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‘Making New Gods’? A Reflection on the Gift of the *Symposium**

MITCHELL MILLER

Euthyphro: Tell me, what does he say you do to corrupt the young?

Socrates: Strange things, to hear him tell it, for he says I am a maker of gods ... (*Euthyphro* 3b)

I. The *Symposium*'s Challenge to its Athenian Auditors

I begin from several orienting ideas that are not, I hope, controversial. First, more pointedly than any other dialogue than, arguably, the *Apology*, the *Symposium* is a gift offered specifically to an Athenian audience. The dialogue's *dramatis personae* are the most prominent cultural (or, in the case of Alcibiades, political) leaders of the city in the period, circa 416 BCE, of the victory party to honor Agathon that it purports to recall. Thus Plato puts before his Athenian auditors¹ representative articulations of Athens' great cultural practices and the values these cultivate: to title these practices in an introductory way, in Phaedrus' speech the auditors will find exhibited the critical appreciation and preservation of epic poetry, especially Homer; in Pausanias' speech, the study and cultivation of law, unwritten and written, especially Athenian law; in Eryximachus' speech, the flourishing of the arts and sciences, especially medicine and music; in Aristophanes' speech, the height of Attic comedy; in Agathon's speech, the new wave of innovation in Attic tragedy that he championed;² and in Socrates' speech, his distinctive

¹ I write 'auditors' rather than 'readers' as a reminder that, if we are right to key from the opening pages of the *Tht.*, the texts of the dialogues were written to be read aloud at gatherings of self-selected groups. Imagining such social gatherings as the settings, at least in the first instance, for 'publication' of the dialogues should help us keep concretely in mind one obvious sense in which the *Smp.* was a gift to Athens.

² We know less than we'd like to know about this innovation, but from Aristot., *Po.* we learn (1) that Agathon set the epic tradition aside and made up his own plots (1451b21) and (2) that he detached the choral interludes from the action, making them not comments on the action but free-standing songs with their own power to entertain (1456b30). It seems safe to say that whereas one

philosophical practice of refutation and reorientation. What is more, by having these speeches be encomia to Erōs,³ Plato has them illuminate, directly or indirectly, the paradigmatic interpersonal relation in which the Athenians pass their values from one generation to the next: in the form of *erōs* that (as we learn most explicitly from Pausanias) is normative for the public sphere, the beauty of the young male inspires his elder to make himself the teacher of the younger. By having the speeches be praises of Erōs, Plato casts each of the great cultural practices of the city not only as a distinctive perspective on its values but also as a resource for this key occasion of their articulation; it is these cultural practices that the inspired elder draws on in teaching the young. Thus Plato, by putting these practices before his Athenian contemporaries in this way, gives his contemporaries a highly differentiated and pointedly focused reminder of the resources they have to draw on in their lives as heirs to and bearers of the values of Athenian culture.

These observations fit together with the approximate date of the 'publication' of the *Symposium* to suggest the striking timeliness of Plato's gift of the dialogue. The anachronistic allusions in Pausanias' and Phaedrus' speeches, respectively, to the subduing of Ionia by Persia in 386 and to Thebes' formation of the so-called Sacred Band, a military corps composed of lovers, in 378, suggest that the *Symposium* was 'published' in the mid-370s.⁴ This was a time of Athenian revival, with a new generation attempting to leave behind the disastrous consequences of the Peloponnesian War and reestablish the eminence of the city in the Greek world. The last great time of that eminence was precisely the period of about 416, dramatized in the *Symposium*; with the war apparently halted on favorable terms

might emerge from a Sophoclean or Euripidean tragedy impressed by the fresh light or new depth the tragedy had cast on or found in its familiar epic content, one would emerge from an Agathonian tragedy impressed by the singular creative power of the poet's imagination and wit.

³ 'Erōs' is of course both the name of the god and the name for the condition of which he is the god. Our English 'love' is both too general and too lacking in the connotation of erotic passion to be a good translation. I shall transliterate ἔρως as '*erōs*', with a capital when referring to the god and lower case and italics when referring to the condition. All translations are my own, but I have regularly consulted Schleiermacher 1957, Joyce 1961, Groden 1970, and Nehamas and Woodruff 1989.

⁴ Plato appears to finesse the dramatic impossibility that Phaedrus, speaking in 416, could have known of the Theban Sacred Band by making Phaedrus speak only hypothetically of 'an army of lovers and the boys they love' (178e); the auditor, however, would recognize the allusion, and this requires that the date of 'publication' follow 378. Thesleff 1982 (= 2009, 143–382) canvasses a range of theories regarding dates of composition; on the notion of ancient publication more generally, see Thesleff 2002, 289–301 (= 2009, 541–50).

by the Peace of Nicias, with the vigorous new cultural and political leadership of the daring Agathon and the charismatic Alcibiades, and with the citizenry's confidence swelling to the point that it would soon undertake the massively ambitious Sicilian Expedition, the city seemed at the height of her powers. What, then, could have been a more appropriate gift to the reviving Athens of the mid-370s than an extensive reminder of the great traditions from which she had drawn strength and her bearings when last at her height in 416?

The irony of this question is, of course, made palpable by Plato's dating of Apollodorus' re-telling of the speeches. On the one hand, Apollodorus corrects Glaucon's impression that the party was a recent event by reminding him that it has been 'many years' (πολλῶν ἐτῶν, 172c4) since Agathon's departure from Athens—which, we know independently, occurred in 408 or 407 when he left to become court poet in Macedon; on the other hand, Apollodorus says that he has been a follower of Socrates for three years, and he makes no allusion to Socrates' indictment and trial, which occurred in 399. Hence the re-telling should be dated as late after 408 as possible while still preceding the period of Socrates' trial, presumably, then, in the years just before 400.⁵ But these were abysmal times for the city, as dark as the period around 416 was bright, and this contrast casts a retrospective shadow over the victory party: the cultural practices and values that had oriented Athens at its last height circa 416 had also failed to prevent its calamitous fall in the following decade and a half. And this gives Plato's gift of remembrance to the reviving Athens of the early 370s the character of a critical challenge. The alert Athenian auditor has the task, even as he may be energized by the vivid representation of the orienting traditions of a glorious past, of recognizing the danger of an uncritical re-appropriation of these traditions. Even as, listening to the speeches of the city's elite of 416, he finds his sense of the greatness of Athenian culture revived, he must also be on the lookout for what it was, in the way in which Athens took up its values in that heady time, that left it blind and exposed to the dangers that brought it to its nadir in 400.

II. Listening Critically: Aristophanes' and Socrates' Challenges

Of the six speakers, the two who, because they deliver critical challenges to the other symposiasts, best give us our⁶ bearings in listening critically are Aristophanes

⁵ Nails 2002, 39, 315.

⁶ From here on, I will allow myself the use of the first person plural, not just as a convenience

and Socrates. We should consider their challenges in turn.

[1] *Who and what does Aristophanes target with his figure of the circle-men?*

Aristophanes' marvelous comic tale is so familiar that we need only mark its main motifs: descended from the sun, the earth, and the moon, ancient humans were creatures of extraordinary power; shaped as circles,⁷ they were possessed of two heads, four arms, and four legs. This power, alas, was intoxicating, and they took it upon themselves to storm Olympus and challenge the gods. This faced deep-thinking Zeus with a problem: how might he defeat this challenge without destroying mankind and losing the sacrifices and honors they offered the gods? His brilliant solution was to have surgeon Apollo cut them in half and so at once diminish their power and, by doubling their number, double the sacrifices; this, however, produced the unanticipated consequence of leaving them so consumed by their yearning to be rejoined, each with its other half, that, lying in each other's arms, they began to starve and die. Accordingly, Zeus resorted to a second brilliant stratagem: by having Apollo move their genitals around from their back-sides to the sliced front sides of their bodies, he enabled them to achieve sexual satisfaction in their mutual embrace so that, fulfilled for the moment, they would then 'turn back to their labors and pay attention to the rest of life' (191c). Thus Zeus transformed ancient man's outward looking ambition for power over the gods into our present-day hetero- and homo-sexual yearnings for one another, yearnings satisfiable only by the fortuitous grace of the god Erōs. With this twist Aristophanes completes his supremely vivid portrayal, both hilarious and deep, of the finitude and double dependence that comes with our embodied being: weakened and at the mercy of our erotic yearning for reunion with our other halves, we must defer to the gods, both the Olympians and Erōs, for our peace and our fulfillment.

If we now step back to ask who and what Aristophanes targets with his portrayal of the circle-men, we get two sets of clues, a straightforward one from Aristophanes himself and a paradoxical one from Plato. The straightforward set: after his marvelously upstaging send-up of Eryximachus by his hiccups and his

but more importantly, as a way to try to occupy the perspective of the targeted Athenian audience of first intention and, as much as possible, to hear the gift and challenge of the dialogue from that perspective.

⁷ Though as three-dimensional the first humans are shaped as spheres, Plato has Aristophanes say κύκλω, 'in a circle', three times, at 189e6, 190a7, and a8 (and cf. 190a1), and 'spherical', περιφερῆ, only once, at 190b3. We shall see the point of his stress shortly.

application of the doctor's three cures (holding his breath, gargling, sneezing [185e, 189a]) while the latter speaks, he begins his own speech with the sly warning to Eryximachus that it will be 'rather different from yours and Pausanias' [speeches]' (189c). The more paradoxical set of clues, from Plato: recall that Plato has Apollodorus report that Aristodemus could not 'completely remember' all of the speeches and that he 'therefore skipped over some' (180c); as a consequence, the number of speeches that are recounted is six, and because the sequence of speeches goes around the room to the right until, with Socrates, there is no one left, we are invited to imagine the six as forming a circle. But if we do, then the effect of Aristophanes' hiccups, to require that he skip his turn and then speak after Eryximachus, is to *break the (Platonically suggested) circle of six speakers in half*. If the first set of clues moves us to take Aristophanes to target Pausanias and Eryximachus with his image of the circle-men, the second suggests that *Plato targets the whole group of six, including, accordingly, Aristophanes and Socrates themselves*.

Consider first Aristophanes' clues. In what way do Pausanias' and Eryximachus' speeches, revisited with Aristophanes' speech in mind, present themselves as fit targets of his image of the Olympus-storming circle-men? Notice, first of all, that by the ways in which Plato has Pausanias incorporate and subordinate Phaedrus' insights to his own and Eryximachus then incorporate and subordinate Pausanias' to *his* own, Plato makes the first three speeches form a whole. Whereas Phaedrus draws a set of individuals from epic poetry—Alcestis, Orpheus, and Achilles and Patroclus—to illustrate his interpretation of *erōs* in terms of honor and shame, Pausanias tacitly sorts out the loves they exhibit by his distinction in kind, encoded in Athenian law, between the celestial *erōs* of the wise elder for the beautiful young boy and the vulgar *erōs*, indiscriminate in its gendering, for the body; Eryximachus then generalizes Pausanias' distinction and extends it, first, beyond specifically human relations to all living things (186c), citing the balances that medicine discerns between opposite conditions in bodies (186e–187c), and, second, beyond even the sphere of living things to everything in existence, citing the balances that music discerns between opposite pitches and opposite rhythms (187b) and that divination discerns between humans and gods (188d).

Once we make out the whole that the first three speeches constitute, we can also see how well-aimed is Aristophanes' exposé. While all three present themselves as praising the god Erōs, what they really celebrate are the benefits that, *when well used*, Erōs brings human beings. And Pausanias and Eryximachus praise *the power of human reason* to secure this good use: taking the form of Athenian law and then of the various arts and sciences, respectively, it is human reason that diagnoses the difference between celestial and vulgar *erōs* and brings about

the replacement of the latter by the former. Thus it is only ostensibly the god that Pausanias and Eryximachus celebrate; what they really praise is the power of human reason to control the conditions symbolized by the god and to benefit from this control. This is what Aristophanes targets with his image of the circle-men storming Olympus: in praising the supreme power of human reason as it now flourishes in Athenian culture, Pausanias and Eryximachus eclipse and overthrow the old gods.

What if we take up the Platonic clues? These extend our attention to the whole circle of six, thereby inviting us to turn our critical eye to the final three speakers. In what sense does Aristophanes' exposé apply to them as well? Pursuing this question brings us to a cluster of paradoxes. It is not strange, of course, to think of Agathon as a circle-man: he invokes his own youth (195b–c) and delicate good looks (195c–196b) to portray the beauty of the god Erōs, and by a set of nimbly fallacious interpretations of the four cardinal virtues, he portrays the goodness of the god as consisting in that power to win without violence the servitude of all others (justice!, 196b–c) which belongs above all to his own supremely pleasure-giving (temperance!, 196c) and, so, seductive (courage!, 196d) poetic rhetoric (wisdom!, 196e); thus Agathon models Erōs' beauty and goodness after his own, effectively replacing the god with himself. As Plato, tongue in cheek, has Apollodorus remark in reporting the symposiasts' response, 'Everyone burst into applause at [Agathon's] speech, which so became the young man who had given it, as well as the god'⁸ (198a).

But it *is* strange to think of Aristophanes himself and of Socrates as circle-men. In what sense might Aristophanes' exposé apply *to itself*? (With this question it becomes pointedly clear that we are responding not to the intention that Plato gives Aristophanes but rather to Plato's own intention in giving this intention to Aristophanes.) Still more strange, in what sense might the exposé apply *to Socrates*, who, as we will see, actually deepens it? Does it make sense to think of Plato as, in some sense, exposing Socrates as a stormer of Olympus? And finally, and insofar as these questions help us find our way to the ultimate depth of the dialogue as a gift to Athens, what is the basic problem—and along with it, hope-

⁸ ... πάντας ... ἀναθορυβῆται τοὺς παρόντας, ὡς πρεπόντως τοῦ νεανίσκου εἰρηκότος καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ τῷ θεῷ (198a1–3). In my translation of the final clause I follow Suzy Groden 1970, 73. The καὶ ... καὶ ... construction is not so tight a conjunction as a ... τε καὶ ... would be. As Smyth (1963, #2878) notes, καὶ ... καὶ ... 'emphasizes each member separately'. Translating it as 'both ... and ...', while perfectly possible, would fail to convey the implicit sense that the speech, in being 'fitting' (now to invoke another suggestion from Smyth) *as well to Agathon as also* to the god, gives Agathon prominence at the expense of the god.

fully, the basic response to the problem—that the Aristophanic critique, applied even to Aristophanes himself and to Socrates, reveals for Athens in the time of its attempt at revival?

[2] *Why does Aristophanes fail, and what is the task this failure implies for Socrates?*

The most immediate measure of Aristophanes' success is Agathon's response, and by this measure Aristophanes fails spectacularly. In Aristophanes' comic comeuppance to Pausanian-Eryximachean reason, Agathon hears only the comedy, not the comeuppance, and he responds as a competitor for acclaim, offering a dazzling display of the Gorgian rhetoric (198c) that characterizes his new mode of tragedy. There is not a hint that he hears Aristophanes' exposé of the upstaging of the gods by the power of human reason; on the contrary, when he models the god Erōs after his own person and wit, he takes this usurpation of the divine by the human to the next level. And in this we get an exhibition, no less compelling for its innocence in the figure of the exuberant young Agathon, of the danger that Plato puts before his fourth-century Athenian audience. One who becomes infatuated with the power of his own intelligence risks losing sight of anything higher, and with the loss of any sense of what we might call a 'higher other', he loses sight as well of anything by which he might take his bearings, anything other than his own power that this power itself might serve. Is there any such higher other? If so, he has lost the ability to recognize it, and by this loss he runs the risk of doing unwitting violence to it and to himself and others and being taken by surprise by the consequences. Is Agathon a figure of such self- and other-endangering violence? The question gains tragic weight if we pair Agathon with his seeming analogue among the *dramatis personae* of the dialogue, the equally dashing young Alcibiades who is soon to arrive at the party. Both are leaders of the city who will soon abandon it, the one for Macedon, the other for Sparta and then Persia. Are there, in their ascendancies in and abandonments of the city, embodiments of Athens' own trajectory of self-absorption and abandonment of its own restraining values in the coming disasters of the Sicilian Expedition and the resumption of the war?

Strikingly, Aristophanes is himself complicit in Agathon's failure to hear his exposé, and it is in this complicity that he himself is a proper target of his own exposé. Not only does his marvelous resort to the rhetoric of comedy incite in Agathon the competitive desire to reply with the rhetoric of his new brand of tragedy, thereby encouraging in Agathon an escalation of the same uncritical celebration of his own power that Aristophanes has objected to in Pausanias and

Eryximachus. What is more, precisely by his exuberant evocation of the cunning Zeus and his attendant, the skillful surgeon Apollo, he himself contributes to the diminishment of the old gods. In the hilarious deviousness by which they at once turn the circle-men inward and double the sacrifices, Zeus and Apollo display not the wisdom and justice of our superiors in kind but, rather, just that human, all-too-human dependence, gluttonous in its very neediness, on the prestige we derive from one another's praise. There is nothing genuinely godly about them that might move us to reverence and respect; on the contrary, they too, along with the circle-men, get their comeuppance, however unintentionally, in the portrayal Aristophanes gives of them. This is the first point of *Plato's* image of the broken circle: not only Agathon but also Aristophanes is a circle-man.

What, finally, of Socrates? At this point, we can say only that in Aristophanes' failure we can glimpse, by a kind of determinate negation, the two-fold task before him. On the one hand, he must find a way to get Agathon to set his rhetoric aside and stop and think; hence, paradoxically, he must appeal to *the very reason that flourishes in Athens* and has 'stormed Olympus'. And on the other hand, he must discover, *by means of this very reason*, a new conception of the divine that, commanding *its* reverence and respect as the figures of the old gods no longer can, will stand prior to it as its higher other; in this sense, Socrates too will turn out to be, albeit in his own distinctive way, a circle-man, for he must 'make new gods'.

[3] *Socrates' refutation and implicit reorientation of Agathon*

Socrates accomplishes this two-fold task explicitly and implicitly, respectively, by his refutation of Agathon. By refusing to give another encomium and insisting on a direct interrogation of Agathon, he forces Agathon to set rhetoric aside and be accountable for the claims he has made. And by exposing the two-fold contradiction in these claims, he subjects Agathon to a transformative reorientation. The basic lines of Socrates' refutation are well-known: Erōs is love of something (199e); that which Erōs, or one in the condition of *erōs*, loves, he desires (200a); that which one desires, he does not have but is in need of (200a–e); as Agathon has earlier insisted (at 197b) and Socrates now reminds him, Erōs is love of beautiful things;⁹ accordingly, Erōs must be in need of and not have beauty—and, so,

⁹ A note on translation: Socrates will not explicitly distinguish the form Beauty (which, when he does draw this distinction, he will name as αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν, 'the beautiful itself' [211d2, e1, e3]) from its cases, the singulars that bear the character of beauty and so are beautiful, until the final step of Diotima's account of the stepwise ascent in the 'higher mysteries'. In all the passages up until then, when he speaks of τὸ καλόν (singular) or of τὰ καλά (plural), he refers to the cases. I

not be beautiful (201b). Further, good things are also beautiful; accordingly, Erōs must also be in need of good things—and so, by implication, not be good (201c). Erōs, then, turns out to be neither beautiful nor good.

Socrates reserves for Diotima's voice the work of bringing out and making explicit the general implications of these devastating strokes, and it is there, we'll see, that Plato offers Athens the gift of his new conception of the divine. Before turning to that, however, and in order to put ourselves in position to try to appreciate its full power, we should mark the existential power that Socrates' refutation has for Agathon and, potentially, for every symposiast and reader who can identify with Agathon. Agathon has argued that Erōs—and, so, he himself as the very model for Erōs—is beautiful and good; accordingly, just insofar as Erōs is now shown to be in need of, and not to have, beautiful and good things, so is Agathon himself shown to be lacking in them. If the immediate force of this disclosure is—on this of all occasions, when the Athenian elite are gathered to honor him—that of a devastating blow to his pride, the more lasting force is a liberating transformation of his relation to himself and his place in (for lack, for the moment, of a closer focus) the world. By showing Agathon that he is lacking in what is beautiful and good, Socrates' argument shows him that beauty and goodness transcend him; and by showing him this, the argument frees him to affirm them as normative goals to aspire to. Freed *from* the pretense that he already possesses beauty and goodness, he is freed *for* a life of striving for them. Thus, but still only implicitly, Socrates' argument points to the 'higher other' and to the task of reinterpreting and reappropriating the practices of Athenian culture as modes of aspiring to it.

III. Diotima's Manifold Gift

Socrates' avowed reason for introducing the figure of Diotima is to give the refuted Agathon a reprieve (201d): with a forthrightness that is unique in the di-

shall try to avoid giving the misimpression that he speaks of the form by translating these phrases either as 'what is beautiful' or, where it seems important to convey that he uses the singular, as 'the beautiful' or, where it seems important to convey that he uses the plural, as 'beautiful things'. (Occasionally Socrates uses the term κάλλος, which connotes—though Plato sometimes gives it a broader range—visible beauty or good looks, and I shall translate this as 'beauty'; in these passages he is not referring explicitly to the form.) Finally, nowhere does Socrates refer explicitly to the form Goodness (that is, the form of the Good); analogously as with his references to cases of beauty, so when he refers to τὰ ἀγαθά, he speaks of cases of goodness, the singulars that bear the character of goodness, and I shall translate these references either as 'what is good' or as 'good things'.

alogues, Agathon has admitted his ignorance (201b–c), and Socrates, offering Agathon the portrait of himself as a young man learning from Diotima, now gives him the space of a spectator to receive the fresh beginning that he needs.¹⁰ Plato's introduction of Diotima, in turn, serves as a manifold challenge both to the symposiasts and to his Athenian auditors: as a woman, she stands outside the sphere of male privilege that the cast of Athenian men reflects—and, indeed, she will challenge the primacy of the male by making pregnancy and giving birth central to *erōs*; as a foreigner, she stands outside the provinciality of Athenian culture and interests; and as a priestess whose name means 'for the honor of god', she is poised to provide a new understanding of the divine.¹¹ We shall trace four key moments of her gift: the conceptions of *erōs* as daimonic striving, of the maieutic power of what is beautiful, of the ambiguous status of the offspring this power inspires, and of 'the beautiful itself' as the divine.

[1] *Reconfiguring the space of erōs: striving for the divine*

Erōs, Socrates has shown Agathon, is not beautiful and not good—and, so, as Socrates now explains Diotima once showed him, also not a god. But it does not follow that it is therefore ugly or bad or a mortal. Even though, as desiring, *erōs* is in need of and does not possess 'beautiful and good things', it is not the mere lack of these; rather, it lives its need as an active striving for and seeking to receive the beautiful and good. Hence it is 'in between' the poles of god and mortal, a δαίμων or, roughly translated, a 'demi-god', and as such an ἐπίβουλος, a 'schemer after beautiful and good things' (203d).

With this introduction of the figure of the *daimon*, Plato reconfigures the space of *erōs* or, put more abstractly, the structure of the conceptual space within which, now, we can begin to think the divine. Up until this moment in the dialogue, the relations of likes and contraries—or, more fully stated, likes and contraries that are themselves also likes, terms on par—have governed the thought of the symposiasts. Male/male, female/female, and male/female ordered Aristophanes' tale of the halves of the circle-men, and younger/elder, hot/cold, dry/wet, high/low, and quick/slow ordered Pausanias' and Eryximachus' interpretations of the various balances of opposites that it is the work of the laws and the sciences, respectively, to secure; most importantly, Eryximachus took the human and the divine as opposites to be preserved in or restored to harmony by the art

¹⁰ For discussion of Socrates' use of this generous pedagogical ploy, see Miller 1996.

¹¹ On the uncertain historical status of Diotima, see the deft discussion by Nails 2002, 137–8.

of divination (188c–d). Diotima, by contrast, both breaks the pairing of human and divine by inserting a third term, the ‘in between’, between them, and turns the axis of the threesome from, as it were, horizontal to vertical; rather than two terms on par, she gives us three with the middle oriented away from the lower, a privative, and toward the higher, a plenitude of what the lower lacks. Thus we have the mortal, the *daimon*, and the divine, with the *daimon* both in need of, hence striving for, and receptive of the divine.¹²

[2] *The maieutic power of the presence of the beautiful*

Hearing, as we do, this characterization of *erōs* in light of Socrates’ refutation of Agathon, it is natural to assume that *erōs* is a seeking to possess what is beautiful and what is good. In the course of developing her surprising account of the ‘mode’ (τρόπος, 206b) and ‘activity’ (πράξις) of *erōs*, however, Diotima complicates, if not outright denies, this assumption. Recall, first, her account. Human beings, she has gotten the young Socrates to agree, desire to possess what is good, for this possession yields *eudaimonia*, ‘happiness’ (204e); and because we desire to possess what is good ‘forever’ (205a), we desire immortality; but how, given that we are mortal, can we survive our deaths? Diotima’s answer is that ‘all human beings are pregnant, both in body and in soul’ (206c); accordingly, we can achieve immortality in the ‘mode’ and ‘activity’ of ‘giving birth in the presence of¹³ [a] beautiful [thing], whether in body or in soul’ (206b, e), that is, by leaving behind offspring through whom we gain a mediated afterlife: these offspring may be physical children who will carry our names and remember us (207d, 208e), or they may take the form of the sort of educative discourse about virtue that

¹² Thus the *daimon* is said both to bear to the gods the ‘prayers and sacrifices’ that we humans make to them and to bring back to us ‘the commands and responses’ of the gods (202e).

¹³ The Greek ἐν, in Diotima’s phrase ἐν καλῷ, is usually translated more literally ‘in’, making the full phrase ‘in [a] beautiful [thing]’. This preserves the gnomic force of Diotima’s language, but at the cost of inviting the interpretation of ‘in’ in a spatial sense, and this, we should realize right away, is nonsensical. Biological begetting does of course produce a fetus *in* the womb, but this ignores the fuller meaning of τόκος, ‘giving birth’, in its biological sense, namely, introducing a new living being into the world; and it makes nonsensical the spiritual notion of the ‘giving birth’ of discourse, whether, as Diotima goes on to explain, this discourse takes the form of a lover’s speech to his or her beloved about virtue or of poetry or of laws. ‘In the presence of’, by contrast, perfectly acknowledges the maieutic power of another’s beauty in inspiring one to ‘give birth’ either to children or to discourse in these forms.

will guide the future flourishing of our beloved (209b–c) or, indeed, the forms of poetry or of laws that may guide generations to come (209d–e).

At the heart of this remarkable answer, Diotima declares, seemingly flat-out, 'For *erōs* is not of what is beautiful, Socrates, as you suppose' (206e).¹⁴ What she immediately puts in place of 'what is beautiful', namely, 'begetting and giving birth in the presence of what is beautiful' (206e), makes good sense in its own right in the context of her full account of the human desire for immortality. But why does she put this *in place of* 'what is beautiful'? In what sense is *erōs* 'not of what is beautiful'?

We can begin to sort this out by asking Plato a pair of partly probing, partly challenging questions. First, recall that he had Socrates declare, against Agathon, that good things are also beautiful (201c). But doesn't this imply, now to turn to Diotima's starting-point at 204e, that in desiring to possess what is good, we also desire to possess what is beautiful? But, secondly, hasn't Socrates also argued that precisely insofar as in desiring what is beautiful, we are in need of and do not have it, this possession eludes us?

If the first of these questions seems simply to contradict Diotima's denial that *erōs* 'is of what is beautiful',¹⁵ the second points to a middle ground and helps to focus her remarkable account of the 'mode' and 'activity' of *erōs*. Does she intend her denial to problematize not the status of 'what is beautiful', *to kalon*, as what *erōs* is 'of' so much as the very notion of the 'of'¹⁶—that is, the notion that the aim of *erōs* is possession? Thus heard, her denial opens the way for the recognition that it is not the *possession* of 'what is beautiful' but rather its *presence* that *erōs* seeks, for it is this *presence*, even as what is beautiful eludes our grasp and control, that has the power to inspire the soul to beget and give birth and, so, to achieve its mortal measure of immortality.

If this is well-taken, we are witnessing the 'maker of new gods' complicating his conception of the divine, and in a way that reflects the very height and otherness that the divine requires. What is beautiful not only transcends the soul that seeks it, standing prior to it as the goal that orients its striving, but it also, even in its transcendence, *presences* for the soul that seeks it and, by this *presence*, inspires

¹⁴ ἔστιν γὰρ, ὃ Σώκρατες, ἔφη, οὐ τοῦ καλοῦ ὁ ἔρως, ὡς σὺ οἶε (206e2–3).

¹⁵ Just insofar as Socrates holds to his claim that good things are also beautiful (201c), the good or what is good should also suffer this denial. But, oddly, Plato has Diotima leave the good out and focus her denial only on the beautiful. Is it nonetheless implicitly present with the beautiful? I will come back to this question later, when the text itself seems to invite it.

¹⁶ That is, of the genitive τοῦ in specifying what *erōs* is a seeking to 'possess'. See n. 13.

the very activity, ‘begetting and giving birth’, by which the soul achieves its immortality. What is beautiful is at once the transcending goal and the maieutic power that inspires the soul’s begetting.

But here a surprising problem arises. In order to proceed, we must pause to note an ambiguity in this phase of Diotima’s teaching.

[3] *An ambiguity in plain sight?*

That the erotic soul does indeed seek the presence of what is beautiful is confirmed by a remarkable passage in which Diotima describes the power to teach which that presence can inspire in a pregnant soul: ‘... when someone [is] pregnant in his soul ... with [that part of wisdom which deals with the proper ordering of cities and households], ... *he will go about seeking the beautiful in the presence of which he may beget*,¹⁷ ... and if he has the good luck to happen upon a soul that is beautiful and noble and well-endowed, ... in relating to such a man *he straightaway teems with discourses*¹⁸ about virtue and the sort of person a good man must be and what customary activities he should engage in; thus [the erotic soul] takes [his beloved’s] education in hand’ (209b–c, my stresses).

The ambiguity—both palpable and unacknowledged—lies in the status of the lover’s offspring. On the one hand, the lover’s ‘discourses’ are doubly *other-directed*, being focused both on the beautiful as he encounters it in the beloved and on the beloved’s well-being. Inspired by the presence of his beloved’s beauty, his thought is devoted to understanding it and how it should be cultivated in the beloved’s life. On the other hand, Diotima stresses that these ‘discourses’ are the means by which the lover achieves immortality *for himself* in the form of some measure of ‘deathless remembrance’ (ἀθάνατον μνήμην, 208d5) and ‘glorious renown’ (δόξης εὐκλεοῦς, d8). This motive becomes transparent when such ‘discourses’, tending naturally to expand to concern the cultivation of beauty in all souls, take the form of great poetry or laws; ‘everyone’, Diotima declares, ‘would choose to have produced such children rather than the human sort and, looking at Homer and Hesiod and the other good poets [and, she will add shortly, at the great lawgivers Lycurgus and Solon], is jealous of the sorts of offspring they have left behind, offspring that, being themselves immortal, provide them with deathless fame and remembrance’ (209c–d).

¹⁷ ... ζητεῖ ... καὶ οὗτος περιῶν τὸ καλὸν ἐν ᾧ ἂν γεννήσειεν, ... (209b2–4).

¹⁸ ... εὐθὺς εὐπορεῖ λόγων ‘[T]eems with’ is the felicitous suggestion of Nehamas and Woodruff, tr. (1989).

If, remembering our status as the recipients of Plato's challenging gift, we are alert to the danger that Aristophanes was the first to expose in his fellow symposiasts, this ambiguous characterization of the lover's motives should trouble us. To put this in the sharpened form of an either/or: is the reputation that the lover achieves a mere by-product of his devotion to and inspiration by the beautiful, or does he pursue this inspiration for the sake of the reputation it will win him? Only the first orientation preserves the priority of the beautiful; the second, reducing the beautiful to a means of acquiring social distinction, is another form of the 'storming of Olympus' that Aristophanes identified in Pausanias and Eryximachus.

But if this concern is right, why does Plato not have Diotima make an explicit point of it? That Plato does have this concern is strikingly confirmed, we shall see, by the complete disappearance of the idea of making a name for oneself in the characterization of the 'higher mysteries'¹⁹ that Diotima will offer at 210a–212a; for the soul capable of these, attention is focused entirely on what is beautiful and, distinguished at the close and for the first time, on the form of beauty. Why, then, does he have her leave the ambiguity implicit, in plain sight but not explicitly flagged and discussed? A first answer, I suggest,²⁰ lies partly in the very character of the *Symposium* as a gift to Athens, and partly in the phase of her teaching that Diotima has now reached. To receive the gift—an oriented occasion to reconceive the divine in its true height and otherness—we must ourselves first rise to the challenge of recognizing our need for it; and nowhere is this recognition and the attitude of engaged responsiveness that it brings with it as important as when we come to the most difficult particular challenge within the dialogue, that of entering into and learning from the revelatory experience of the 'higher mysteries'.²¹

¹⁹ This will be the shorthand title, borrowed from Suzy Groden's translation, that I shall use for Diotima's account of the ascent to Beauty itself at 210a–212a. Diotima introduces these as τὰ ... τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά, ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ τὰῦτα ἔστιν, literally translated 'the rites and mysteries [or revelations] that are those for the sake of which these [experiences, just described, of being inspired by what is beautiful] are' (210a1–2). Groden's 'higher' is surprisingly well-measured, for as we will see, Diotima's qualifier σκέδον, 'pretty much', at 211b6 suggests that there may be still further heights to reach.

²⁰ For a second answer, distinct but complementary to the first, see section IV below.

²¹ As an aside that would require more space to develop than we have, note that Plato in several ways mediates in advance the auditor's possible failure to recognize the ambiguity and orient herself accordingly. First, the ambiguity remains in the text, preserved, accordingly, and ready to be discovered on a later reading; and the very contrast between the emphatic presence of the concern

[4] *The 'higher mysteries': 'the beautiful itself' as the divine and discourse as disclosive of it*

In truth, Diotima's account of the 'higher mysteries' is not so much an account as it is a set of pointers for an imaginative participation in the experience of the divine in the new sense that she introduces. Rather than pretend to do the work of this participation on the page, let me identify and characterize four of these pointers.

[i] *The distinction of 'the beautiful itself' from 'beautiful things'.* Up until and, indeed, well into her account of the 'higher mysteries', Diotima speaks only of 'what is beautiful' or 'beautiful things' (τὸ καλόν, τὰ καλά)—that is, of that which has or bears beauty.²² She now reveals the partiality of the reach of these terms by distinguishing from them, as the goal of the mysteries, 'the beautiful *itself*' (αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν).²³ This is the form or nature of beauty, and in a remarkable *via negativa* Diotima declares it prior to its manifestations in the things that bear it both in its being and in its knowability: in its being it is that from which, by participating in it, the various things that bear it derive their beauty (211b), and it transcends the conditions of becoming to which these things are properly subject—in particular, coming-into-being and perishing, change, and the ways of being more and less that come with partiality, relatedness to others, and the givenness to different points of view (211a); in its knowability, in turn, it is not *itself* manifest in any bodily thing or as 'any particular discourse or science' (οὐδέ τις λόγος οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη, 211a). Accordingly, it is the eternal

for reputation and honor in the passage leading up to the 'higher mysteries' and its absence in the latter passage might well move the reader—if, after she has studied the 'higher mysteries' for the first time, she begins to sense this contrast in hindsight—to go back and do this later reading. Second, the reader who does not go back and does not make the discovery nonetheless has a kind of 'second best' understanding that preserves, even with the admixture of the human-all-too-human concern for reputation, the idea of the goal-status and the maieutic power of what is beautiful, and this is at least a substantial advance beyond the 'circle-man's' complete eclipse of the divine. I have argued elsewhere that such two-fold generosity is a structural feature of the dialogues. See, e.g., Miller 1999, and the introduction in Miller 1991.

²² As observed earlier (n. 9), consistent with this focus on cases rather than the form, she also occasionally speaks of τὸ κάλλος, whose core sense of visible beauty or the beauty of good looks also refers us to beautiful things rather than to αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν, the form beauty itself.

²³ 211c7–8, d3, e1, my stress. She also speaks of this as 'the beautiful nature' (τὴν φύσιν καλόν, 210e5), as 'that which beautiful *is*' (or 'that which *is* beautiful', ὃ ἔστι καλόν, 211c8–9, my stresses), and as 'the divine beautiful itself ... in its unique form' (αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖον καλὸν ... μονοειδές, 211e3–4).

and changeless source of its various sorts of presence in all the different sorts of things that we encounter in place and time, and it stands prior to the perceptual and cognitive experience by which we come to know this presence. Hence Diotima designates it as 'divine' (211e). It is what Socrates offers the symposiasts, and Plato Athens, as (to again recall the provocative phrase from the *Euthyphro*) a 'new god'.

[ii] *The new conception of the 'divine' and reason.* In their very different ways Pausanias and Eryximachus, on the one hand, and Aristophanes, on the other, 'stormed Olympus': whereas Pausanias and Eryximachus eclipsed the old gods by treating Erōs, in particular, as subject to control by the reason at work in the laws and in the sciences, Aristophanes called them back into view in comical imagery that, however unintentionally, complicitously undermined any respect or reverence they might once have compelled. Diotima's conception, by contrast, at once appeals to and yet re-disposes reason. In the presence of what is beautiful, the pregnant soul 'teems with discourses', not, however, to control but rather to extend and deepen, for the guidance of his beloved as well as himself, his understanding of that presence; the lover 'seeks' this presence and lets it inspire and lead his thought to an ever deeper appreciation of what is beautiful. As Diotima shows by the goal she sets and the movement toward it that she charts with her stepwise ascent up the 'stairs' of love (211c), the deepest purpose of reason is to make of itself the means for the supercession of rational discourse itself—that is, of λόγος and ἐπιστήμη (211a)—in the 'sudden' (210e) and fundamentally visionary experience (211c, e, 212a) of 'the beautiful itself'.

[iii] *The critical re-appropriation of our Athenian cultural resources.* I argued at the outset that by setting different dramatic dates for the symposium itself and its later retelling, Plato invites and challenges early fourth-century Athens to critically re-appropriate its great traditions. In a general sense, of course, with her notions of *erōs* as *daimon*, of the pregnancy of the lover's soul and the maieutic power of the presence of beauty, and of 'the beautiful itself' as the higher other that is the ultimate source and goal of the lover's experience, Diotima's teaching is a critical rethinking of the experience of *erōs*. But more particularly, by the specificity—and lack of it—of her sketch of the trajectory of the stepwise ascent up the 'stairs' of love, she turns our attention back to the traditions represented by Pausanias and Eryximachus and provides the occasion for our critical reinterpretation of them.

To see this, we need first to recall the trajectory of the ascent. The rightly guided lover, Diotima says, must begin with the love of a single body, then—by way of the 'beautiful discourses' that the beauty of this body inspires—be

brought to realize how the beauty of one body is ‘brother’ to that of another and, finally, to appreciate how ‘beauty in visible form’ is ‘one and the same in all bodies’ (210a–b, cf. 211c); with this recognition he has at once turned his attention to the ‘beauty in visible form’ that all bodies share and, ‘relaxing’ (χαλᾶσαι, 210b5) his initial fixation on a single body, readied himself to begin to ‘value the beauty in souls’ (210b). Accordingly, when he encounters another who is ‘decent in soul’, he will be moved to ‘beget’ a new sort of discourse, that which ‘makes young men better’ (210c), hence to ‘contemplate the beauty (τὸ ... καλὸν)’—that is, nobility of character—that is cultivated by good ‘life practices and laws’ (210c, cf. 211c). From this reflection the lover will move on to ‘the sciences’, that is, to ‘the great sea of the beautiful’ (210d, cf. 211c) that the many kinds of knowledge disclose, and ‘beget many beautiful and magnificent discourses and thoughts ... in an unstinting love of wisdom’;²⁴ it will be in the course of this discursive activity and in the state of mind that it generates that the ‘vision’ of ‘the beautiful itself’ will suddenly present itself to the lover.

Not only by having her explicitly mention ‘laws’ and ‘sciences’ but also by the extreme brevity with which Plato has her speak of them, Plato turns our attention back to the speeches of Pausanias and Eryximachus; we are at once reminded of them and thrown back upon them as resources for making sense of Diotima’s compressed remarks. Pausanias, we recall, raised the level of thought about Erōs from that of the tales of singular individuals to that of the distinction between kinds, noble and vulgar, of *erōs*, and by his further distinction of Athenian law from those of Ionia and of the hinterlands of Boeotia and Elis, he secured a perspective from which to discern, for the male citizenry, the erotic practices by which the city’s wise elders would take the education of its ignorant youth in hand. Thus Pausanias’ speech both provides content for Diotima’s account of the stage of ascent concerned with beauty of soul and, if we now recall Eryximachus’ response, makes intelligible her immediate transition from the laws to the sciences. Eryximachus could welcome Pausanias’ speech for its turn from individuals to kinds, for its appeal to the laws with their concern for the universal within the domain of the city, and for its implied focus on the right relation between opposites—elder/younger, wise/ignorant, past-their-bloom/beautiful; but for

²⁴ ... πολλοὺς καὶ καλοὺς λόγους καὶ μεγαλοπρεπεῖς τίκτη καὶ διανοήματα ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ, ... (210d4–6). Note the two nearly untranslatable terms here, *μεγαλοπρεπεῖς* and *ἀφθόνῳ*. *μεγαλοπρεπεῖς* connotes a great spirit, and *ἀφθόνῳ*, literally ‘un-envious’ or ‘un-jealous’, implies an open-spirited, nonacquisitive disposition—just what we should expect as characterizations of discourse and thinking that, rather than being attempts at control, are modes of listening for what is greater than oneself.

Eryximachus the champion of the sciences, Pausanias had captured only one case of the activity of the sciences, each in its own domain, namely, identifying and securing the normative 'loves' between the relevant opposites in its field, and so Eryximachus launched forth on his exemplary accounts of medicine's treatment of living bodies, of music's treatment of pitches and rhythms, and of divination's treatment of the powers fundamental to all else. And in these accounts we find determinate content for Diotima's brief sketch of the stage of ascent in which the lover, taking up 'the sciences', explores 'the great sea of the beautiful'.

Even as we let Pausanias' and Eryximachus' speeches provide content for Diotima, however, our recollecting of them provides an occasion for realizing how radically she has reoriented our understanding of the laws and the sciences as resources for the city. In the harmonies of opposites that these discern,²⁵ Diotima finds not just conditions of benefit to human beings but, more, sites of the inspiring presence of beauty; in the rational discourses, in turn, that each sort of beauty inspires, she finds not just means of managing this or that object field but, more, modes of attention that let the contemplative mind be moved from one site of presence to another and, so, towards an ever deeper appreciation of the whole; and, finally, in 'the begetting of many beautiful ... discourses' by which the mind ascends towards this appreciation, she finds the preparation of the occasion for the ultimate vision in which 'the beautiful itself', the cause that expresses itself in the plenitude of what is beautiful, finally discloses itself 'in its being by and with itself, eternally, in its unique form'²⁶ (211b). At the core of these points of reorientation, she finds *erōs* as neither a god nor a means for human reason but rather a striving that, responsive to the maieutic power of what is beautiful, opens itself ever more deeply to the divine that transcends it.

[iv] *'The beautiful itself' and the good: are the 'higher mysteries' the highest?* Socrates closed his refutation of Agathon by pairing 'good things' (τὰ ἀγαθά) with 'beautiful things' (τὰ καλὰ): 'good things', he got Agathon to agree, are also beautiful (201c). Against the background of this strong pairing of what is beautiful and what is good, it is striking that in the 'higher mysteries' Diotima focuses exclusively on the beautiful. How should we understand this? Does she really drop what is good, or does she only appear to, and instead keep it in an unspoken

²⁵ Though this is a thought for another occasion, one should consult the *Phlb.*, above all its reflections on the imposition of limit on the unlimited (23c–27d) and on the several aspects of the good (64d–e), for evidence of Plato's, so to speak, Diotima-oriented appreciation of the sciences' discovery of normative balances of opposites as sites of proportion and beauty. On the former, see Miller 2010, esp. 62–78.

²⁶ αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ μεθ' αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς ἀεὶ ὄν (211b1–2).

close relation to what is beautiful? Once we raise the latter possibility, we find numerous indirect provocations to pursue it. Consider these four: (1) In the, so to speak, Pausanian and Eryximachean moments of her account of the stepwise ascent to ‘the beautiful itself’, the notion of beauty seems inextricably bound to that of goodness: to cultivate what is beautiful in the sense of nobility of character in his younger beloved, the lover begets the sort of discourse that ‘makes young men *better* (βελτίους)’ (210c, cf. 209b–c), and, now to appeal to what is left implicit, the beauty that each of the sciences discloses lies in the *normative*, that is, *good*, balances of the relevant opposites that it studies. (2) Diotima speaks of reaching the culminating insight into the form of beauty in these strangely qualified terms: ‘when one ascends from [beautiful things] by the right pederasty and *begins* to see that beauty, *he has almost grasped the goal*’.²⁷ Does she mean that what she has just characterized as the ‘sudden seeing’ (ἐξάιφνης κατόψεται, 210e4) of the beautiful itself has distinct stages? Or—or should we say ‘and’—does she mean that there is something else to be encountered further along the ascending way, something beyond the beautiful itself? If the latter, might this be the good itself? (3) In her final sentences on the vision of the beautiful itself, Diotima twice makes use of an intriguing relative pronoun in the dative, ᾧ, to describe (to speak as neutrally as possible) how the beautiful itself can be seen. At 212a1–2 she asks with ironic understatement whether ‘it would be a poor life for one to look there and to contemplate that [namely, the beautiful itself] in the way that is needful (ᾧ δεῖ) for one to contemplate it and to be with it?’²⁸ And in the next sentence, at 212a3, she refers to ‘... the one who sees the beautiful in the way that (ᾧ) it can be seen, ...’.²⁹ Thus translated, the ᾧ is taken to refer to the distinct mode of understanding—or, alternatively, to the distinct power, ‘the mind’s eye’³⁰—that is required for the purely intelligible form, the beautiful itself, to be ‘seen’. But it is also possible to interpret ᾧ in a more ontological sense, taking it to refer to ‘that [being] by means of which’ the form Beauty is made ‘visible’ to the soul of the ascending lover. And if we hear it this way, it is hard to resist thinking of the role played by the form of the Good in the famous simile of the sun that Plato has

²⁷ ὅταν δὴ τις ἀπὸ τῶνδε διὰ τὸ ὀρθῶς παιδευαστεῖν ἐπανίων ἐκεῖνο τὸ καλὸν ἄρχηται καθορᾶν, σχεδὸν ἄν τι ἄπτοιτο τοῦ τέλους (211b5–7, my stresses).

²⁸ ἄρα οἶει, ἔφη, φαῦλον βίον γίγνεσθαι ἐκεῖσε βλέποντος ἀνθρώπου καὶ ἐκεῖνο ᾧ δεῖ θεωμένου καὶ συνόντος αὐτῷ. I owe thanks to my colleague Rachel Kitzinger for great help with the syntax of this remarkable sentence.

²⁹ ... ὁρῶντι ᾧ ὁρατὸν τὸ καλόν ... (212a3).

³⁰ Nehamas and Woodruff, tr. 1989, n. 94. See also Allen 1991, n. 250.

Socrates offer in *Republic* 6 at 508c–509a: just as the sun is the source of the light in which visible things first present themselves to be seen, so the Good, the elder Socrates proposes, is the source of the 'truth', the *alētheia*, in which knowables—that is, forms—first present themselves to be thought.³¹ Could Plato, through Socrates, be making Diotima speak in a way that refers not (or: not only) to the distinct mode of intellectual intuition by which the beautiful itself can be 'seen' but rather (or: but also) to the Good as that which first enables the beautiful itself to present itself to the erotic soul?

These questions intersect in an intriguing way with the profound and thought-provoking note on which Plato has Diotima end her speech. At the close of the 'higher mysteries' Diotima describes the unique begetting that 'the divine beautiful itself', when it discloses itself to the soul at the height of the ascent, inspires: up until this moment the erotic soul has been moved by the presence of what is beautiful to beget 'images of virtue' (εἶδωλα ἀρετῆς, 212a4) for it has been experiencing images, that is, appearances, of beauty; now, however, because the soul experiences 'the true' (τοῦ ἀληθοῦς, a5), that is, the beautiful *itself*, it begets 'true [virtue]'³² (ἀληθῆ [ἀρετήν], a5). By her distinction between offspring—presumably discourses—that are images of virtue and the offspring that is true virtue, Diotima refers to the inwardly transformative power of the visionary experience of the beautiful itself: in this experience, the lover, she says, becomes 'beloved-to-god' (θεοφιλεῖ, a6)³³ and as 'immortal' as a man can be (212a). We shall consider these extraordinary claims, which Socrates leaves as Diotima's last words, shortly. But in the context of our concern with the Good, what is striking is Diotima's emphasis on *virtue* (ἀρετή). Why does she speak not of the beauty or nobility of the transformed soul but rather of its *virtue*—that is, of its *excellence or goodness*? Mustn't the thought behind Socrates' closing question in his refutation of Agathon³⁴ continue to hold, that is, mustn't beauty and goodness be inextricably linked, for the impact of the vision of the beautiful itself on the soul to be that the soul is made truly *good*?

³¹ For my best effort to interpret the 'work' of the Good as Socrates suggests it in the *R.*, see Miller 2007.

³² That 'virtue' is to be understood as the noun that 'true' modifies is confirmed in the next clause, in which Diotima refers to the soul as τεκόντι δὲ ἀρετὴν ἀληθῆ, 'begetting true virtue' (212a5–6).

³³ This is often translated as 'beloved to the gods', but there is no reason for this plural—and if it is right that Plato has Socrates use Diotima's voice to offer his non-anthropomorphic conception of the divine as 'the beautiful itself', there is good reason to avoid it.

³⁴ 'Don't you think that good things (τὰγαθὰ) are also beautiful (καὶ καλὰ)?' 201c2.

IV. A Postscript: the Gift and Mediations of Our Failure to Receive it—Fame and Alcibiades

If we are listening well, Socrates is a circle-man in a positive sense. Whereas Pausanias and Eryximachus eclipse the old gods by subordinating Erōs to the controlling reason of the laws and the sciences, and Agathon does so by modeling Erōs after himself, and whereas Aristophanes' conservative resistance to such usurpations fails because his own comic representations of the gods portray them as human, all-too-human, Socrates and his Diotima offer a new conception of the divine and of human being's relation to it: 'the beautiful itself' (in, perhaps, supportive partnership with the Good) is at once the goal of human striving and the source of the power that inspires the very work of reason and discourse by which we seek it.

But Plato is fully aware of the profound challenge that this new understanding poses for us, his Athenian auditors, and he makes provision against the prospect of our failure in at least two pointed ways.

First, now that we have seen the overcoming of self-seeking that the 'higher mysteries' represent and require, we can also see, in retrospect, that by means of the ambiguity of Diotima's preceding portrayal of the soul's pursuit of immortality Plato has offered a kind of mean or second-best: even while the effort to secure one's name and 'deathless remembrance' among future generations tends to undermine one's recognition of the priority of 'the beautiful itself', the receptivity of the pregnant soul to the maieutic power of the presence of what is beautiful tends to preserve its possibility. For those of us who, as Socrates has Diotima warn at 210a, may not be ready for initiation into the 'higher mysteries', Plato thus provides a fall-back position that keeps the way open.

And, second, he follows Diotima's presentation of the 'higher mysteries' with Alcibiades' encomium to Socrates. To try to do justice to this extraordinary speech would require another essay; for the moment, let two complementary observations bring our reflections to (what I hope is) a fitting close. On the one hand, the Athenian auditor in the mid-370s can hardly hear the poignant words of the city's rising young star without being moved to recognize in the trajectory of his life-to-come a cautionary tale: that his lifelong attempt to make himself leader of the city collapsed in his two betrayals, first to Sparta and then to Persia, and then in his flight and murder exhibits the danger both to the city and to himself of a life lived in pursuit of power and acclaim and without the orientation provided by Socrates' 'new gods'. And on the other hand, no more brilliant and gripping testimony to the soul-shaping power of this orientation could be

given than Alcibiades' account of Socrates' character. In Plato's deft staging, of course, Alcibiades is not present to hear Socrates' report of Diotima's 'higher mysteries'; in his vivid tales, however, of Socrates' feats of intellectual concentration (220c–d), of his composure in the midst of a battlefield rout (221a–b), and of his freedom from the corrupting demands³⁵ of carnal desire (219e–220a) and honor (220e) and their combination in sexual seduction by Athens' most good-looking and ambitious young man (218c–219e), we who were present to hear Diotima cannot fail to recognize aspects of the 'true virtue' that is the inner effect of the visionary experience of the beautiful itself. In face of the challenge of the 'higher mysteries', Alcibiades' account of Socrates' inner strengths gives us reason to remain open and attentive.

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* It is a pleasure to be able to submit this essay in honor of Professor Holger Thesleff. Since, nearly fifty years ago, I first encountered his identification of *ongkos* as a style distinctive of the later dialogues, his scholarship has been for me a model of close reading, erudite preparation, and open-spirited, independent thinking. The reader will recognize at work at a deep level in this essay his seminal ideas that Plato targeted determinate audiences in different dialogues, that 'publication' often took the at once intimate and challenging form of a reading-aloud before a small group, and that by giving many of the dialogues a 'pedimental structure', that is, beginning with a protreptic phase and locating the most demanding and deeply probing thought at the dialogue's center, Plato could address the different needs and depths of different parts of his audience in different phases of the same text. I would also like to acknowledge a manifold debt to Professor Debra Nails. Her exemplary scholarship on the *dramatis personae* of the dialogues, which shares with Professor Thesleff's work a concerted effort to enable us to recover a concrete sense of the cultural and political world in which Plato worked and to which he responded, has provided orientation for a generation of interpreters. With regard to the present essay, though its limitations are, of course, mine alone, her timely and utterly supererogatory editorial support is largely responsible for its existence.

³⁵ This qualification is not redundant. After having first marveled at Socrates' indifference to the absence of food when, on campaign, supplies were cut off, Alcibiades undercuts the impression that Socrates was an anti-hedonistic ascetic by adding, 'then again, in situations of plenty (ἐν εὐχίαις), he alone was able to enjoy it to the full' (220a). Does the visionary experience of 'the beautiful itself' (and the Good?) have the inward effect not only of freeing the soul from corruption but, too, of freeing it for joy?

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