeal to the modes of understanding the pursuit of the desirable. The need to understand what these values are—centered on the beloved—involves justification of the preference of one over other alternative systems of values. In the *Symposium* only the path is prescribed.

A note must be added here: the *Symposium* continues the cultural and educational revolution Socrates began when he made his appearance in the *Protagoras*. *Arete*, in order to be taught to the citizens of the polis, cannot be left to the established ways of the poets, be they epic, lyric, or dramatic. In the *Protagoras*, Plato had occasion to emphasize this point. Socrates introduced the new mode of educating the citizens of the future. Poetry, he argued, was obscure just as the rising trends of rhetoric, though not parallel, were similarly lacking in critical depth. If the *Ion* is read as a critique of the educational efficacy of epic poetry to inculcate *arete*, the *Symposium* crowns the attempt to complete the critique by raising the issue of the validity of the educational claims that comedy and tragedy, the darlings of the Athenian polis, make on behalf of their efficacy.

Socrates has gradually introduced the new mode of education: philosophy. A new opportunity presented itself at the celebration of a poetic victory of a young, brilliant, rising star in the art of tragedy. In effect, the theme of education is introduced in the *Symposium* through the back door, painlessly as it were. The scene is set, and the actors are all there, especially the comedian and the tragedian. In fact the most important points made in the speeches are those of the dramatic poets. Furthermore, Socrates has entered the lion's den, and the chances that philosophy will survive the other modes seem rather slight. It is expected that the victory of poetry will be reconfirmed together with, and its claims to, superiority. The soul of the multitude belongs to the poet. It is an old story. Homer had been for centuries the acknowledged educator of Hellas.

It is not expected that philosophy will in fact replace the established modes of educating the citizenry; but a beginning had to be made, and it was. Socrates, the radical reformer crossed the line. Whether the new movement succeeded in

changing the character of Hellenic culture is not the issue, but making a beginning in understanding the need and how to proceed was. In a broader sense, the target was Eros: in the narrower sense, the identity of the human soul and its *telos*, the heights to which it can rise. In the *Symposium* the debate, or rather the *agon*, is between dramatic poetry and the new way of assessing what poetry puts before the citizens for the improvement and understanding of their souls. The *philosophos* that Diotima expects to act in the future is not so radical as to demand the replacement of all the values Agathon associated with the god Eros. The names of the values are the same, and in certain respects so is the content.²⁶ The reliance on facile forms of understanding and pursuing the *aretai* in association with the deepening of their meaning needs to be eliminated. But so long as Eros is considered a god, none of these things can be done, and the poet will continue to rule supreme over the future of the citizens' souls.

The theater is the teacher. But the theater, just like the courts of kings in older times, is not a *philosophos*. And now that Athens has developed the theater arts to an unprecedented height, the future of the city, its citizens and institutions, must not be left in the hands of the demagogues and untutored legislators. To do so seals the city's fate, and Socrates knows it. The situation can only get worse unless philosophizing enters the mainstream of public education to prepare the citizens to face their future as thinking beings. That the movement remains to be led by few, even by one, is another story, but it did not detain Plato from seeing what could be done once the message is communicated and shared. But Plato was only eleven years old when the symposium he later commemorated sometime after 385 took place.

What happened that night in 416 was more than a drinking party. Socrates finally succeeded in extracting an agreement from both tragic and comic poets that the most qualified person to write either type of dramatic poetry is the *philosophos*, and if so the day will come when critical intelligence using its own combination of dialectic and myth will be trusted to clarify the direction that the education of the soul must follow to secure human fulfillment. It was almost dawn when the agreement

²⁶ At 205b poetry is one of those as it was for Diotima: οἴσθ' ὅτι ποιήσεις ἐστί τι πολὺ· ἢ γὰρ τοι ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ ὄν ἰόντι ὀφροῦν αἰτία πᾶσα ἐστί ποιήσεις, ὥστε καὶ αἱ ὑπὸ πάσαις ταῖς τέχναις ἐργασίαι ποιήσεις εἰσὶ καὶ οἱ τούτων δημιουργοὶ πάντες ποιηταί.

came, but wine and too much talking had rested heavily on the eyelids. "So after putting them to sleep, Socrates got up and left, and Aristodemus as usual followed him. He went to the Lyceum and bathed, passed the rest of the day as he would any other, and after that he went home in the evening and rested" (225D, 170).

Some years later, Plato informs us, Socrates completed the argument.²⁷ The full story is told in the *Republic*, towards the end in the famous quarrel between poetry and philosophy. Socrates led the way in dismissing the peculiar and unnecessary bifurcation of the creative powers of the soul. Following the example of the teacher, the disciple also sought to keep the soul's power in harmony and remain a poet-philosopher or philosopher-poet, depending on how the reader perceives the focus of the dialogues. As for Agathon and Aristophanes, their careers came to different ends: Agathon died an unhappy man, and of his entire production only fragments now exist; Aristophanes fared much better, but despite his brilliant and astute powers of observation, he never overcame the limits of comedy. The other members of the symposium survived only through the grace of Plato's flair for drama. The triumph of political waywardness came with Alcibiades' rise and fall. Nor did it stop with his assassination at the hands of the mortal enemy of Hellas, the Persians—ironically at a time when he was finally able to prove that there was more to his restless soul than the lack of genuine nobility. Neither poetry nor philosophy could direct the *dynamis* of his Eros to meet the tasks of authentic political leadership. He did something unheard of to Eros. Legend has it that he had the image of Eros with the

²⁷ See n.22 *supra*. Because there is general agreement that Plato composed the *Symposium* before the *Republic*, only the dramatic date of the latter is of interest at this point. However uncertain that may be, it would seem unreasonable to accept A. E. Taylor's dramatic date of 421 (*Plato, The Man and His Work*² [London 1927] 263), *i.e.*, about six years before that of the *Symposium*. An earlier dramatic date for the *Republic* would imply that many of the topics and critical themes discussed there—especially the quarrel between philosophy and poetry—would by 416 have been familiar to at least some of the symposiasts, especially the poets. It is better suited to the argument developed at the end of the *Symposium* and the criticism of poetry at the end of the *Republic* to assume that the latter work comes after the former in both types of dates. I am prone to think that the earliest dramatic date for the *Republic* would be 414.

lightning bolt of Zeus painted on his shield—another instance of *hybris*.²⁸

The Last Exchange: How the *Symposium* Ends

The exchange between Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes was renewed in the wee hours of the morning when Socrates had argued and persuaded the two poets that the same man can compose tragic as well as comic poetry, a task that under the circumstances had been unthinkable, given the opposition between the two types of dramatic poetry.²⁹ The *Symposium*, as others have noted, ends in a paradox, leaving the reader pondering an unsolved riddle: "Perhaps we shall never know just how Socrates managed his argument, but the character of his paradox is clear in its outlines" (Clay 199).

The reader is disappointed if not perplexed by Plato's reluctance to state clearly the solution of this "paradox." Instead, we have an anticlimatic ending: Aristodemus falls asleep and does not hear the argument from the beginning. Waking up later close to daybreak and still in a state of drowsiness, he caught only the tail end of the argument. Gathering from what he heard, he concluded that Socrates had convinced Aristophanes and Agathon to accept the soundness of his theory of the unity of the art of the tragic and comic poets. By that time the hall was in disarray. Other roaming celebrants found the door open and crashed the party. Everyone was drinking wine beyond any measure, ignoring the etiquette of the symposium. Eryximachus and Phaedrus had already left. The other guests were either gone or asleep. Agathon and Aristophanes were still alert and drinking from a large cup while listening to Socrates. Then Aristophanes first fell asleep, and later, when daybreak had come, so did Agathon. The tragedian, symbolically enough, surrendered last. After quoting 223C–D Clay comments (187):

²⁸ Plut. *Alc.* 16.1: "He had a golden shield made for himself, bearing no ancestral device, but an Eros armed with a thunderbolt" (tr. B. Perrin, LCL).

²⁹ B. Knox notes: "For the fifth-century Athenian, tragedy was tragedy, and comedy was comedy, and never the twain should meet": "Euripidean Comedy," in A. Cheuse and R. Koffler, ed., *The Rarer Action: Essays in Honor of Francis Fergusson* (New Brunswick 1970) 69 (cited in D. CLAY, "The Tragic and the Comic Poet of the *Symposium*," in J. Anton and A. Preus, ed., *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy* [Albany 1983: hereafter 'Clay'] II 199).

“And after Socrates had spent his day as usual and returned home at nightfall to get some sleep, the dialogue between Plato and his reader begins. For we are brought to ask what comedy and tragedy have to do with one another; and what the last argument of the *Symposium* has to do with its central argument: the praise of Eros.” He suggests that “the answer to our riddle lies submerged in the dialogue itself,” provided we arrive at a proper description of the *Symposium*. He calls it (194) “a tragic-comedy or a new form of philosophical drama which, in the object of its imitation, comprehends and transcends both tragedy and comedy.” It would be difficult to disagree with Clay’s solution if the argument were meant to address the mode of literary transcendence of the duality in the dramatic types of poetry by introducing the new genre of “philosophical drama.” Perhaps the problem rather than the solution may be taken a step further or explored from a somewhat different perspective.

Transcending the duality of tragic and comic poetry may solve a serious problem in literary composition but it does not necessarily address the deeper issue of education in the polis, the *didaskalia* needed in the period of crisis when things for Athens were not faring well. The man that Socrates said was to be able to compose both tragedies and comedies, prophetically speaking, was to be Plato. But Plato, though he began his career as a tragic poet, was to write neither type of dramatic poetry, not because he did not know their respective canons of composition, but rather because his concern and commitment, after meeting Socrates, went beyond literature and the written word in general. He identified with Socrates in trying to uncover the true nature of Eros and use the findings to build a new education for the polis. If in practice tragedy and comedy were miles apart, despite the fact that both address the public in their capacity of a *didaskalia*, as education as well as entertainment, the Socratic quest for a solution to the paradox cannot be limited to effecting a comprehensive theory of literature. We need to seek its ultimate concern in the comprehensive art that Eros prescribes: the relation between the philosophical life and the good of the polis.³⁰ If the duality ‘tragic-comic’ is a dangerous division that affects education in political virtue, especially in view of the established tradition, then the time had come to pass the crown

³⁰ This is not to suggest that Clay has ignored the broader range of the paradox. In fact, he goes beyond the limited application of the solution in literature to bring up indirectly the issue of education in the context of imitating the new model of conduct Socrates provides.

to a new authority. In this sense the theme of the *Republic* is adumbrated in the *Symposium*.

Whatever principles of a "unified theory of dramatic poetry," if we may call it that, were set forth at the end of the *Symposium* (and already articulated in the *Ion*), they could not counter the principles embedded in what was said about Eros as creator, a point that Agathon had defended and Socrates did not challenge. What Socrates had insisted at the time of the 'interlude' was that all arts, especially the art of life in the polis, must originate with Eros as *philosophos*. But the argument worked out in support of the new conception of creative Eros could only come at the end of the *Symposium*, not somewhere in the middle, and definitely not immediately after Socrates' speech, although Diotima had connected Eros to *poiesis*. The celebration of the evening called for encomia, not arguments. Phaedrus insisted on keeping to the epideictic, non-dialectic plan, when the exchange between Socrates and Agathon was about to get out of hand. Bringing the paradox of poetry into any of the encomia would have been out of place. Nor could it occur after Alcibiades' encomium.

If we admit that the solution to the paradox presupposes the quest of the nature of Eros, its *dynamis*, and the range of the hierarchy of values on the rungs Diotima described, it is not out of place to ask a different question: did Socrates, who knew the solution to the paradox, ever become an artist, or rather a poet? In the *Phaedo*, on the last day of his life, the Muse bid him to compose verses, which he said he did. He versified one of Aesop's fables, hardly an impressive feat.

But there is more to the creative side of Eros than the production of literary works, as Diotima brought to Socrates' attention at 205c ff. Hence we may return to the question: how far did Socrates climb up on the ladder of Eros? If he became a creator, what was he a creator of? The answer should be that his creation, in a primary sense, was the shaping of himself and, simultaneously, helping to shape other souls. But to say that he climbed the ladder and remained permanently on the highest rung would be tantamount to *hybris*. Not unlike that of the man who left the Cave never to return. But he did attain a vision of the Forms and, in the case of the *Symposium*, the Form of Beauty. We may want to speak here of obstacles that interfere with the climbing, not just that of Socrates, but of all human beings. There is the condition of humanity, in which the soul is prisoner of the body, and therefore the completion of

the climb remains problematic. There is also the problem of the external conditions, of the institutions in political life, especially when they do not favorably support the pursuit of the philosophical life. But now we have gone beyond the *Symposium* and have entered the discourse of the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*.

It would be unfair to say that Socrates intended to degrade the poets. His concern was about the effects of their poetry and their lack of 'self-awareness' as artists. What the tradition had left unexamined was the relation between the source of poetry and knowledge about the nature of the soul. Socrates argued for a higher set of principles from which the significance of poetry, its subject matter and intent, can be properly understood and assessed. Insofar as the poets did not know the common source of their principles, they do not work from *episteme*, and hence their output does not qualify to be entrusted with the molding of public opinion and the education of the appetites, the ἐπιθυμητικόν. Exciting the appetites and the emotions is one thing, directing and taming them in light of the *logistikon*, quite another. The demand Socrates makes on both types of dramatic poetry is that they must learn to create from knowledge (ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν), not by some divine dispensation (θεία μοίρα). The point of the argument was to make clear that both modes of poetry address the same object, the same human soul, not two different souls and not two altogether different divisions of the same soul. Such is the basic meaning of the higher principle that covers the arts of tragedy and comedy.

Plato, the dramatist-philosopher, knew about the lesson Socrates was projecting at the end of the *Symposium*: τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμῳδίαν καὶ τραγῳδίαν ποιεῖν, with which both poets agreed. And he put it to good use, but not by creating dramatic works. There is also the possibility that Plato invented if not sharpened the 'literary' issue, as he has done with many other philosophical quests, by extending and enriching the teachings of Socrates. It was convenient to let Socrates speak of the foundations of the art of composing dramatic poetry, acknowledging thus the source of his own theory of literature, but for one thing: Plato puts the teacher in a difficult position when the demand is made that the author of a theory demonstrate in action the truth of the theory. There is no problem in the case

of Plato. He wrote masterpieces;³¹ Socrates did not; he became one.

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³¹ Sykoutris (*supra* n.11: 20) notes that “the *Phaedo* is the tragedy, the *Symposium* is the comedy of the philosopher [Plato]” (my translation). Sykoutris follows Wilamowitz, *Platon* I (Berlin 1920).