

READING PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

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Introduction

Lacan decided that an analysis of the *Symposium* of Plato in his Seminar of 1960 - 1961 would be an illuminating detour by which to investigate the transference relation in psychoanalysis.¹ This investigation centred on the question of the desire of the analyst and the ethical implication of where the analyst *ought* to situate himself in order to respond to the transference.

Central to the discussion is the concept of identification and the role of the ego ideal. There is a danger in analysis that the analyst is offered the place of the ego ideal for the analysand and that he assumes this position by abandoning his role as subject-who-is-supposed-to-know (*sujet-supposé-savoir*) and erroneously taking the position of the one who knows (master of knowledge). In this case the desire of the analyst is the desire to 'understand' the analysand and falling for this lure is a sign of the incompetence of the analyst. The challenge facing the analyst is much more difficult than reaching an understanding and communicating that understanding to the analysand. It requires the ability to know how and when not to know, to be able to be *desiring* in the full sense that Lacan gives to this term, and to do this in a way that makes possible the realisation of the desire of the analysand by the analysand. It is primarily by a certain *refusal* on the part of the analyst that the dynamic of the transference should work. This refusal, this *Versagung* or not-

¹ Over the course of the Seminar, Lacan follows many such detours in order to approach the structure of transference. *The Symposium* is the first of these and the longest sustained. From there he goes on to use a painting by Zucchi, a sixteenth century Mannerist, a dramatic trilogy by Claudel, some articles from the psychoanalytic literature on transference. He draws on the concepts, schemas and graphs that he had been unfolding over the years.

saying² requires a clear distinction between 'identification' at the level of the imaginary (a narcissistic identification involving the ideal ego), and identification at the level of the Symbolic (which involves the ego ideal). Where should the analyst position himself so that these two identifications, which are always present, can be distinguished? Lacan suggests that this position is possible only from the place of the lack in the Other, the place of $S(\emptyset)$ on the Graph of Desire. The end of analysis and the resolution of the transference have to do not just with an arrival at this place where the seemingly endless metonymical movement of the signifier comes to a halt before the big phi, the term of symbolic castration, but also with a pointing beyond this place of the void, this place towards which the *che vuoi?* of the analysand is directed. In other words the end of analysis should not stop at the place where the subject recognises himself as *desirable* but should point to some beyond (and it seems to be the recognition of the lack in the Other, the *ouden* of the analyst, which constitutes this pointing) so that the subject recognises that he is implicated as *desiring*.

Lacan's Seminar may seem unnecessarily long and rambling. The listener and now the reader, initiated into learning by another route, may fume with irritation at the roundabout ways and unfulfilled promises of explanation until it is time to speak back and report on what Lacan is talking about. It then becomes clear that the subject matter requires the detours and myths on the one hand, the graphs and schemas on the other. The subject matter in the case of the Seminar on Transference is love and desire and Lacan uses the *Symposium* of Plato as a detour around, in order to enter into, the question of desire in psychoanalysis. There is more than one desire at work in the 'analytic cell' and it is the desire of the analyst that Lacan is intending to circumscribe in particular.

While I will leave the elaboration of a position on transference and the place of the desires of either party implicated therein for another day, I hope that this article will serve as something of a guide to the reading of the *Symposium*, in the light of Lacan's commentary on that text. What follows is a far from exhaustive reading of the *Symposium* as illuminated by a reading of

² J. Lacan. *Transference, The Seminars of Jacques Lacan 1960-1961*. XXI, p. 4. Trans. Cormac Gallagher, unpublished.

Lacan's Seminar. It does not aim towards any conclusion, any neat, reductive formulation of either text. If anything, it will leave things open, it will leave questions hanging, it will puzzle more than comfort. Along the way the reading of the ancient text by Lacan's light will be interrupted by some of his observations which are strictly speaking psychoanalytic as opposed to elaborations of the Greek text. I hope (without being able to detail in what way), that the reader will benefit from what falls out of the reading.

Let us begin by noting that neither Plato nor Lacan has much time for the requirement to follow a rigorously deductive line of thought. Therefore it would be inappropriate and misguided to attempt to reduce their two discourses to two neatly turned, jargon-laden accounts, or worse still to one argument. They may be talking about the same thing and one may use the other to communicate his approach but they are not reducible to one argument.

The Preamble

The *Symposium* is an account, and not a completely trustworthy one, of a drinking party that took place in Athens one night in January in the year 416BC. The drinking party - *sumposion* - was directed by certain rules of conduct which were followed up to a point. These rules allowed the delivery of a number of speeches on the subject of love. The night had acquired a certain fame as the occasion of Socrates speaking on this topic but also a certain notoriety due to the contribution to the proceedings by Alcibiades.

The way we come to hear things might make a difference or so Plato suggests by his preamble to the actual telling of the story. The way in which the 'text' of Lacan comes to us is also interesting. The question then is: how do we come to hear the word?

The *Symposium* opens with an account of how it comes to be told. Apollodorus is replying to a request from an unnamed companion to relate to him the story of the famous party. In other words it begins within a conversation the beginning of which we do not hear. Apollodorus is the right person to ask because he has recently practised the telling of the story to Glaucon. There seems to have been some interest in the story around the time of our hearing it. Apollodorus was, however not at the party. He has the story

from Aristodemos, 'a little fellow who never wore shoes',³ who was at the party in the house of Agathon, the tragedian whose victory in the festival of tragedy they were celebrating. Apollodorus thinks that Aristodemos was the foremost lover (*erastes*) of Socrates at the time. Despite this the former had not been invited to the party and only comes to be there by meeting Socrates by chance and by being coaxed teasingly into accompanying a dressed-up Socrates to the party. Therefore we are receiving the story at one remove from its original source who was a somewhat hesitant, uninvited guest who didn't recall the details of all that was said.⁴ It is worth noting at this stage that a justification for the way Lacan 'uses' the *Symposium* for his own purposes can be found in Plato's text itself. The speakers frequently paraphrase or 'use' a version of a phrase of Homer or one of the tragedians to make their point. Aristophanes at one point even has the audacity to correct Homer in order to insert the myth he is weaving into the tradition.⁵ They are not bound by the modern obsession with accurate reproduction of the classics.

The two arrive separately because Socrates stops for a while, as is his wont, in a neighbour's porch to consider something. Each takes his place on a couch beside another but not each other - Aristodemos beside Eryximachos, the doctor, and Socrates beside the host, Agathon. With the interesting exception of Aristophanes, the comic poet, each of the main characters whom we meet over the course of the story is a lover of another who is present: Phaedrus, the hypochondriac, and Eryximachos, the doctor; Pausanias is the lover of Agathon; Socrates is linked with not only Alciabiades but also Agathon and Aristodemos over the course of the story.

This is a drinking party of homosexuals, 'a collection of old queens',⁶ from which emerges a discussion on love which has occupied the minds of philosophers and theologians for twenty-four centuries. The speeches on love come from men who practise and prize homosexual love. Lacan, using the *Symposium* to elaborate the structure of love, suggests that this form of love is more accessible to discourse (and therefore serves his enterprise which is 'to

³Plato. *Symposium*. Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford University Press, 1972. para 173b.

⁴ *ibid*, para 178a.

⁵ *ibid*, para 190c, see also para 195c.

⁶ J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, III, 5.

know what it means to know about love'⁷ and that it is a less complicated model than one that involves love with women in the articulation of which something is always elided.⁸

There is in Agathon's first flirtation with Socrates an association between intimacy and the acquiring of knowledge, which we will see more of as the story unfolds. Agathon invites Socrates to join him on his couch so that he might benefit from any piece of wisdom that occurred to Socrates while he was in the porch of the neighbour. Socrates responds while taking his seat beside Agathon on the couch:

Wouldn't it be well, Agathon, if wisdom (Sophia) were such that it flowed from the fuller of us to the emptier of us, if we were to touch each other, like water in wine-cups flowing through wool (along a thread of wool) from the fuller to the emptier. If wisdom were like this I am greatly honoured to share your couch; I think that I will be filled with much beautiful wisdom from you. Because mine is paltry (cf Lysis⁹) and open to question/disputable, like a dream is, whereas yours is brilliant and shows great promise and it shone the other day so strongly and clearly despite your youth with more than thirty thousand Greeks as witness.¹⁰

Agathon's brief reply - 'you are a wanton (*hubristes*) man'¹¹ - picks up on the tone of teasing banter in these remarks of Socrates. It is worth keeping in mind that a playful banter, a teasing bitchiness even, colours the language of the exchanges in this story and this continually reminds us of the importance of the contribution made by the characterisation and dramatic setting to the reading of this text. Of particular significance in this exchange, however, is the idea that knowledge could be passed through, and perhaps exchanged for,

⁷ *ibid.*, II, 13.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Plato, *op.cit.*, para 204c.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, para 175d-e (my translation).

¹¹ *ibid.*, para 175e.

physical intimacy. And further that Socrates is supposed to be the one who knows and he doesn't refuse that position in any clear way as the lines quoted above show. His claim that he knows nothing significant and that what he does know is as disputable as a dream's interpretation is couched in the language of this teasing banter and exaggeration. It echoes a similar claim in another dialogue, *Lysis*, when he says that his knowledge is paltry and only amounts to the ability, granted to him through a gift of the gods, to recognise quickly a lover (*erastes*) and a beloved (*eromenos*).¹² Socrates, then, is presented as a man with an unusual and not easily defined epistemological position. He is well worth investigating if one wants to consider what it is to know how not to know but, perhaps because of this, to know about love. He, therefore, provides a very promising detour for Lacan, who refers to the *Lysis*¹³ on this point. The following questions initiate Lacan's analysis of the Symposium: what is it to know about love? what use is it to know about love?¹⁴ and to what end and in what way should one make use of love or desire?¹⁵

Those present decide not to make the party a drunken one but to drink only for pleasure.¹⁶ This drinking party is to be governed by a certain orderliness which will make the disruption caused by the entrance of Alcibiades all the more unruly. Eryximachos, the doctor and espouser of harmony, proposes an activity and the form in which it will be dealt with. He suggests that they spend their time together in conversation - *dia logon*. Here, while it also carries a philosophical weight, the term *logos* is used ostensibly to mean conversation, debate. Again the reader is reminded of the elusive tone of the text: an inextricable web of the comic and the profound which suggests that the one cannot come without the other. It is significant that the story of the night ends with Socrates trying to get Agathon, the tragedian, and Aristophanes, the comedian, to agree that the ability to compose tragedy and comedy should be combined in the same person. Their conversation is to

¹² *Lysis* 204c.

¹³ J. Lacan, op.cit., I, 4-5.

¹⁴ *ibid*, II, 9.

¹⁵ *ibid*, I, 6.

¹⁶ Plato, op.cit., para 176e.

have as its prescription the honouring in words of the god of love, a suggestion originating from Phaedrus who as 'father of the *logos*'¹⁷ will be first to speak. Each will speak in turn from left to right. Eryximachos points out that if people see fit to talk and write about the usefulness of salt it is only right that Eros should be praised since this has not been undertaken until now. Interestingly both love and salt are necessary ingredients for human life and yet in speaking about them there is always an element of the ridiculous. Socrates speaks for the gathering when he approves the arrangement proposed by Eryximachos and uses the moment to remind us that the topic suits him since all he knows about are the ways of love, *ta erotika*, literally the things caused by love.¹⁸

The first five speeches are spoken *extempore*, do not follow an easily identifiable logic, and are spoken as eulogies rather than formal philosophical arguments. The structure of the *Symposium* is restlessly metonymical - each speech confounds, undermines, moves on from the previous one.

Phaedrus

After pointing out that Love, Eros, is one of the oldest of the gods and therefore one deserving our honour Phaedrus explains that this provenance means that he is a very useful god. Love provides a guide for virtuous behaviour in that it is the cause of feelings of shame and feelings of pride. Love by this account is a useful marshal for good behaviour; it embodies a law for virtuous action. This outlook on love brings to mind the notion of the super ego in Freud's second topography. Both involve the installation of a critical agency through identification with an ideal, an agency whose main function is that of prohibition.

His next point is of particular interest to Lacan because it introduces the idea of substitution. Lacan says quite early in the Seminar, prematurely as he points out, that 'love, as signification, (because for us it is one and it is only that), is a metaphor, in the measure that we have learned to articulate

¹⁷ *ibid*, para 177d.

¹⁸ *ibid*, para 177d, *passim*.

metaphor as substitution ...'.¹⁹ Paraphrasing Lacan: the substitution occurs when the function of the lover (the *erastes*, the one who lacks without knowing that/what he lacks) takes the place of the function of the beloved (the *eromenos*, the beloved object, who has to give (meaning he *has* something to give and also that he *must* give it) what he does not have. This substitution produces the signification of love.²⁰ This is far from clear and is not easily clarified. In fact Lacan suggests that he will spend the rest of the year's Seminar developing this idea of love as metaphor.

Phaedrus introduces the idea of substitution to this talk on love in the form of three examples from legend. The first reference is to the story of Admetus and Alcestis. In that story Queen Alcestis dies *instead of, or, in the place of (huperapothneskein)*²¹ her husband. She takes his place and is rewarded by being allowed to live again. The second example is the story of Orpheus who does not receive his wife back from Hades because he is not prepared to die for the sake of love. For his trickery in attempting to enter Hades alive, he was torn to pieces 'by women'.²² The third example is Achilles who not only chose *to die for (huperapothneskein)* but also *to die after, to follow in dying (epapothneskein)* Patroclus who was his lover. Phaedrus does not use the term *lover* in a loose way. In the school of love that these men attend, lover - *erastes* - is a technical term. Phaedrus is at pains to correct Aeschylus' misapprehension regarding the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus (a relationship which is not insignificant in that it is what drives the action of Homer's Iliad). What is remarkable about Achilles is that he, as the loved one, the *eromenos*, acted in a way worthy of a lover. In other words he substituted his function as beloved object with the function of lover - he acted with the courage of a lover, who has this courage because he is possessed by a god. For this act he was honoured especially by the gods in that it is a reversal of the normal form of love, a reversal of Lacan's formulation for the signification of love outlined above.

¹⁹ J. Lacan, op.cit., III, 4.

²⁰ *ibid*, III, 5.

²¹ Plato, op.cit., para 179b.

²² *ibid*, para 179d.

Pausanias

Before hearing what Pausanias has to say we are reminded again of the fact that we are reading only the highlights of the speeches as edited by Aristodemos. Several others spoke between Phaedrus and Pausanias but our eye-witness, or better, our ear-witness, could not remember them.²³ This warning alerts us to the possibility that in each of the speeches something worth attending to is recalled, or at least something which contributes to the overall drama of words. It is important to bear this in mind given the ridiculing of each of the speakers by subsequent speakers.

Pausanias distinguishes between two Loves - Heavenly Love and Common Love - and argues that it is fitting to sing the praises only of that Love which urges us to love beautifully. This speaker is an advocate of homosexual love as a more virtuous kind of love. He defends the *overvaluation* of the beloved by the lover and the protection of the beloved from the advances of the lover until such time as the lover's intention has been found to be worthy. This practice was the custom in Athens where homosexual activity was neither proscribed nor straightforwardly accepted. Being Athens a more subtle system was in place:

This is why it is encouraged for the one [the lover] to chase and for the other [the beloved] to flee, presiding at the game and putting to the test it is possible to see what sort the lover (*eron*) is and what sort the beloved (*eromenos*).²⁴

Pausanias describes as acceptable any behaviour in the name of love, however obsequious or shameful, as long as it has to do with goodness (*arete*). This speech is an apology for the idealisation of the love object and the behaviour that accompanies such overvaluation and it is worth remembering that Pausanias is the lover of Agathon, who has been joined on a couch by Socrates.

²³ *ibid*, para 180c.

²⁴ *ibid*, para 184a (my translation).

Aristophanes, whose turn it is to speak next, responds to Pausanias' speech with a bout of hiccups. Kojève, the grand old man of French Hegelianism, as a parting shot in a conversation with Lacan around the time of the Seminar, said of this remarkable form of interruption: 'In any case you will never interpret the Symposium if you do not know why Aristophanes had a hiccup!'.²⁵ The hiccup indicates that Aristophanes was trying to stifle his laughter during the speech of Pausanias. Along with the excess of word play about Paus-anias paus-ing it signals the derisory nature of that man's contribution to the proceedings. Due to the violence of the bout of hiccups the order of the speakers is disrupted. This marks the first disruption, in the form of an uncontrollable eruption due to a failed suppression, in the structure that was imposed upon the evening. Aristophanes has not finished with Pausanias - when he comes to speak he concludes with a humorous swipe at the relationship between Pausanias and his beloved, Agathon.

Eryximachos

This man of science sees Love as a force that is present in all that exists. He moves the discussion from the area of aesthetics and social order to the area of science. Lacan notes Eryximachos' eagerness to align medicine with the science of the time, namely the science of musical and mathematical harmony (*harmonia*). By this ancient doctor's account health is concord and 'medicine is the knowledge of the things caused by love in the body'.²⁶ This speech is the most pompous from a man who had a reputation for lecturing to people rather than talking to them. His so-called argument does not hang together: on the one hand he says that there are two kinds of love, good love and bad love, while he also holds that love is the principle of harmony and unification. Eryximachos' argument falters,²⁷ misinterpreting Heraclitus he ends up trying to cover himself with a bit of cleverness about the next speaker balancing any omissions. The next speaker is the emitter of hiccups.

²⁵ J. Lacan, op.cit., IV, 11.

²⁶ Plato, op.cit., para 186c.

²⁷ ibid, para 187c.

Aristophanes

The good doctor was asking for it and the comic poet gives it to him. Although he begins his speech in comic vein with a humorous swipe at the previous speaker, Aristophanes goes on to speak about love in an almost tragic mode. His famous myth describes the splitting in two of each of the three human genders and the subsequent missing of and searching for the lost half. The navel was where the wrinkles of the cut spheres were tied up and was to act as a reminder that the sundering had been carried out as punishment for their insolence. Later, through clemency, Zeus changed the place of the genitals and moved it round to the front of the body to enable copulation, just below the reminder of the wound. Lacan compares this reference to the genital organs to the way little Hans speaks of the tap being unscrewed in the dream.²⁸ In other words the introduction of the idea of a moveable genital organ in the myth of this comic poet's speech on love is interestingly close to ideas around the castration complex.

Aristophanes goes on to say that there is more to love than sexual coupling as is witnessed by the lucky ones who happen to meet up with their other halves. Then there is something which is not and cannot be clear to their minds. He introduces the problem of talking about love - it can only be intimated since it is given in riddles.²⁹ The comic poet has spoken of love in the form of a myth and is explaining that this is the only way it can be broached. Socrates will follow his example when he introduces an otherwise unrecorded myth of the birth of love from Penia and Poros. Both these myths are artifices of Plato inserted into the discourse when he needs to point to a truth which can only be expressed in the form of myth. Myths are attempts to make sense of matters that escape being contained in other forms of discourse and it is the myth of Aristophanes that is the most memorable contribution to the discussion of love by the first five speakers in the *Symposium*. Lacan suggests that the structure of the text as a whole, a series of speeches in different styles, all of which fail to have the final word on love is what

²⁸ J. Lacan, op.cit., VI, 16.

²⁹ Plato, op.cit., paraphrase of 192c-d.

interests us about this 'dialogue' the form of which makes manifest 'the difficulty of saying something about love which hangs together'.³⁰

Returning to Aristophanes. He imagines Hephaistos, the lame god of the smithy, posing a question to a couple of these lucky ones: 'What is it that you men want for yourselves from the others?'.³¹ He suggests that the answer is that they want to heal the split so that the two separate people would become one. Aristophanes sums up with a definition of love that emerges from his myth: 'Love is the name for the desire and the pursuit of the whole'. And he adds, 'As I say, formerly we were one but now we have been separated out (*dioikizein* which gives us dioecious in English) by the god on account of wrong-doing ...'.³²

Lacan says that Plato gives the comic poet, the clown, the best things to say about love³³ which is appropriate because love is a comic sentiment despite the fact that people go about it with 'a strangely serious air'.³⁴ This contradiction is caught by the tone of Aristophanes' speech which is fundamentally comic but contains a pathos that is usually associated with the tragic. While man may be an irreversibly split being who can only imagine attaining wholeness in phantasy, this tragic predicament does not preclude him from being compared to a hard-boiled egg sliced by a hair or to a flat-fish, a turbot, for example. Safouan, who neatly, if somewhat reductively, summarises³⁵ what each of the first five speakers says to psychoanalysis, relates Aristophanes' contribution to the notion of primary narcissism:

Beyond the subtle ironies concerning the primitive sphere split by the anger of Zeus, and the compulsion which leads to the lovers exhausting themselves, each in the unending quest to find again the lost half, a quest which only knew a relative respite, and that was not without Zeus having had to carry out a certain

³⁰ J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, II, 7.

³¹ Plato, *op.cit.*, para 192d.

³² *ibid*, para 192e-193a.

³³ J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, VI, 9.

³⁴ *ibid*.

³⁵ M. Safouan. *Le Transfert et le desir de l'analyste*, Paris, Seuil, 1984. pp. 196-197.

operation on the genitals, Aristophanes, a comic poet and therefore more alert than the other protagonists to what is *primary narcissism*, is the only one to deliver on love a tragic discourse.³⁶

Aristophanes finishes pessimistically by saying that we can only hope to approach this ideal of rejoining with the other half of our nature and, somewhat enigmatically, the consolation is that we have love as a guide.

Agathon

A brief exchange between Socrates and Agathon about their relative merits as speakers on love is cut short by Phaedrus who as 'father of the discourse' feels it his duty to prevent Socrates from turning the form of their evening to that of dialectic with questions and answers and to return the two of them, ostensibly the last two to speak, to the rule of the *encomion*.

Agathon begins by dismissing all the previous speeches as off the point in that they have dealt only with love's benefit for man and neglected to treat the nature of the god, Eros, himself. They thereby did not abide by the rules of the eulogy form which lay down that first one should praise the nature and then the gifts that are bestowed by that nature. From hints that are supplied to us by the very tropes that are used and from an explicit reference later on we learn that Agathon is following the rhetorical training of Gorgias, one of the leading sophists of the time. This speech from the young tragedian is a performance which becomes all the more ridiculous the more dramatic it becomes. How far Agathon is the victim of the ridicule is open to debate. Lacan suggests that he knows very well what he is doing.³⁷

Agathon, despite his rhetorical training, does not manage to present a coherent argument concerning the nature of love rather it is in the gaps in his discourse that something of the truth may be glimpsed. To communicate the tenderness or sensitivity of Love he uses a comparison with another deity noted for the gentleness of her touch. But that goddess is *Ate*, the goddess of

³⁶ *ibid*, p. 197 (my translation).

³⁷ J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, VII, 11.

infatuation, blindness and delusion, whose gentle touch brings disaster. (It is the driving force in the tragedy of *Antigone*, which Lacan had given a commentary on in the Seminar on Ethics, the year prior to the Seminar on Transference.) He says that Necessity (*Ananke*), not Love (*Eros*), is responsible for all the violent acts amongst the gods, all the castrations and imprisonments.³⁸ However, in adapting Sophocles to his purposes a little later, he substitutes Love for Necessity in the quotation: 'Not even Ares can withstand Necessity' from Sophocles lost play *Thyestes* is changed to 'not even Ares can withstand Love' thereby conflating the two forces he had earlier distinguished. In the next sentence he has Love capturing Ares oblivious to the remark he had made earlier about Love not being involved in such activities! This alerts us to the possibility that the whole speech of this posturing young tragedian at the height of his powers is riddled with irony. The previous speech by the comedian, Aristophanes, had struck something of a tragic note despite its comic elements and now the speech of the tragedian strikes a comic note despite the tragic performance. (It is interesting that the night ends with a conversation we do not have the details of between Socrates, Agathon and Aristophanes wherein Socrates is advocating that a dramatic poet should be proficient in both genres³⁹). Lacan is alive to this comedy in the speech of Agathon and the conversation at the end of the evening and concludes: '... it is not enough in order to speak about love to be a tragic poet, it is also necessary to be a comic poet'.⁴⁰ This observation has interesting implications for psychoanalysis if that endeavour is conceived of as an attempt to speak about love.

Agathon is moved to verse to sum up his account of Love before finishing with a flourish of rhetorical tropes. He says that Love makes 'peace among men, a breathless calm on the sea, a bed for the winds and sleep for one's cares'.⁴¹ This version of Love as a peacemaker, a soother, a singer of lullabies, is couched in the language of death. Lacan describes the calming as when nothing is working any more, as when everything breaks down and in

³⁸ Plato, op.cit., 195.

³⁹ *ibid*, 223d.

⁴⁰ J. Lacan, op.cit., VII, 15.

⁴¹ Plato, op.cit., 197c.

the context of love, in bed, this can be embarrassing. In other words love is what causes collapse, what causes us to make a fiasco of things.⁴² Despite his assertion that Love is not awkward⁴³ Agathon, or Plato, through the use of irony is letting us know that it is the cause of the most awkwardness. Lacan sums up the tragedian's outlook and methodology:

What is in question, is always to produce the same effect of irony, indeed of disorientation which, in a tragic poet, has really no other meaning than to underline that love is really what is unclassifiable, that which comes to put itself crosswise in all significant situations, that which is never in its place, that which is always out of season.⁴⁴

Socrates

The scene has been set for the contribution of Socrates: the elegance of the speeches has been pushed to ridiculous extremes, the figure of Love has become irretrievably comic. Socrates begins by praising, in his customary way, the glamorous phraseology of his predecessor and saying that not alone is he at a loss (*aporein*⁴⁵) to follow such a performance but that he has unwittingly agreed to do what he cannot do:

And then I realised how ridiculous I am having agreed with all of you to deliver a eulogy on love in turn and I said that I was skilful [*deinos* which has a depth of meaning: fearful, powerful, marvellous, clever] in the things caused by love, but I know nothing about the matter, how to deliver a eulogy, that is.⁴⁶

⁴² J. Lacan, op.cit., VII, 12.

⁴³ Plato, op.cit., 196a.

⁴⁴ J. Lacan, op.cit Plato, op.cit., 198b., VII, 13.

⁴⁵ Plato, op.cit., 198b.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, 198d (my translation).

From the start Socrates is playing with his audience. What does he not know about? Delivering a eulogy or the things to do with love? He goes on to play on the relation between the eulogy and the truth and knowing the truth about delivering a eulogy. The upshot of it is that all that has been spoken to date is described as beautiful and reverent (*semmos*, which also means pompous)⁴⁷ but nothing to do with the truth. Socrates declines to deliver such a eulogy on love but proposes to speak the truth in his own way so as to avoid being taken for a fool. He asks Phaedrus' permission to change the style of the speaking, to upset the order of the proceedings and let the words come out in a random way.⁴⁸

Socrates is granted permission to speak in any way he thinks appropriate and proceeds to ask Agathon a few questions. Out of these questions and answers it is established that love is relational, it is between two people. Socrates' aim is to introduce the concept of lack (*endeos*) to the discussion of love and to do so he introduces the concept of desire (*epithumein*) and seems to suggest that a distinction be made between desire and love (*eran*). It is particularly in the case of desire that there is a lack: 'Consider ... if it is necessarily the case that desire is desire of that which is lacking and if there is no lack, there is no desire'.⁴⁹ Socrates speaks more of desire in this way than of love but he says the same thing using the word for love - *eran*⁵⁰ - so it is not clear if he wants to distinguish the two. He stresses that desire is always desire of what is not to hand, of what is not present and 'Love, first of all, is love of things, and secondly it is love of what is lacking'.⁵¹ Following this line of argument and picking up on Agathon's own claim that Love loves beauty (*to kallos*) Socrates goes on to establish that if that is so then Love must lack beauty and furthermore since Agathon had equated the beautiful with the good it follows that Love lacks the good. This is Socrates doing what Socrates does best. Lacan names this 'the Socratic dialectic of interrogating the

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 199a.

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 199b.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, 200a-b.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 200d.

⁵¹ *ibid*, 200e.

signifier about its consistency as signifier'.⁵² It is significant that just as quickly as he sets up this victory for his method he drops it in the face of the challenge in hand, namely the challenge to speak the truth about love. And what does he do instead? He hands over the task to a woman, Diotima. It is an abrupt hand-over. Lacan suggests that the reason for this sudden change is that Socrates' own method, no more than the methods of the previous speakers, is not up to the task of producing an account concerning Love (*ton de logon peri tou Erotos*).⁵³ This is a most significant moment in Lacan's reading of the *Symposium*, this moment when a form of discourse comes up against its limit in the pursuit of a certain object. There is something about love that escapes knowledge that is conscious of itself, Socratic knowledge, and to pursue it further it is necessary to change the register. Lacan marks the significance of this shift:

But the novelty, if what I am teaching you about the Freudian revolution is correct, is precisely the fact that something can be sustained in the law of the signifier, not simply without this involving a knowledge but by expressly excluding it, namely by constituting itself as unconscious, namely as necessitating at its level the eclipsing of the subject in order to subsist as unconscious chain, as constituting what is fundamentally irreducible in the relationship of the subject to the signifier. All this to say that this is why we are the first, if not the only ones, not to be necessarily surprised that the properly Socratic discourse, the discourse of *episteme*, of *knowledge transparent to itself*, cannot be pursued beyond a certain limit with regard to a certain object, when this object, if indeed it is the one on which Freudian thought has been able to bring new light, this object is love.⁵⁴

⁵² J. Lacan, op.cit., VIII, 7.

⁵³ Plato, op.cit., 210d.

⁵⁴ J. Lacan, op.cit., VIII, 8.

Discourse at the level of *episteme*, 'a plane of knowledge [where] there is only what is accessible to the pure and simple operation of the law of the signifier',⁵⁵ only takes us so far and then it is necessary 'to go beyond'⁵⁶ and 'to let myth speak'.⁵⁷ Lacan explains Plato's use of myth as 'emerging, when they are required, to supply for the gap in what cannot be assured dialectically'.⁵⁸

Diotima, the woman from Mantinea, is described as wise in 'these things', the things to do with love. The name of her city has a resonance with the word for seer - *mantis* - and the word used by Aristophanes when he mentions the only way love can be formulated in the minds of men - *manteuetai* - 'it is divined'.⁵⁹ She has related the myth concerning love to Socrates and first he reports how she prepared the telling by introducing him to the zone which love inhabits. Her method, by way of transition from the exchange between Socrates and Agathon, mirrors that of the Socratic dialectic. Positions have been switched. Now Socrates is the one who is questioned because he is the one who is asking. This is a minor reversal of positions which foreshadows the one that is to come when Alcibiades goes into detail about his relationship with Socrates. The parallel between the Socrates-Agathon exchange and the opening of the one between Diotima and Socrates extends to the terms in which they speak. In case we thought that we could dismiss the contribution of Agathon out of hand it is made clear that Diotima's words on love circle around the very terms that the young tragedian has highlighted, namely the beautiful - *kalos* - and the good - *agathos* (*passim*⁶⁰).

Diotima's first concern is to establish the place of love. Like true belief (*to ortha doxazein*⁶¹) in relation to knowledge and ignorance Love is between (*metaxu*) two. Lacan picks up on the description of true belief as the giving of an account without having an account and compares it to one of the

55 *ibid*, VIII, 9.

56 *ibid*.

57 *ibid*.

58 *ibid*.

59 Plato, *op.cit.*, 192d.

60 *ibid*, 210e.

61 *ibid*, 202a.

definitions of love he is working with in his Seminar, namely that love is giving what one does not have.⁶² We must await the arrival of Alcibiades to see the enactment of this definition. Love is intermedatory, occupying the middle ground between mortality (*thnetos*) and immortality, or deathlessness (*athanatos*) and is therefore within the category of the Daimons.⁶³ He transmits, carries messages between the gods and man. He fills the space between the two because god and man do not mix. Communication (*dialektos*) is possible through the agency of the daimon in the form of divination (*manteia*) and sorcery (*goeteia*) whether man is sleeping or waking.⁶⁴ If we recall that Lacan casts the gods as 'a mode of revelation of the real'⁶⁵ Diotima's placing of love between gods and men is immediately invested with eye-opening relevance. It is also in keeping with the place of love that myth be called upon to consider it and it is at this point in the report of their conversation that Diotima elaborates the myth of the birth and parentage of love. This myth was 'forged'⁶⁶ by Plato and since that time Love has been the offspring of Poros and Penia.

At the feast of the gods held to celebrate the birth of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and sexual attraction, Penia (poverty, want, lack) turns up to beg and remains at the entrance. Poros (resource, passage through, ways and means), son of Metis (ingenuity), gets drunk on nectar and collapses in the garden of Zeus. Penia, prompted by her lack of resources (*aporia*), decides to have a child by Poros, so she lies with him as he lies in drunken sleep and becomes pregnant with Love. The reason Love is connected to Beauty is because he was conceived on the periphery of the celebration of the birth of Aphrodite, who is beautiful. Love takes after his mother in that he never has any money, he is always in need. He is not the beautiful, sensitive type of popular conception but is tough, dry and shoeless (this last being a characteristic he shares with Socrates, who, unusually for him, on the night of

⁶² J. Lacan, op.cit., II, 15; VII, 11.

⁶³ Plato, op.cit., 202d.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, paraphrase of 202e-203a.

⁶⁵ J. Lacan, op.cit., III, 8.

⁶⁶ *ibid*, VIII, 11.

the drinking party is wearing shoes).⁶⁷ He takes after his father in the ingenious ways he pursues beautiful things and good things. Courage, recklessness and intensity pervade his skills in hunting, his desire for knowledge, and his skills in sorcery, curing/poisoning (*pharmakeus*⁶⁸) and in sophistry. Diotima is not surprised at Socrates expectation that Love be beautiful because it is simply a case of his confusing the object of love (*to eromenon*) for Love itself, the lover (*to eron*).

Lacan notes the following about this myth: that the active party is the feminine while the masculine is the one who is desired; that love has an intimate relation with beauty; and that love is to do with giving what one does not have because *Penia*, by definition *aporia*, has nothing to give.

The next question that comes up for Socrates and Diotima addresses Love's relation to beauty. Socrates asks what use (*chreia*⁶⁹) Love is to man given the nature so described. They agree that the lover loves beautiful things because he wants them to become his. Socrates has difficulty answering the question which asks why he wants beautiful things to be his and has an easier time answering that a lover wants good things to be his to bring him happiness. They go on to establish that everyone is always loving but we single out one form of love with the name love and use other terms for other kinds of love: 'In sum desire of good things and of being happy is 'the greatest and deceitful love' for all' (the epithets for love are thought to be a paraphrase from some poet⁷⁰). Diotima then comments anachronistically on the idea expressed in Aristophanes speech that we are looking for our other halves. This is the case only if what is represented as our other half is the good because 'men do not love anything other than the good'⁷¹ and they want to get goodness for themselves permanently.⁷² This overview of the purpose of love is followed by an investigation into what love actually does and even Socrates needs interpretative help with the pronouncement that 'love's

⁶⁷ Plato, op.cit., 174a.

⁶⁸ *ibid*, 203d.

⁶⁹ *ibid*, 204c.

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 205d.

⁷¹ *ibid*, 206a.

⁷² *ibid*, 206a.

purpose is birth in beauty both in respect to the body and in respect to the soul.⁷³ Through a conflation of the acts of procreation and birth, Diotima presents love of beauty as guide to the true purpose of love which is birth, which requires a beautiful setting for the necessary preliminary sexual act. Birth is described as 'immortality in a mortal creature'.⁷⁴ Here beauty has come to serve the purpose of veiling death, of distracting man from the relentless generation and corruption of life, of providing the illusion of identity through time. Mortals undergo unceasing change and at most, through the agency of birth, one generation passing and age-ing leaves behind another new generation which is *like* it. By this device mortals *share* in immortality.⁷⁵ Diotima concludes this part of their discussion with a radical revision of the notion of love as motivated by some kind of altruism. Again anachronistically she picks up on the earlier references in the speech of Phaedrus to the figures of Alcestis and Achilles and states that their actions were not for the sake of the other but were motivated 'by the prospect of virtue in immortality and suchlike fame - for they are in love with immortality (= not-death).⁷⁶

Later, when she gets to the famous Ascent passage,⁷⁷ Diotima seems to have returned beauty to its status of object⁷⁸ rather than as guide towards the object. Lacan picks up on this ambiguous consideration of the role of beauty in love. Beauty is an illusion, he says, which, in the passage through the generation and corruption of life, helps man get through the difficult points. It provides the illusion of some solace of constancy in an ever-flowing, ever-changing, Heraclitean world. Beauty has to do with the concept of the 'between-two-deaths' which Lacan had spoken of in the previous year's Seminar. It has something to do with the way beauty by veiling man from physical death may bring another sort of death, a sort of stopping or fixing. Within the desire for beauty lies hidden the desire for death because;

⁷³ *ibid*, 206b.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 206c.

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 208b.

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 208d.

⁷⁷ *ibid*, 210a-212a.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 211d.

... what beauty appears to us to be destined to cover over in the very discourse of Diotima is, if there are two desires in man which capture him in his relationship to eternity with generation on the one hand and corruption and destruction on the other, it is desire for death *qua* unapproachable that beauty is designed to veil ... Desire of beauty ... corresponds to what we have articulated as corresponding to the hidden presence of the desire for death.⁷⁹

The way in which beauty slips from being the object to being the guide towards, or support of, the object is a case of the metonymical function of desire.⁸⁰

The final contribution from Diotima shifts to yet another register. For what is to come, neither the dialectical method nor the mythic method is appropriate. The new register is that of the mysteries and of initiation⁸¹ and the question is whether Socrates is ready to enter the highest grade of initiation into the mysteries, the level of watching (*epoptika*⁸²). This reminds us of Socrates claim to know nothing apart from the ability to see when two people are in love. The Ascent passage describes a journey through levels of love. As a young man the focus is on physical beauty and initially on loving just one person's body. From this with the realisation that the beauty of one body hardly differs from that of another, he comes to love all beautiful bodies. The next stage is for him to value beauty of the soul more than beauty of the body. He then considers institutions and activities until he reaches a point from where he can catch sight of a unique kind of knowledge of beauty itself. He will see it to be eternal, unchanging, in its essence and not in some tainted instance which is only taking a share in this Idea of beauty. Seeing this essential beauty, beauty in itself (*auto to kalon*⁸³) makes life worth living and

⁷⁹J. Lacan, op.cit., IX, 3-4.

⁸⁰ ibid, IX, 5.

⁸¹ ibid, IX, 4.

⁸² Plato, op.cit., 210a.

⁸³ ibid, 211d.

all instances of beauty - 'gold and clothing and good-looking boys and youths'⁸⁴ - pale into insignificance beside this true beauty.

Socrates has nothing to add and having approved Diotima's words he claims that his mission is to try to persuade others to do as he does and to choose Love as a partner in the business of acquiring 'this possession for human nature',⁸⁵ the possession being ambiguously signified as either immortality or the essential beauty.

Alcibiades

In the middle of the applause for Socrates speech, but not before Aristophanes had a chance to try to get a word in to respond to the reference in the speech to his own contribution, noise and knocking is heard at the front door. While Agathon is arranging with the slaves how to vet any undesirables attempting to enter into the proceedings, in barges Alcibiades, 'very drunk and bellowing loudly.' This man needs an introduction if the enormity of the scandal he causes is to be appreciated. Lacan spent some time describing him in the second seminar of the year because for him the rude arrival of Alcibiades is the pivotal event of the whole story.

Alcibiades was an incarnation of the scandalous. Everything he did was outrageous. He never held any position for long before effecting his own fall from grace. He was beautiful, the darling of Athenian society, an aristocrat capable of acts of thuggish vandalism. He was an out-standing military leader but also treacherous. At the suspected time of the telling of story of the *Symposium* by Apollodorus (?404BC) and perhaps the reason for the intense interest in Athens in the event of that night, Alcibiades was doing business with the Persians, interestingly his third camp, his first having been his native city, Athens, by whom he felt hard done by, and had betrayed. He went over to the other side, Sparta, the second camp, whose queen he reputedly had impregnated twice. And now Athens was interested in recalling this ever-restless, unsituated, upsetting, disrupting son of theirs in the hope that he alone might restore the city's glory which at that moment was

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 212b.

writhing in its own death throes at the end of the Peloponnesian War. The story is set shortly before the death of Alcibiades in a web of intrigue at the hands of Persian secret agents. (I am following here the interesting speculation concerning the date of the telling of the story from Nussbaum).⁸⁶ Perhaps his most notorious exploit was to take place not long after the night of the drinking party (January 416BC). The Mutilation of the Hermae (May, 415BC) so outraged Athenian society that many believed that their ill-fortune in the war was due to this sacrilege for which their then general was found guilty. On the night before the departure of the Athenian fleet on the expedition to Sicily which would bring the Athenian empire to its knees, the little statues of Hermes, the messenger and interpreter between gods and men (the very position in the scheme of things that Diotima ascribes to Love), were vandalised, an act of gross profanity.

Alcibiades' entrance to the party is true to form. He completely upsets the proceedings, changes the rules of the evening and imposes new ones, namely that each person is now to speak a eulogy not to an abstraction like Love but to the person sitting to his right. Alcibiades in word⁸⁷ as much as in deed makes a mockery of the previous speeches, in particular that of Socrates. His entrance in the trappings of a Dionysus, blind drunk, is succeeded by a blindfolded stumbling onto the couch between Agathon and Socrates whose presence he is not immediately aware of - all of this in language that is a thinly-veiled send-up of the serene talk of initiation into the mysteries at the end of Diotima's account of the Ascent towards love. Indeed Alcibiades, here incarnating love, is representative of the very first level of that Ascent - infatuated and covetous of another and very much at the level of the physical. Having dismissed Socrates words, which he did not hear, as exactly the opposite to the truth, he proposes to tell the truth in a eulogy to Socrates, whose head he has just adorned with a chaplet of ribbons. He says he has no choice because Socrates' jealousy would not allow him to sing the praises of any other - not even a god.

⁸⁶ M.C. Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge University Press, 1986. pp. 165-171.

⁸⁷ Plato, *op.cit.*, 214d.

Alcibiades is between - 'the *metaxu* position', as Lacan calls it,⁸⁸ "between the two', between Socrates and Agathon, ... between the one who knows, and knowing, shows that he must speak without knowing and the one who, not knowing, spoke of course like a bird-brain, but who nevertheless spoke very well as Socrates underlined...'.⁸⁹ This outrageous man will speak the truth that wine brings, the truth of a confession beyond shame about a man who alone can make him feel shame.⁹⁰

To introduce his account of Socrates he risks ridicule when he compares him to the little statues of Silenos to be seen in the shops of the carvers of the Hermae (*hermoglyphaios*⁹¹). The subsequent assault on these statues in the middle of another night would be brought shockingly to mind by this reference. What is Alcibiades relation to this man whom he compares to these little statues of the unboundedly libidinous Silenos, which in turn remind us of the most scandalous event of Alcibiades life? The speaker answers the question by developing the simile:

I say that he is most like those sileni that sit in the shops of the sculptors (*hermoglypheios*), the ones the craftsmen make holding pipes and flutes and which when opened asunder appear to have within them the *agal mata* of the gods.⁹²

It is around this term - *agalma* - that Lacan's reading of the *Symposium* turns. The word in Greek signifies a glory, a delight, a pleasing gift. It is derived from the verb *agallo* to glorify, to adorn. It came to signify little statues in honour of a god, an ornament, an image.⁹³ It is the *agalma* in Socrates that Alcibiades desires to see. Before detailing his manoeuvres to that end he develops his second comparison of Socrates to a satyr, Marysas. This figure is

⁸⁸ J. Lacan, op.cit., IX, 9.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Plato, op.cit., 216b.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 215b.

⁹² *ibid.*, 215a-b (my translation).

⁹³ Liddell, Scott. *Greek - English Lexicon*, Oxford University Press, 1968.

wild, wanton, violent to the point of rape (*hubristes*⁹⁴) and yet capable of the most seductive charms through the music of his pipes. Alcibiades confesses to being besotted by the satyr-like Socrates but the comparison to Marsyas is on the level of physical resemblance. Within is a wealth of self-control (*sophrosune*⁹⁵) and any impression that he really does fall sillily in love with the young men he is said to court or that he actually does know nothing as he claims is only due to the fact that 'he spends his whole life dissembling and playing with people'.⁹⁶

Alcibiades has seen through this charade because he has managed to see on one occasion the *agalmata* within and from that moment on he was a slave to his infatuation with Socrates. Being his boyfriend at the time (or at least he imagined himself to be in that relation with Socrates) he felt himself to be in a privileged position 'to hear whatever he knew'.⁹⁷ From being the pretty-boy pursued he became the pursuer of an occasion to be seduced by Socrates but the latter did not rise to the bait. Alcibiades goes on to tell of the extraordinary behaviour of Socrates on one particular night. The word used to describe the behaviour, *huperephanos*,⁹⁸ is taken by most commentators in its rare positive sense of magnificent but it more commonly described a person as arrogant or overweening. This part of the story is only to be heard by those who have been bitten by the snake, philosophy, who have experienced its Bacchic mania. Alcibiades and Socrates have taken their places to sleep on separate couches after an evening together. The former's attempt to be seduced by the latter has come to nothing and at this crucial moment in their relationship the opening question is: 'Socrates, are you asleep?'.⁹⁹ We recall that it was while he slept that Penia had her way with Poros. Alcibiades has to take up the role of lover as he explains to Socrates that Socrates is in love with him and that he is more than willing to grant him any favours he may wish for because in return, by way of exchange, Alcibiades would hope to be

⁹⁴ Plato, op.cit., 215b.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, 216d.

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 216e.

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 217a.

⁹⁸ *ibid*, 217e.

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 218c.

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assisted in his aim of becoming a good person. Socrates refuses this offer on the grounds that it was not a sound business proposition from his point of view:

If you see this in me [something attractive] and you try to take a share in it and exchange beauty for beauty, not by a little cleverness are you trying to claim more than you deserve from me and to acquire truth in exchange for the semblance of beauty by which you plan to get gold for bronze. But, my dear, take a better look in case the fact that I am nothing (*ouden*) escapes your notice.¹⁰⁰

Alcibiades, feeling he has hurt Socrates by this proposed exchange, joins him on his couch and spends the night embracing him. Socrates maintains his refusal throughout.

Alcibiades finishes his strange eulogy by recounting stories of Socrates' prowess in battle, in drink and in concentration. He critiques the Socratic dialectic in terms of the simile of the sileni - beneath an appearance of triviality and mundanity his arguments are full of the *agalmata* of virtue.¹⁰¹ However, in a final swipe at the object of his eulogy he sums up Socrates' carry-on as a warning to Agathon not to be taken in: '... he pretends beguilingly to be the lover but switches positions and becomes the beloved instead'.¹⁰²

Finale

It is not over yet. The speech of Alcibiades cannot be let stand and it is Socrates who speaks to subvert it. He has refused Alcibiades' charms and pleas and physical intimacy and now he refuses to be the object of the eulogy, refuses the position granted him by the speech, the confession of Alcibiades. He undermines the pathos of the confession just as Alcibiades had done to the

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*, 218e-219a (my translation).

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 222a.

¹⁰² *ibid*, 222b.

serenity of his account of the Ascent. He points out that, behind all the Satirical, silenos-like play-acting in the speech, the object of the eulogy has, in fact, been to make Socrates and Agathon fall out with each other because Alcibiades thinks that Socrates should love Alcibiades and nobody else and Agathon should be loved by Alcibiades and nobody else.¹⁰³ Socrates is putting himself on the same level as Alcibiades and is showing himself to be a rival desirer of the same object, Agathon, a name which means literally, a good thing.

Agathon rallies to Socrates' side to remind us how Alcibiades has literally come between them on the couch. Agathon gets up at Socrates request to lie on one side of him. Alcibiades protests and asks that Agathon be let lie between them. Socrates refuses yet again on the grounds that such a seating arrangement would require another eulogy to be sung to him according to the proceedings instigated by Alcibiades. What is to come is a eulogy to Agathon by Socrates but this never happens. There is another invasion by a crowd of drunken revellers and the drinking-party descends into disordered drunkenness.

In the early hours, Aristodemos, our source, woke from a drunken slumber to find, hazily, Agathon, Aristophanes and Socrates still talking and as far as he recalled their conversation was an attempt by Socrates to persuade the tragic poet and the comic poet that the one should be able to do the job of the other. Before reaching any conclusion Socrates managed to put the two men to sleep whereupon he got up, went to the Lyceum for a wash, passed the day as he would any other and went home to sleep in the evening.

Lacan speaks at length about this extraordinary finale. What is shown in these last scenes of the *Symposium* is a lesson for psychoanalysis:

Here we are shown that something else is suddenly substituted in the triplicity, in the complexity, which shows us, presents itself to reveal to us that in which, as you know, I maintain the essential of the analytic discovery is contained, this topology in which fundamentally there results the relationship of the subject to the

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 222d.

symbolic in so far as it is essentially distinct from the imaginary and its capture.¹⁰⁴

He takes note of the fact that Alcibiades looks for a sign from Socrates, looks for a manifestation of the desire he believes Socrates to have for him and what does he see? He glimpses the *agalma*, the partial object, *o object* cause of desire. This object is not exchangeable.

Alcibiades as embodying the function of the desired substitutes himself for Socrates who is supposedly the desirer. Socrates, for his part refuses the substitution, 'absents himself from the place marked by the covetous desire of Alcibiades'.¹⁰⁵ He takes up his position in *atopia*, the no-place which is the place of the lack in the Other, where he is no-thing - *ouden*. In other words Socrates refuses the substitution requested by the metaphor of love in order that Alcibiades become implicated as a desirer, and what is more as a fellow desirer of the same thing, the good thing, whatever that is. Socrates' refusal at the end and his intention to praise Agathon will present to Alcibiades 'the image of Alcibiades loving *qua* the image of Alcibiades loving'.¹⁰⁶ This is possible because of the identifications that have taken place. Now through this presentation of the image of him loving he is going 'to enter upon the path of superior identifications which the path of beauty traces out'.¹⁰⁷ Socrates is substituting something for something else and what he is substituting is the place of the *agalmata*, 'the supreme point where the subject is abolished in the phantasy'.¹⁰⁸

Lacan calls upon his Optical Schema at this point in his commentary. What is in question is an 'intrasubjective dialectic' involving the three terms 'the Ego-Ideal, the Ideal Ego and the little *o*, the *agalma* of the partial object'. The end of this Socratic dialectic, this Socratic refusal is consistent with Freud's observation as to 'the essential of being in love, *Verliebtheit*, namely the recognition of the foundation of the narcissistic image in so far as it is what

¹⁰⁴ J. Lacan, op.cit., X, 2.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*, XI, 9.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, XI, 10.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*.

gives its substance to the Ideal Ego'.¹⁰⁹ In other words being in love has fundamentally to do with an 'intrasubjective' topology and it is bedded in narcissism. But if we say that Alcibiades, captured in love, is implicated on the path towards desire it is through Socrates' refusal. And this latter, too, is implicated in his own way. Alcibiades is Socrates' demon - the latter needs the former to continue with his own desire, to continue interrogating the signifier, to stay awake. And this requires a certain deception of the one who knows by the one who incarnates the subject at the level of the imaginary:

Alcibiades shows the presence of love but only shows it in so far as Socrates who knows, can be deceived by it and only accompany him by being deceived about it. The lure is reciprocal ... But who is the most authentically lured if not the one who follows, firmly and not allowing himself to drift, what is traced out for him by a love which I would call terrifying.¹¹⁰

Lacan has given so much time to the *Symposium* because he finds articulated there (particularly in what happens between Alcibiades and Socrates, in the talk of the agalma, the treasure hidden within the subject Socrates) a structure in which can be rediscovered the position of desire.¹¹¹ What then does the reading of Plato show us about transference and its consequences?

Lacan takes from the psychoanalytic discussion of transference the description of this phenomenon as the 'automatism of repetition ... the presence of the past'¹¹² but adds that there is something more to it, something of a reproduction, something creative:

And if it is a question of fiction, what is being pretended and, because it is a question of feigning, for whom?... Because everything that we know about the unconscious from the very start, from dreams, indicates to us and experience shows us that

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, XI, 11.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, XI, 14.

¹¹¹ *ibid*, XII, 2-3.

¹¹² J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, XII, 5.

there are psychic phenomena which are produced, are developed, are constructed to be understood, therefore precisely for this other who is there even when one does not know it, even if one does not know that they are there to be understood; they are there to be understood, and to be understood by another. In other words, it seems to me impossible to eliminate from the phenomenon of transference the fact that it manifests itself in the relationship to someone to whom one is speaking.¹¹³

In the *Symposium* Alcibiades specifies who he is prepared to make his confession before:¹¹⁴ those who have been initiated. Lacan casts this group as 'the tribunal of the Other'. Transference is more than repetition, which is a general possibility which the existence of the unconscious constitutes.¹¹⁵ Transference occurs in a setting in which speech is addressed to someone and that someone has the place of Other.

What is Alcibiades confessing to before this tribunal? To an attempt at seduction, an attempt 'to make of Socrates something completely subordinated, submitted to a value other than that of the relationship of subject to subject.'¹¹⁶ He had wanted to make of Socrates something subordinated to the object of his desire, the *agalma*:

Socrates is no longer there anything but the envelope of what is the object of desire ... [and therefore] ... Socrates is with respect to him the slave of desire, that Socrates is subjected to him by desire, and that even though he knew it he wanted to see Socrates' desire manifesting itself as a sign in order to know that the other object, *agalma*, was at his mercy.¹¹⁷

113 *ibid*, XII, 8.

114 Plato, *op.cit.*, 218b.

115 J. Lacan, *op.cit.*, XII, 8-9.

116 *ibid*, XII, 8-9.

117 *ibid*.

Failure in this endeavour brings shame to Alcibiades. Shame - the demon *Aidos* - intervenes because something shocking has been unveiled;

... the final mainspring of desire, this something which forces itself to be more or less dissimulated in love, the fact is that its aim is this collapse of the Other, the capital O, into the other, little o, and that in addition on this occasion, it appears that Alcibiades failed ...¹¹⁸

Socrates' interpretation diverts Alcibiades' desire away from Socrates and onto Agathon. In other words, for all the embarrassment Alcibiades has undergone in his attempt to locate his *agalma* in Socrates, he is shown that he has not found a resting place yet. To what extent does Socrates know what he is doing in designating the place of Alcibiades' desire? This is the question for which there is not a definitive answer. Lacan, granting Socrates the benefit of the doubt, traces a line of speculation on this crucial question, which is paraphrased in what follows. If the desire of Socrates is to lead his interlocutors towards their own desire, their *gnothi seauton* or 'looking after your soul', and if what he is designating in this way is the desire of the subject as Lacan defines it, and if he is doing this without knowing it:

... then Socrates has a place that we can completely understand ... It is in the measure that Socrates does not know what he desires and that it is the desire of the Other, it is in this measure that Alcibiades is obsessed by what? By a love of which one can say that Socrates' only merit is to designate it as transference love, to refer it back to his true desire.¹¹⁹

Lacan elaborates his own myth of love and desire over the course of the Seminar in which from the beginning he has stressed the impossibility of a discourse on love that hangs together. Only in the form provided by myth can the irreducible components of the phenomena of love and desire be contained. By way of conclusion because there cannot be any real conclusion,

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, XII, 10.

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, XII, 12.

by way of enticing the reader of this essay to do what the writer realises he needs to do, namely return to the texts to interrogate them further, the myth is here quoted:

I have the right in order to introduce it [the metaphor-substitution which is the signification of love] here, to materialise it before you, to complete its image, to really make a myth of it. And as regards this hand which stretches towards the fruit, towards the rose, towards the log which suddenly bursts into flame, first of all to tell you that its gesture of reaching, of poking, is closely linked to the maturation of the fruit, to the beauty of the flower, to the flaming of the log, but that, when in this moment of reaching, of drawing, of poking, the hand has gone far enough towards the object, if from the fruit, from the flower, from the log, a hand emerges which stretches out to encounter your hand, and at that moment it is your hand which is fixed in the closed fullness of the fruit, the open fullness of the flower, in the explosion of a hand that bursts into flame, what is produced at that point is love!¹²⁰

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¹²⁰ *ibid*, IV, 3.