

## THE AFTERLIFE OF PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

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*Abstract:* From the time of Plotinus, in the 3rd century of the common era, down to the present day, Plato's *Symposium* has exercised an enormous influence on European art and literature. In this paper I set out a brief description of the 'afterlife of Plato's *Symposium*' and identify six features that helped to make the dialogue one of the best known and most influential philosophical texts ever written.

An account of the 'afterlife' of Plato's *Symposium*—its influence on the work of writers and artists in later centuries—could fill a book, or perhaps several of them.<sup>1</sup> But it might be possible to identify at least some of the specific features of the dialogue that helped to make it one of the most influential philosophical works ever written.

A brief listing of some of the best-known responses to the dialogue may give some sense of the rough dimensions of the phenomenon. Near the end of the 3rd century of the common era Plotinus read Plato's *Symposium* as a thinly veiled metaphysical treatise and adopted it as a blueprint for his own account of the different levels of reality and the return of the human soul to its spiritual homeland.<sup>2</sup> Following Plotinus' lead, many early Chris-

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<sup>1</sup> As Reginald Allen has observed, 'The *Nachleben* of the dialogue, as the Germans call it, its afterlife and influence, is very nearly as broad as the breadth of humane letters in the West; in the matter of *Quellenstudien*, it is not a spring, but a mighty river.' (*The Dialogues of Plato, Vol. 2: The Symposium* (New Haven and London, 1991), p. vii). Allen discusses several later responses to the dialogue and Frantisek Novotny provides a general survey of the Platonic legacy in his *Posthumous Life of Plato* (Hague, 1977). R.G. Bury cites several later writers to show 'how the doctrines of Plato have permeated the mind of Europe' (*The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge, 1932), p. 1). There have also been accounts comparing the view of love put forward in the *Symposium* with those of later eras: Thomas Gould, *Platonic Love* (New York, 1963); M. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London, 1954); Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York, 1966); and Octavio Paz, *La Llama Doble: Amor y Erotismo* (Barcelona, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. MacKenna (London, 1969), especially sections I.6 (On Beauty) and III.5 (On Love).

tian writers viewed the dialogue, most notably the famous 'ascent passage' at 210a-212a, as a compelling vision of the soul's journey from earth to heaven. Toward the end of the 15th century the Florentine scholar Marsilio Ficino translated the *Symposium* (first into Latin and later into Italian) and coined the phrase *amor Platonicus* to refer to the (male) romantic relationships highlighted at various points in the dialogue.<sup>3</sup> The publication in 1484 of Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium*, popularly known as the *De Amore*, sparked the creation of no fewer than thirty-three 'trattati d'amore' in Italy during the next century alone—works such as the *Platonic Discourse upon Love* by Pico della Mirandola, the *Dialogue on Love* by Leo Hebraeus, and the novel *Gli Asolani* by Pietro Bembo. By the end of the century *Gli Asolani* had gone through twenty-two Italian editions, with a Spanish edition published in 1551 and a French version in 1545, later reprinted six times. Bembo's view of a (now heterosexual) 'good kind of love' was made known to a far wider audience by the publication in 1528 of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. The merits of a 'Platonic' relationship became a frequent topic for comment by the poets of 16th and 17th-century Europe, and Plato's view of physical beauty as only an approximation of the beauty that exists in an ideal realm shaped the thinking of leading figures in the German and English Romantic movements. In the 20th century images and themes from the dialogue appeared in works by Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Sigmund Freud, and the American social reformer Jane Addams. Themes from the *Symposium* have also figured in works of art by Rubens, Titian, Giorgione, Botticelli, Pietro Testa, Jacques Louis David, Asmus Jakob Carstens, Anselm Feuerbach, John LaFarge, and Hans Erni, among others, and in musical compositions by Erik Satie (his 'Socrate' suite for voices and small orchestra) and Leonard Bernstein (his 'Serenade for Violin after Plato's *Symposium*'). In recent years the *Symposium* has been adapted for performance on stage or television on at least five occasions, including a BBC production with Leo McKern in the role of Socrates. Most recently, the rock musical 'Hedwig and the Angry Inch' borrows elements from the *Symposium* to tell how Tommy, an East German rock star, searches for love and happiness after a

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase appears in a letter from Ficino to Alamanno Donati (Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, 716). In the *De Amore* Ficino speaks only of 'Socratic love', but both expressions signify a love focused on the beauty of a person's character and intelligence rather than on their physical charms.

botched sex-change operation. What was it about the *Symposium*, one might wonder, that inspired so broad and varied a set of responses?

First, there were the dialogue's obvious literary merits—perhaps most notably the liveliness and broad range of Plato's writing, the presence of a single controlling philosophical vision, and the fashioning of many small but illuminating details. Plato's prose, which has been described as 'the most beautiful ever devised for the expression of abstract thought'<sup>4</sup> ranges from 'the easy conversational tone of educated men' up to heights where it 'consciously hovers between prose and poetry'.<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf analyzed Plato's artistry in these terms:

It is a winter's night; the tables are spread at Agathon's house; the girl is playing the flute; Socrates has washed himself and put on sandals; he has stopped in the hall; he refuses to move when they send for him... All this flows over the arguments of Plato—laughter and movement; people getting up and going out; the hour changing; tempers being lost; jokes cracked; the dawn is rising. Truth, it seems, is various; Truth is to be pursued with all our faculties... For Plato, of course, had the dramatic genius. It is by means of that, by an art which conveys in a sentence or two the setting and the atmosphere and then with perfect adroitness insinuates itself into the coils of the argument without losing its liveliness and grace, and then contracts to bare statement, and then, mounting, expands and soars in that higher air which is generally reached only by the more extreme measure of poetry—it is this art which plays upon us in so many ways at once and brings us to an exultation of the mind which can only be reached when all the powers are called upon to contribute their energy to the whole.<sup>6</sup>

But while Plato's art 'plays upon us in so many ways', as Woolf put it, the dialogue is tightly organized around a single vision—a view of *philosophia* or 'the love of wisdom' as *Erôs* in its best and most fully realized form. This thesis is not articulated until the dialogue is more than half over, but once it is presented during the course of Socrates' speech, it becomes obvious that everything up to this point has been mere prelude and propaedeutic.<sup>7</sup> As Diotima explained to Socrates, one who is properly

<sup>4</sup> By Bernard Williams in M. I. Finley, ed., *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal* (Oxford, 1981), p. 227.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Palmer, *The Greek Language* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1996), p. 168.

<sup>6</sup> From 'On Not Knowing Greek' in *The Common Reader* (London, 1962), pp. 51-53.

<sup>7</sup> In his translation of the dialogue John Brentlinger notes: '...the earlier speeches, the dramatic and historical action depicted or suggested, all motivated by a type of love, become

educated in the ways of love will move beyond the more narrowly focused enthusiasms of this world toward a life-altering communion with the Form of Beauty Itself. There, if anywhere, in communion with absolute moral and aesthetic perfection, human life becomes worth living.<sup>8</sup> One who has been endowed with and inspired by such knowledge will be able to impart genuine virtue to the young, and gain immortality to the greatest degree possible for a human being.

Yet the vision cannot be sustained. The moment Socrates finishes his speech Alcibiades and his drunken cohort enter the chamber and upset the symposium's established order.<sup>9</sup> At the conclusion of Alcibiades' love-hate encomium to Socrates the arrival of a second group of rowdies brings all orderly activity to an end. As dawn breaks, Socrates and his devoted admirer Aristodemus depart to begin another day of the contemplative life Diotima has just described the best form of human existence.<sup>10</sup> In short, the dialogue takes us through a series of imperfectly understood and partially realized manifestations of *Erôs* until we are given a glimpse of what perfect love, Absolute Beauty, and the best kind of life for a human being must be like. But as one might expect from the author of the *Republic* and *Timaeus* no sooner do we enter into the contemplative life than we are forced back down to a realm in which reasoned discourse must compete with and ultimately give way to the forces of disorder.

Many small, seemingly incidental details echo and reinforce the main message. The verbs and prepositions used to describe the assembling of the participants for the occasion foreshadow the 'upward movement' about to be described by Diotima.<sup>11</sup> The initial 'framing conversation' in

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the *data* of this discourse, the concrete material which gives meaning and relevance to its compressed and abstract statement' (*The Symposium of Plato* (Amherst, Mass., 1970), p. 21).

<sup>8</sup> The Greek adjective *kalos* (or the abstract noun *to kalon*) single-handedly covers the range of meanings collectively covered by our terms 'beautiful', 'fine', 'noble', and 'good'.

<sup>9</sup> Alcibiades' entrance is depicted in the 1869 'Das Gastmahl des Plato' by the German artist Anselm Feuerbach, now in the collection of the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe, Germany. A full-color reproduction appears in Seth Benardete's *On Plato's Symposium* (Munich, 1993), pp. 6-7.

<sup>10</sup> Plato speaks only of Socrates' 'engaging in his usual pastime' (*diatribein*), but the Lyceum was one of Socrates' regular haunts for philosophical conversation (cf. *Euthyphro* 2a, *Lysis* 203b, and *Euthydemus* 271a).

<sup>11</sup> As the dialogue opens, a group of men eager to learn about the famous party at Agathon's are 'going up to town' (*aniôn*) from the lower-lying village of Phalerum (172a).

which Apollodorus and an unnamed companion disagree about what form of life is really worth living (173c-d) unobtrusively anticipates the lesson concerning love and desire Diotima is about to present. A group of men who deliver a series of speeches about *Erôs* display through their own actions the control *Erôs* exercises over human life.<sup>12</sup> As the symposium begins Socrates stands apart on the porch of a neighboring house (175a), suggesting that he has already begun his trip up Diotima's ladder. And as Alcibiades praises Socrates for his super-human capacity for philosophical reflection we are simultaneously shown Socrates pursuing philosophical understanding while remaining wholly immune to the effects of the wine and the late hour. Finally, at the moment Socrates affirms that life in its finest form consists in contemplating the nature of Beauty we find ourselves engaged in just such an activity. As Reginald Allen has put it: 'beneath its shining surface [the dialogue] is constructed with the precision and something of the intricacy of a Swiss watch.'<sup>13</sup>

Second, the choice of the format of an ancient *symposion* or 'drinking party' enabled Plato to present within a small space a large number of competing intellectual perspectives and contrasting personalities. It does not appear that Plato actually invented the genre of the symposium or 'banquet of illustrious individuals'; his contemporary Xenophon appears to have just beaten him to it.<sup>14</sup> But it does seem that Plato adopted the symposium format and almost immediately advanced it to such a high level of interest

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Similarly, Socrates and Aristodemus are said to 'go forward along the road (*pro hodou*)' toward the house of Agathon—i.e. 'Mr. Good' (174d). The deliberate misquotation of *Iliad* X, 224 highlights this point. The feature is noted in Catherine Osborne's, *Eros Unveiled* (Oxford, 1994), p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Agathon appears with his elderly lover Pausanias, Eryximachus with his dear friend Phaedrus, and Socrates with his fawning admirer Aristodemus and embittered ex-boyfriend Alcibiades.

<sup>13</sup> Allen (1991), p. vii.

<sup>14</sup> In his *OCD* article on 'symposium literature' Oswyn Murray asserts that Plato 'established the prose genre of the *Symposium*, an imagined dialogue of set speeches or discussions usually on themes appropriate to the occasion.' (S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1996), p. 1461). But it has been recently argued by A.J. Bowen that: (1) Xenophon wrote the first symposium, (2) Plato created his version in order to do Xenophon one better, and (3) Xenophon subsequently reworked his symposium in the light of Plato's example. See the introduction in Bowen, *Xenophon's Symposium* (Warminster, 1998).

and intellectual content that it inspired a large number of ancient 'literary symposia' or imagined after-dinner conversations on a set theme.<sup>15</sup>

As the dialogue unfolds we are introduced to a series of contrasting intellectual perspectives on the evening's topic, the nature of *Erôs* – 'love' or perhaps more precisely, 'passionate desire'.<sup>16</sup> The first speaker, Phaedrus draws heavily on views of *Erôs* expressed by the leading poets of ancient Greece. His successor, Pausanias, analyzes *Erôs* from a cross-cultural perspective reminiscent of Sophistic thought.<sup>17</sup> The physician Eryximachus then explores the workings of *Erôs* on a cosmic level in the manner of a Presocratic natural scientist. Aristophanes then explains the origins of love in a charming folk tale: ever since Zeus divided the original human beings, a race of globular 'double humans' we have been yearning to be reunited with our original 'missing half' or 'soul mate', and that is what love is all about.<sup>18</sup> The poet Agathon then presents a flowery extravaganza which ascribes every possible excellence to *Erôs*. Socrates attacks

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle wrote a symposium-style dialogue on drunkenness, Epicurus wrote one on wine and sex, Heraclides of Pontius one on the effects of food and drink, Maecenas one on the effects of wine, and Menippus and Lucian wrote philosophical symposia. Among Latin authors there is the *Cena Trimalchionis* of Petronius and *Satire* 2.8 of Horace. The early Christian writer Methodius composed a *Symposium or Treatise on Chastity* in which ten virgins make extensive use of the language of Platonic philosophy in order to extol the religious value of chastity.

<sup>16</sup> Greek *erôs* may be rendered either as 'love' or 'desire' but it is more precisely a passionate love or desire, typically sexual in character. Prodicus the Sophist described *erôs* (in DK B7) as 'desire (*epithumia*) multiplied by 2', while '*erôs* multiplied by 2', he added, 'is madness'. One can feel *erôs* toward different sorts of things—objects and activities as well as persons—just as we might speak of politics, chess, or philosophy as 'the ruling passion of one's life'—and this feature of the term will play a key role in Plato's account.

<sup>17</sup> Pausanias' account calls to mind the contrast between *phusis* and *nomos* emphasized by various Sophists (cf. Antiphon B1). Forms of *nomos* and the related verb *nomidzô* appear seventeen times during the course of his speech.

<sup>18</sup> For a defense of the view of Aristophanes' account as a folk tale see K. Dover, 'Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's *Symposium*, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 86 (1966), 41-50; reprinted in K. Dover, *The Greeks and Their Legacy* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 102-14. We have an image of the original double humans in a medal honoring the 16th-century Paduan philosopher Marcantonio Passeri. The caption on the medal reads 'With philosophy leading (or 'as a companion'), we retrace our steps', reflecting the then current view of the image as a symbol of man's original unified—physical and spiritual—nature. An image of the Androgyne, as the image became known, also appears as a device on Gargantua's hat, along with a quotation from St. Paul. For a discussion of the Neoplatonic uses

Agathon's poorly conceived and superficial encomium to *Erôs* by means of his characteristic *elenchos* or 'cross-examination' before relating the lessons in love he received from a religious authority, an Arcadian priestess named Diotima. The intellectual *tour de force* concludes with a drunken encomium to Socrates by an inebriated and embittered Alcibiades. The dialogue recreates a lively informal debate about the nature of love among a group of friends and acquaintances, but in the process it explores a fundamental philosophical question about how the truth about reality is to be discovered.<sup>19</sup>

A third, more doctrinal feature which attracted the interest of many later readers was the way in which the *Symposium* viewed the smaller enthusiasms of human life from a larger, ultimately religious perspective. The dialogue's main lesson, as I have argued, was that *Erôs*' true nature and powers can be appreciated only when we are brought to appreciate the possibility of a perpetual union with a perfect, eternal, and divine being—a view which was entirely congenial to the many religious writers and thinkers who encountered Plato's text in the early centuries of the common era, especially those who were engaged in the process of defining Christian doctrine.

In the *Enneads* Plotinus had succeeded in combining Pausanias' distinction between the two Aphrodites, Diotima's retelling of the myth of Poverty and Resource, and her vision of the ascent to Beauty Itself to create an account of the process by which the human soul returns to the ultimate source of all reality—'the Authentic-Existent' or 'One':

The born lover... has a certain memory of beauty but, severed from it now,  
he no longer comprehends it: spellbound by visible loveliness he clings

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of the image, see Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London, 1960), p. 201 following, and Plates 66-68; and for its meaning in Rabelais, 'J. Schwartz, *Irony and Ideology in Rabelais: Structures of Subversion* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 56-65. For an account of the uses of the myth by various Renaissance writers, see P. Cheney, 'Jonson's *The New Inn* and Plato's Myth of the Hermaphrodite, *Renaissance Drama*, Vol. 14 (1983), 173-94.

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Barney has made a convincing case that at least part of Plato's aim in the *Cratylus* was to explore the merits of rival approaches to knowledge, with the prime contender there being 'etymological realism'. See her *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus* (New York, 2001). In the *Symposium*, as Andrea Nightingale has convincingly shown, it is the encomium or 'speech of praise' whose merits are being examined and found wanting. See Andrea Nightingale, 'The Folly of Praise: Plato's Critique of Encomiastic Discourse in the *Lysis* and *Symposium*,' *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (1993), pp. 112-30.

amazed about that. His lesson must be to fall down no longer in bewildered delight before some one embodied form; he must be led, under a system of mental discipline, to physical beauty everywhere and made to discern the One Principle underlying all... he must learn to recognize the beauty in the arts, sciences, virtues; then these severed and particular forms must be brought together under the one principle by the explanation of their origin. From the virtues he is to be led on to the Intellectual Principle, to the Authentic-Existent; thence onward, he treads the upward way. (I, 3.2).<sup>20</sup>

After Plotinus, as the historian Anders Nygren has explained, the image of the soul ascending to heaven on a ladder of love would run through much of early and medieval Christian literature:

For a thousand years... the ladder-symbolism characteristic of Eros piety sets its mark almost without question upon the general conception of Christian fellowship with God.<sup>21</sup>

The theme surfaces again in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* as the outcome of pursuing a 'rational' rather than 'sensual' kind of love:

Therefore let us direct all the thoughts and powers of our souls to this most holy light, that shows us the path leading to heaven; and following after it and divesting ourselves of those passions wherewith we were clothed when we fell, by the ladder that bears the image of sensual beauty at its lowest rung, let us ascend to the lofty mansion where heavenly, lovely, and true beauty dwells, which lies hidden in the inmost secret recesses of God. (p. 347).

A century later the Platonist Sylvandre in D'Urfé's pastoral romance, *L' Astrée*, would explain that 'God has placed [women] on earth to draw

<sup>20</sup> Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen McKenna, 4th edn revised by B.S. Page (Faber and Faber: London, 1956).

<sup>21</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia, 1938), p. 594. As Nygren explains, the simile of the celestial ladder of love appears in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysus the Aeropagite, St. Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and St. Bonaventure, among many others. We have an image of the celestial ladder in a 15th-century illustration done for *Il Paradiso* by Sandro Botticelli (see Kenneth Clark, *The Drawings of Sandro Botticelli for Dante's Divine Comedy* (New York, 1976), p. 197). It also appears in a painting by Giovanni de Paolo from about the same period, and in a 19th-century work by Gustave Doré (see Charles H. Taylor and Patricia Finley, *Images of the Journey in Dante's Divine Comedy* (New York, 1976), pp. 182-183 and 224-225).



us by them' to Heaven (III, 512-13). Loving a woman, he claims, is an act of religious piety: 'fear not... my child, of falling short toward God, provided that you there honor this Astrée as one of the most perfect works He has ever made visible to man' (II, 327).<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Spenser's *Hymne of Heavenly Beauty*, St.4, 1-4: 'Beginning then below with th' easie view/Of this base world, subject to fleshly eye/From thence to mount aloft by order dew/To contemplation of th' immortall sky.'

One of the most striking applications of what might be called the *Symposium's* religious perspective on love appears in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, published in 1858:

He was but three-and-twenty, and had only just learned what it is to love—to love with that adoration which a young man gives to a woman whom he feels to be greater and better than himself. Love of this sort if hardly distinguishable from religious feeling. What deep and worthy love is so, whether of woman or child, or art or music? Our caresses, our tender words, our still rapture under the influence of autumn sunsets, or pillared vistas, or calm majestic statures, or Beethoven symphonies, all bring with them the consciousness that they are mere waves and ripples in an unfathomable ocean of love and beauty: our emotion at its keenest moment passes from expression into silence; our love at its highest flood rushes beyond its object, and loses itself in the sense of divine mystery.<sup>23</sup>

In short, one of the chief merits of the *Symposium* for many later readers was that it provided a compelling framework for understanding the ascent of the human soul from this world to the next.

For many less-other-worldly thinkers, however, the dialogue's chief virtue lay in its identification of an important type of interpersonal relationship. Like Plotinus, Ficino assigned great importance to the distinction drawn by Pausanias between the two forms of the goddess Aphrodite—the celestial or heavenly Aphrodite and the common or earthly Aphrodite. Pausanias had introduced the distinction in an attempt to establish the superiority of love on the classic pederastic model (the love of an older male for a youth just on the verge of manhood) to the common sort of love which holds between people of different sexes and indifferent

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in E. Veevers, *Images of Love and Religion: Queen Henrietta Maria and Court Entertainments* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 130.

<sup>23</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York, 1960), p. 38

levels of virtue. But Ficino took the distinction to mark a contrast between the desire for physical union sparked by our senses of smell, taste, and touch, and a more refined appreciation of a person's beauty accessible to us through our faculties of sight and hearing. Although each form of love is 'virtuous and praiseworthy' in so far as each 'follows a divine image':

He who properly uses love certainly praises the form of the body but through that contemplates the higher beauty of the Soul, the Mind, and God, and admires that more strongly.<sup>24</sup>

The contrast surfaces again in Bembo's *Gli Asolani* when, after previous speakers have alternately praised and censured love, the gentleman Lavinello asks:

Who can fail to see that if I love some gallant, gentle lady, and love her more for her wit, integrity, good breeding, grace, and other qualities, than for her bodily attractions, and love those attractions not for themselves but as adornments of her mind—who can fail to see that my love is good because the object of my love is likewise good?<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between physical and spiritual love, as symbolized by the two Aphrodites, also found its way into the visual arts. As Sir Kenneth Clark explains:

...because it symbolized a deep-seated human feeling, this passing allusion [made by Pausanias in the *Symposium*] was never forgotten. It became an axiom of medieval and Renaissance philosophy. It is the justification of the female nude. Since the earliest times the obsessive, unreasonable nature of physical desire has sought relief in images, and to give these images a form by which Venus may cease to be vulgar and become celestial has been one of the recurring aims of European art. The means employed have been symmetry, measurement, and the principle of subordination [i.e. of part to whole]...<sup>26</sup>

Among the early examples of the Heavenly Aphrodite Clark cites the Knidian Aphrodite of Praxiteles, done around 330 B.C. (known to us only

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<sup>24</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas, 1985), p. 54.

<sup>25</sup> Pietro Bembo, *Gli Asolani*, trans. R. Gottfried (Bloomington, Indiana, 1954), p. 158.

<sup>26</sup> K. Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Princeton, 1956), p. 71.

through later copies), and the famous Aphrodite of Melos—better known as the Venus de Milo—from around 100 B.C. While these works display the female body they do so in ways that minimize our attention to their physical or sensual aspects while stimulating our intellectual or rational faculties. We can, for example, measure off the torsos of these figures into seven equal sections, and identify an exact proportionality of the size of the head, the distance between the breasts, etc. In short, what makes these statues great works of art is not the realism with which they portray the naked female body but rather the properties of balance and proportion the artists has instilled in them. By contrast, when we encounter artistic representations of the Common Aphrodite, as in this sensuous 'Leda' of Cesare da Sesto (after a work by Leonardo), the flute-playing nude of Giorgione's 'Concert Champêtre' (where the goddess is literally seated on the ground), or Rubens' voluptuous 'Three Graces', our attention is drawn to their physical attributes—to their size, weight, or fleshiness. The art historian Erwin Panofsky has also linked the distinction between the two Aphrodites to the painting of Titian traditionally known by the title of 'Sacred and Profane Love', arguing that the unclothed woman represents the 'naked truth' or the Heavenly Venus, while the other is her clothed or 'worldly' Natural twin.<sup>27</sup>

On some accounts the 'Primavera' and 'Birth of Venus' of Sandro Botticelli also drew heavily on the distinction between the two Aphrodites.<sup>28</sup> In 'Primavera' or 'Firenze', created around 1477, Botticelli presents a tapestry of earthly delights presided over by a richly-clothed Venus or Aphrodite figure, with Cupid (Eros) firing his darts of love down from above. In the right half of the painting Zephyr pursues Chloris who then metamorphizes into Flora, the goddess of vegetative growth. The story here is one of sensual desire, the procreative impulse, and abundant vegetative growth. On the left-hand side of the painting, a symmetrical arrangement of the three graces draws our attention upward and toward Mercury, the personification of reason, who himself points the way toward a higher realm. On one reading, the painting depicts the process through which love and desire beget vegetative growth and natural beau-

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<sup>27</sup> See his *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1962), pp. 151-52; and *Problems in Titian* (New York University Press: New York, 1969), pp. 109-38.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Liana De Girolani Cheny, *Botticelli's Neoplatonic Images* (Lanham, Md., 1985).

ty, while the created works draw the mind upwards toward a more rational realm of which they are reminiscent.

In the 'Birth of Venus', created in 1485/86, we find the Earthly Aphrodite's un-clothed counterpart, the Heavenly Venus (Aphrodite) arriving on the Italian shore, transported by divine powers from her oceanic birthplace. This is clearly the Aphrodite born of the foam created when the genitals of Kronos were cast into the sea. Venus' modesty, as revealed by the modest arrangement of her arms, and her elegantly balanced stance mark her as a direct descendant of the Heavenly Aphrodites of antiquity.

Over the course of several centuries European poets created an array of sonnets, plays, songs, and masques which explored the 'Platonic' notion that men and women should bind soul to soul rather than body to body. One of the more skeptical observers, John Donne, expressed the basic contrast in his 'Undertaking or Platonic Love':

But he who loveliness within  
Hath found, all outward loathes,  
For he who color loves, and skin,  
Loves but their oldest clothes.<sup>29</sup>

In Ben Jonson's 'The New Inne' the gentleman Lovel cites Aristophanes' myth (III, ii, 85) before describing the proper form of love as a uniting of the two parts of a single creature:

The end of love is to have two made one  
In will and affection, that the minds  
Be first inoculated, not the bodies.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1630's William D'Avenant created masques such as 'The Temple of Love' and 'The Platonic Lovers' for the amusement of the lords and ladies of the English court of Queen Henrietta Maria. One observer of the London scene, James Howell, wrote to a friend that:

... there is a Love called Platonick Love which much sways here of late. It is a Love abstracted from all corporeal, gross impressions and sensual appetite, but consists in contemplations and ideas of the mind, not in any carnal fruition.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> From *Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*, ed. T. Redpath (London, 1956).

<sup>30</sup> *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, ed. G. Wilkes (Oxford, 1982), Vol. III, ii, p. 150.

<sup>31</sup> James Howell in *Epistolae Ho-Eliaene*, ed. J. Jacobs (London, 1982), Vol. I, pp. 317-18.

Many traditions have contributed to our modern understanding of love—the courtly love tradition, the Christian ideal of ‘charity’, modern psychoanalytic theory, just to mention a few. But on many occasions, when writers have sought to describe a form of interpersonal affection grounded not in physical desire but in an appreciation of another’s mind or ‘soul’ the language and imagery employed have derived ultimately from Plato’s *Symposium*.

A fifth influential element was the dialogue’s view of *Erôs* as a force that manifests itself in a wide range of human activities. The view of *Erôs* as a creative impulse makes its first appearance when Agathon identifies *Erôs* as the power that underlies the creation not only of animals but of the arts of poetry, archery, medicine, and prophecy, metalwork and weaving (197a-b). The idea is then developed at greater length in Diotima’s account (208b-209e). As she explains it, *Erôs*, properly understood, is ‘the desire for eternal possession of the good’ (which implies desiring to live forever), and as a consequence can be seen to be at work in all the ways in which human beings seek to gain some measure of immortality—by perpetuating their name or image in their children, composing poetry, founding cities, imparting virtue to the members of the next generation, etc.

The view of love as a power that enables us to sense and create beauty in all its forms was embraced by the leading figures of the English Romantic movement—Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth. In his essay ‘On Love’, written during the period when he was translating the *Symposium* into English, Shelley describes the all-embracing form of love that affords us access to an ideal realm:

We are born into the world, and there is something within us which, from the instant that we live, more and more thirsts after its likeness... We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototypes of everything excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man... this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends.

In lines that have been described as ‘the clearest re-expression of Plato’s philosophy in all of English poetry’<sup>32</sup>, Shelley described all forms of artistic endeavor as the products of this power:

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<sup>32</sup> By J. Notopoulos in *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind* (Durham, 1949).

...lovely apparitions,—dim at first,  
 Then radiant, as the mind, arising bright  
 From the embrace of beauty (whence the forms  
 Of which these are the phantoms) casts on them  
 The gathered rays which are reality—  
 Shall visit us, the progeny immortal  
 Of Painting, Sculpture, and rapt Poesy,  
 And arts, tho' unimagined, yet to be;  
 The wandering voices and the shadows these  
 Of all that man becomes, the mediators  
 Of that best worship, love, by him and us  
 Given and returned... (*Prometheus Unbound* III, 49-60)

The American social reformer Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House in Chicago, also championed the view of love, in the specific form of sexual desire, as the origin of all our artistic impulses. In her 1927 essay 'Youth in the Streets' she lamented the lack of supervision being given to the large numbers of pleasure-seeking teenagers then moving into America's cities. Quoting from Diotima's speech, Addams claimed that sexual desire 'suffuses the world with its deepest meaning and beauty, and furnishes the momentum toward all art'.<sup>33</sup> Inspired by what she took to be Plato's view of the arts, Addams railed against 'the blatant and vulgar songs heard in five-cent theaters and vaudeville houses' and urged the city fathers to organize programs that would enable the young to find a release for their sexual energies in more refined forms of music and dance.

In the early decades of the 20th century Freud credited Plato's account of *Erôs* in the *Symposium* with helping him to develop his widely influential understanding of the nature of human sexuality. 'In its origin, function, and relation to sexual love,' Freud wrote, 'the 'Eros' of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psychoanalysis.'<sup>34</sup> Just as both Agathon and Diotima had linked creation to *Erôs*' powers, so Freud came to regard a wide range of phenomena, including

<sup>33</sup> Jane Addams, 'Youth in the City' in *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York, 1923), p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVII, 91. For persuasive critiques of Freud's claim see Gerasimos Santas, *Plato and Freud: Two Theories of Love* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1988), pp. 153-84; and A. W. Price, 'Plato and Freud' in C. Gill, ed., *The Person and the Human Mind* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 247-70.

the creation of works of art, as manifestations of our basic sex drive. The composer Leonard Bernstein spoke in similarly Freudian terms when he described the unconscious mind as 'the deep spring from which comes [man's] power to communicate and to love' and declared that 'all art is a combination of these powers'. The writer Iris Murdoch expressed the idea in this way: 'Art comes from the deep soul where a great force lives, and this force is sex and love and desire... and without this force there is no art, and no science either...'<sup>35</sup>

The sixth, and last, feature of the *Symposium* that attracted considerable interest was its candid exploration of human sexuality. Readers of the dialogue were quick to notice that all the participants in the discussion of love were men, many of them present in the company of their male lovers. In his speech Pausanias' openly defended male homoerotic relationships on the classic pederastic model—a relationship in which an older man agrees to promote the social and political interests of a younger man in return for receiving sexual favors. In his account of the splitting of the original 'double humans'—some double males, some double females, and some combinations of the two sexes—Aristophanes made it clear that both male and female homoeroticism occupied a place in the sexual universe. Alcibiades' drunken disclosure of his failed seduction of Socrates became so notorious that Latin translations of the passage were circulated long before the dialogue as a whole had been translated. The speech was known in the Hellenistic and early Christian periods<sup>36</sup> but it became an object of wide interest during the Renaissance. Even before the *Symposium* had been translated in its entirety into Latin, the speech enjoyed some notoriety as one of the bawdier ancient texts. It was also the first portion of the dialogue to be made available, at least in bowdlerized form,

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<sup>35</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Acostos: Two Platonic Dialogues* (Chatto and Windus: London, 1986), p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> There are direct or indirect references to the *Symposium* portrait of Alcibiades in Epictetus, *Discourses* I, 181; Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* I, 99; Cornelius Nepos, *Life of Alcibiades* 2; Lucian, *Types of Love* 49; John Cassian, *Conferences* 13, 5, 3.

<sup>37</sup> James Hankins explains that 'In Bruni's version Alcibiades' account of his attempted seduction of Socrates is high-handedly converted into a story of how Alcibiades pursued Socrates for his wisdom, and all other references to homosexuality, fluteplaying, and paganism are systematically expunged.' (*Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol. I (Leiden, 1990), p. 80). The text of Bruni's version of the seduction scene is included in Hankins, *op. cit.* Vol. II, pp. 399-400.

in the 1435 Latin translation of Leonardo Bruni.<sup>37</sup> At some points in later centuries the sexually related materials in the dialogue caused difficulties for those who sought to defend Plato from the criticisms launched by religious and academic authorities.<sup>38</sup> In more recent years, however, the *Symposium's* apparent acceptance of what today might be called 'alternative lifestyles' or different sexual orientations has struck many readers as one of the dialogue's most attractive features. One reviewer of a 1986 performance of the *Symposium* hailed both the performance and the dialogue itself as a 'rediscovery and reaffirmation of the power and dimensions of love in its many forms'.<sup>39</sup> Another production, presented in the State of Colorado during a debate over whether to deny Constitutional protection on the grounds of sexual orientation, offered the dialogue to its audience as a celebration of love in all its forms.<sup>40</sup> These responses to the dialogue share the assumption that the *Symposium* portrayed all forms of sexuality—even the pederastic relationship which was a recognized aspect of Athenian aristocratic life during the classical period—as appropriate or acceptable forms of behavior.<sup>41</sup>

To sum up: I have argued that much of the later interest in Plato's *Symposium* can be traced back to the fact that the dialogue: (1) displayed a high level of dramatic artistry, (2) exploited the full potential of the symposium format in order to present a set of competing intellectual traditions and contrasting personalities, (3) offered early religious writers a useful

<sup>38</sup> For an account of this phenomenon see Jill Kray, 'The Transformation of Platonic Love in the Italian Renaissance' in A. Baldwin and S. Hutton, eds. *Platonism and the Romantic Imagination* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 76-85.

<sup>39</sup> J. Appel, in a review of 'Plato's Symposium' at the Los Angeles Powerhouse Theater ('Plato's Symposium,' *High Performance*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1986), p. 27).

<sup>40</sup> 'All About Love: A Musical Based on Plato's *Symposium*', by M. Ross, M. Arnest, and L. Arnest, performed August 29-September 14, 1997, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

<sup>41</sup> It has, however, been argued by P. von Blanckenhagen that the dialogue actually presents a sustained critique of the pederastic model (see his 'Stage and Actors in Plato's *Symposium*,' *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1992), 51-68). If this is correct, then the widespread view of the *Symposium* as the expression of a plea for tolerance, i.e. for the acceptance of all manifestations of *Erôs* as natural and good, would not be correct. Von Blanckenhagen based his claim in large part on Plato's unflattering portrait of Agathon as an aging 'drag queen', but it is clear from Diotima's speech that she ranks the joint pursuit of philosophical understanding as a step above the usual pederastic relationship. Cf. her reference at 210b5-6 to 'the right way of loving a boy'—to *orthôs paiderastein*.



philosophical framework within which to understand the passage of the soul from earth to heaven, (4) identified a distinctly intellectual or spiritual kind of interpersonal relationship, (5) linked sexual desire to a wide range of human activities, and (6) explored different expressions of sexual desire without evident animus or prejudice. I would not claim that this list of features reflects every historically influential aspect of the dialogue, and in any case, the significance of any great work of art always exceeds the sum of its identified component parts. But no account of the afterlife of the *Symposium* could be considered complete if it failed to include the six features described above.<sup>42</sup>

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