

## CHAPTER 1

# Introductory Dialogue (172a–178a)

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### *Functions of Narrative Frames in Platonic Dialogues*

Most of Plato's dialogues are written in direct discourse like dramatic poetry. But some of Plato's dialogues have a narrator who relays the main events of the dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Since the *Symposium* is a narrated dialogue, some account should be taken of the various functions performed by narrative frames in general and by that of the *Symposium* in particular.

Narrative frames allow the author to introduce information about the events in the dialogue that would be impossible, inappropriate, or inconvenient to have characters state aloud in the course of their conversation. The way a dialogue is framed thus provides important information that qualifies in some way the meaning of reported statements and narrated events. Frames can be used to introduce organizing themes that can serve as lenses through which to view the main action of the dialogue. Frames can also be used to create a temporal distance between the audience of the dialogue and the depicted events, shrouding the narrated events in mystery by not allowing the audience to have direct access to them. If the narrated events are set in the past or in another place from the action of the frame itself (e.g., *Phaedo*), the author makes the frame comment on the larger significance of the narrated events by means of the connection between two distinct settings and casts of characters. The frame thus affords Plato one of the devices by which he is able to make one part of his dialogue comment on another.<sup>2</sup> All of these functions are performed by the narrative frame of the *Symposium*.

The narrative "frame" at the beginning of the *Symposium* runs to 174a. It has the effect of "framing" the dramatic action of the party at Agathon's house with a retelling, into which the body of the dialogue is embedded. In the frame, the narrator Apollodorus is approached by unnamed companions who are interested in hearing what was said at Agathon's party. He relates to

them that he had only two days ago rehearsed the story for someone named Glaucon, who had also been asking about the same event. Glaucon had heard a garbled version of the story from someone who had heard it from Phoenix, and came to hear a better version from Apollodorus, who Glaucon supposed might have actually been present at the party. Apollodorus corrected him about the timeline—the party had actually occurred many years previously “When we were still children”—and offered to tell him the story as recounted by someone who had been there, Aristodemus—the very man from whom Phoenix had heard the story (172a–173b). The *Symposium* is presented as Apollodorus’s second recounting of what he heard from Aristodemus, this time in response to the inquiries of unnamed companions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the *Symposium* mixes narration with drama, direct with indirect discourse, part of it being narrated and part of it enacted. The frame provides the layering effect through which the events of Agathon’s party are presented. With the lens the frame provides, Plato prepares his audience to hear something important, something that could challenge them to change their lives; but the frame also has the effect of reminding his audience that they are at a remove from the real-life events. The layers in *Symposium*’s narration and the temporal gaps between these layers cause the audience to question what its relation to the information and its sources (our narrators) should be. The audience of the *Symposium* should bear in mind that anything Apollodorus says directly to his own audience (e.g., at 222c, where he comments upon the speech just delivered by Alcibiades) would not have been heard by any of the participants at Agathon’s house. Such comments do not form a part of the drama of the party, and the drama of the frame is not sufficiently developed at later portions of the dialogue for these comments to possess a dramatic function at the level of the frame-dialogue. But such comments do have a function in relation to Plato’s audience; they constitute one of the devices by which Plato is able to make a part of his work comment on another portion of his work. Whenever a Platonic dialogue provides a commentary on one of its own themes or passages, one should consider how the author is making use of this device.<sup>4</sup>

The above considerations raise the question of how the audience is supposed to feel about Apollodorus, since his point of view may be reflected in his narration. Apollodorus is the highly emotional man presented in the *Phaedo* as the most hysterical of Socrates’ grieving friends who spend the final hours with him before Socrates is put to death. Some members of Plato’s audience might be inclined to relate to Apollodorus as a zealous advocate of philosophy and a lover of Socrates. For them, he would seem to represent a fellow traveler and a kindred spirit. But the way Apollodorus’s character is drawn—the self-confessed fanaticism, the proselytism that leads him to insult his audience, the cultic attachment to Socrates—all of this leads one to wonder if he is not the kind of disciple of whom the master is embarrassed. This impression is only reinforced by the way his character is discussed in the *Phaedo*, where his hysteria over the impending death of Socrates is looked

upon with distaste by the narrator and where such reactions are remonstrated as “womanly” by Socrates (cf. *Phd.* 117d). Given the supposedly excessive emotionalism of Apollodorus in the *Phaedo*, and given the way he characterizes his enthusiasm for Socrates as a kind of mania at the outset of *Symposium*, (173d7–8) one must ask what Plato has in mind by choosing him as the main narrator of his dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

In considering why Apollodorus is made the narrator, one has to recall that the theme of the *Symposium* is *Erôs*, or passionate desire. Love was characterized in the *Phaedrus* as a kind of “divine madness” that brings benefits from the gods to mortals. Is Apollodorus’s mania “divine madness”? Apollodorus himself surely thinks so; if he did not, he would not be so proud of his insanity. But the fact that Apollodorus regards his madness as divine and even the likelihood that Plato would regard such madness as divine does not mean that the character of Apollodorus is drawn without satire. Socrates in the *Phaedrus* also regards great poets as divinely mad, but that hardly exempts them from his criticism there or elsewhere. Alcibiades testifies later in the *Symposium* to the madness that ensues when one has been “bitten by the snake” of philosophy; yet Alcibiades hardly rates as a character Plato intends his audience simply to admire. Even if Apollodorus’s love of Socrates and manic enthusiasm for philosophy speak well for him, the example of Alcibiades shows that it takes more than these qualities to make a philosopher. Apollodorus may never have become as bad as Alcibiades, but like certain other of Socrates’ friends he shows no sign of excelling as a philosopher and on the contrary shows signs of failing by Socratic standards. Apollodorus is surely meant to make Plato’s audiences aware of how far his kind of enthusiasm is from that about which it is enthusiastic.

To unpack the interpretive problems posed by this dialogue, one should perhaps first ask why these particular characters and this unusual setting were chosen for the exploration of its themes.<sup>6</sup> Plato, here, trusts the narrative to this devotee of Socrates who seems, from what he says in the opening pages of the dialogue, to have undergone an almost religious conversion through his encounter with the philosopher, Socrates (cf. *Phd.* 59a). He says that he rages (*mainomai*, a word that connotes madness) at 173e2, after confessing to having formerly lived a worthless life as one of those who believed that “philosophy was the last thing a man should do” (173a). But having spent three years (172e) in loyal devotion to Socrates, he is clearly dedicated to condemning the misdirected lives of his audience and to exhorting others to become better through the study of philosophy. Whether or not Apollodorus comprehends all, or any, of Socrates’ philosophical positions, his zeal for moralizing makes him sound quite self-righteous. “Of course . . . I used to think that what I was doing was important, but in fact I was the most worthless man on earth—as bad as you are this very moment” (173a).<sup>7</sup>

Plato’s audience learns that Apollodorus was not in attendance on the extraordinary occasion when Socrates debated the poets, the night when

Alcibiades delivered an unabashed speech about Socrates (172c). The fact that this Glaucon thought that Apollodorus was present that night is proof to Apollodorus that the version Glaucon had heard was badly garbled. Not being there himself, Apollodorus's source for the story of this legendary symposium was the very same source that communicated the story that Glaucon had heard in a garbled form from Phoenix: another follower of Socrates named Aristodemus, a character described as "a real runt of a man" (*smikros*, 173b2).<sup>8</sup> Aristodemus, who seems to imitate Socrates' dress, his habit of going barefoot, and his other strange mannerisms, is presented as a man who was an earlier version of Apollodorus, experiencing previously a case of the same affliction that caused Apollodorus to want to make it his business to know everything Socrates says and does, a concern to which he has now dedicated his life (173a). A little later, when he agrees to retell the story for his unnamed auditors (described as "rich businessmen"), on the way to town, Apollodorus says that his greatest pleasure comes from philosophical conversation (173c). The characterizations of Apollodorus and Aristodemus seem to suggest that cases of fanatic devotion to Socrates were quite typical. These are not very flattering portraits of Socrates' more "obsessed" followers. It could be that one of the functions of Plato's dramatizations is to define what should count as following Socrates in a worthy way and to distinguish it from the devotion of those who would erect a cult of personality around Socrates.

Yet in spite of such reservations about Apollodorus and Aristodemus, Plato presents them as those through whom the story of Socrates at Agathon's party comes down to later inquirers. Aristodemus and Apollodorus, although imperfect, are indispensable as the narrators who provide the only access to the event. Yet this fact creates a distance between the audience and that event. On the one hand, Plato's audience learns that Apollodorus has just had the opportunity to rehearse the whole tale a couple of days earlier. The dialogue opens with Apollodorus saying, "In fact, your question does not find me unprepared" (*Δοκῶ μοι περὶ ὧν πυνθάνεσθε οὐκ ἀμελέτητος εἶναι* 172a1–2), a point he reiterates a little later (173c1). So the story is fresh in his mind. But he also has flaws as a narrator, perhaps most notably the way he insults his audience at 173a and 173d, as Agathon will later insult his guest of honor (Socrates) in his speech (cf. 195a–196b). Apollodorus tells the businessmen that their affairs are trivial and boring, and calls them "the real failures." He claims to have checked part, but only part, of his account with Socrates, presumably a reliable source (173b). As for Aristodemus, Apollodorus's source for the story, he admits to forgetting some details of the speeches (cf. 178a, 180c) and to forgetting several speeches altogether (180c). He dozes off for part of the evening (223b–c). Yet he is the essential link to the evening's words and deeds for Plato's audience. Put simply, we would not have the story of this infamous drinking party without him. In short, Plato seems to have taken great care to balance the evidence for believing his narrators' accounts with good reasons for viewing

them with a critical eye, flushed with skepticism. Their memory lapses and inattentiveness are counterbalanced by the fact that Apollodorus has been able to fill in gaps and to obtain confirmation from Socrates on certain key points, and by the fact that the account is fresh in his mind.

Two different people accost Apollodorus within a few days (sometime between 407 and 399, probably about 404 or 403)<sup>9</sup> desiring to hear the tale of a party that took place more than a decade in the past. This detail suggests, among other things, that Socrates is a notorious personality whose activities were followed closely by many people (and not just by students of philosophy). Plato had some reason to set the main body of the dialogue (the drinking party and the speeches within the frame) twelve to fourteen years before Apollodorus's account of these events and for having the account of these events reported from memory by not one, but two, fallible intermediaries. At a minimum, this setting serves to shroud these events and speeches more densely in uncertainty and mystery. This aura of mystery, in which everything that is revealed seems half-veiled as well, befits a dialogue devoted to *Erôs*. For according to Diotima, *Erôs* itself neither wholly possesses nor wholly lacks what it seeks, just as Plato's audience neither wholly lacks nor wholly possesses access to the events of the symposium. Plato's audience is initially inspired with curiosity for the account of the drinking party, and then offered, in answer to its desire, a cryptic oracle that seems to conceal as much as it reveals. The tale includes tantalizing details that hint at further undisclosed depths—details such as the example of Socrates' trance on the way to the party, or his parting, enigmatic challenge to the poets about tragedy and comedy. The cryptic quality of these details enhances the sense that the audiences' desire to know about Socrates is, like *Erôs* in Diotima's account, a hybrid of resource (*Poros*) and poverty (*Penia*). For that desire is stimulated both by what the dialogue says and by what it does not say, what it uncovers and what it withholds.<sup>10</sup>

The narrative complexity of the *Symposium* results in action and speeches on several levels, and these must be distinguished and kept in mind. We have noted that Apollodorus is narrating the story in about 404 to unnamed listeners. Plato's audiences are allowed, as it were, to "listen in" on this retelling of the tale that is framed by the narrator's "real-time" remarks and actions. But we now know that Apollodorus got the account from Aristodemus sometime between the dramatic date of the *Symposium* (about 416/15) and the date of this retelling. So when, for example, Phaedrus (or any one of the first five speakers) is giving his speech, we must remember that what is said is passed along from the speaker to Aristodemus to Apollodorus to Plato's audience. And the duration between the date of the original speeches and the date of the retelling to which we are privy is about twelve years. The temporal gap between the main body of the dialogue and the retelling of these speeches by Apollodorus is extended further by Socrates' recollections of Diotima's teachings when it is his turn to speak. Socrates will recall the

lessons in matters of *Erôs* he claims to have received some twenty-four years earlier. So, when Socrates recalls the series of conversations he claims to have had with Diotima, the narrative structure reaches its greatest complexity. Apollodorus recounts (in 404) that Aristodemus said (some unspecified time earlier) that Socrates told the partygoers (c.416/15) what Diotima told him (c.440). But Plato is believed to have written the *Symposium* sometime in the 380s,<sup>11</sup> which adds yet another layer of temporal remove between the main events of the dialogue and Plato's original audience. The effect of these layers of mediation is to make the audience aware of their distance from the events and to highlight the aura of mystery that surrounds them.

When Aristodemus first encounters Socrates, the habitually barefoot follower finds the master freshly bathed and wearing sandals or slippers. It is notable that Socrates has shod his customarily bare feet and thus that it is Aristodemus who is made to appear more "Socratic" than Socrates on this occasion.<sup>12</sup> This dramatic detail indicates something about Socrates and about Socratic followers such as Aristodemus. First, it shows that Socrates is not so doctrinaire about the simplicity of his usual attire that he will not dress up for a special occasion. But secondly, the very fact that Socrates is adaptable in this way shows that followers such as Aristodemus are focusing on the inessential when emulating external matters such as Socrates' habit of walking unshod.

Socrates says that he is dressed up "in order to go beautiful to the beautiful" (*ἵνα καλὸς παρὰ καλὸν ἴω* 174a9). In other words, the philosopher explains his attire to Aristodemus by saying that he has to look his best, since he's going to dinner at the house of a good-looking man, the young poet Agathon.<sup>13</sup>

He invites his companion to join him, even though Socrates says he knows that Aristodemus was not invited (174a-b). This exchange occasions a pun on Agathon's name. Socrates rephrases a proverb, which holds that "Good men go uninvited to an inferior man's feast," twisting it to reassure Aristodemus that "Good men go uninvited to a Goodman's feast." Socrates claims that Homer not only corrupted the adage but also insulted or committed an outrage against it (*hubrisai*). Homer did this by making an inferior man, Menelaus, go uninvited to the feast of a superior man, Agamemnon.

Thus, Socrates goes from claiming that he wanted "to go beautiful to the beautiful" to his paraphrase of Homer according to which "good men go uninvited" to the good. It seems that Socrates is replacing the beautiful with the good, or treating the two terms as interchangeable or at least closely related.<sup>14</sup> This dramatic detail foreshadows the way that Diotima's teaching will replace the phrase "beautiful things" with "good things."

But another question is raised by Socrates' remark. One wonders *why* Socrates wanted "to go beautiful to the beautiful." This remark raises the possibility that Socrates is courting Agathon. Plato's dialogue on love might indicate something about Socratic courtship. Certainly, the possibility of a love triangle between Socrates, Agathon, and Alcibiades becomes a subplot

later in the dialogue and the intricacy and possible significance of their relationships will have to be examined in the appropriate place.

Socrates' transformation of the Homeric saying also makes the audience wonder who is supposed to be regarded as better and more virtuous among Socrates, Aristodemus, and Agathon. Indeed, Aristodemus modestly claims that he himself is inferior to Agathon and that Homer's version of the saying is more appropriate to his situation than is Socrates' revision. Aristodemus thereby displays that he is overawed by Agathon's fame, or by admiration for his beauty and talent; by contrast, Socrates is not, even though Socrates has uncharacteristically dressed up for the occasion. Later, when Socrates will contrast his own "trivial," dreamlike wisdom with that which Agathon displayed before thirty thousand Greeks, it is quite clear even to Agathon that Socrates is demeaning the poet's wisdom (175e8).<sup>15</sup> All of these dramatic elements raise questions about Socrates' attitude toward the poets, specifically about philosophy's value in comparison with poetry, and thus it is appropriate that Agathon will later suggest that he and Socrates will go to court (*diadikasometha*) regarding wisdom (175e8). All of this dramatic detail serves to prepare Plato's audience to think about the relation between philosophy and poetry, and to think about Socrates the philosopher in his social relations to other intelligent but nonphilosophical men. Aristodemus is afraid that he will appear the inferior in the company of men of letters, and he says that Socrates better think of a good excuse for bringing him. Socrates says, echoing Homer, "we'll think about what to say 'as we proceed the two of us along the way'" (174d). (The more accurate rendering of what Socrates misquotes here is given at *Protagoras* 348d: "When two go together, one has an idea before the other.")<sup>16</sup> But Socrates' preoccupation with some idea causes him to lag behind and become lost in thought, and so he instructs Aristodemus to go on ahead. As a result, Aristodemus is forced to arrive first at the party to which he had not been invited. Thus far the two possibilities mentioned in the text are: that good men go uninvited to a good man's feast, or that an inferior man might come uninvited to a good man's feast (as in Socrates' complaint about Homer's depiction of Menelaus and Agamemnon). There are two further possibilities not previously considered: that a good man might be coming uninvited to an inferior man's feast, or that an inferior man might be coming uninvited to another inferior man's feast. The effect is to invite us to consider these four possibilities: either Agathon or Aristodemus are both good, or both are inferior, or Agathon is good and Aristodemus is inferior, or Aristodemus is good and Agathon is inferior—and it is left to Plato's audience to decide. The question is interesting in that Agathon is a celebrated poet and Aristodemus is a devoted follower of Socrates. Whatever the limitations of Aristodemus with respect to virtue, one wonders whether or not his love of Socrates might give him some claim to superiority over the poet. Hence, the effect of the detail is to raise again an issue foregrounded in the frame—the relative value of the life devoted to philosophy, and the

extent to which Socrates promoted a genuine interest in philosophy among his most devoted followers.

When Aristodemus arrives without Socrates, Agathon makes Aristodemus feel welcome, only then to wonder aloud immediately as to the whereabouts of Socrates. Agathon orders a servant to go and fetch the philosopher, but Aristodemus indicates that wandering off alone to think is one of Socrates' habits and that he should not be disturbed (175b). Plato's audience is told that Agathon wanted to send for Socrates many times, but Aristodemus assured him that he would come when he was ready. The philosopher finally came in when the guests were scarcely halfway through the meal (175c).

What is the significance of this episode? Why are we shown Socrates losing himself in thought and being late to the party? Is there a connection between this curious trance and the acts of purification that are betokened by Socrates' bathing before and after the party? One thing that is accomplished by Plato's having Aristodemus arrive before Socrates is that we can learn, via Aristodemus's conversations with Agathon, that such behavior is typical for Socrates.<sup>17</sup> This curious absorption is said to be one of Socrates' habits; it is characteristic of his pursuit of philosophy. The philosopher loses himself in thought and as a result is late for dinner. Not only is he late for dinner, which might be thought to be impolite, but it is perhaps also rude that he lets Aristodemus, who had been invited by Socrates, arrive at the party without him. This behavior makes clear that Socrates' philosophical concerns can cause him to forget about social proprieties or perhaps afford him a sublime indifference to physical concerns such as the need for a meal. (Recall that Socrates is promised a meal and a night of carousing at the beginning of the *Republic*, but the feast turns out to be entirely a feast of words.) In terms of the tripartite psychology of the *Republic* one could say that this detail shows that the wisdom-loving part of Socrates' mind is more powerful than either the honor-loving part or the appetitive part. Furthermore, this whole incident foreshadows the report of a similar incident that Alcibiades will relate later in the dialogue, and this provides Plato's audience with a source for this information independent of Alcibiades' later account. In addition, the whole event further shrouds Socrates in mystery; we wonder what he is thinking, and we are never told. Finally, the event serves to set up an interesting exchange between Socrates and Agathon when the philosopher finally does arrive. Then Agathon's remarks to him indicate that Agathon too wonders what Socrates was thinking, but he receives only a cryptic response from Socrates. Agathon will speak of Socrates' "wisdom," a wisdom that Socrates disclaims, but which Agathon's imagination cannot help conjuring up: Socrates' willingness to separate himself from others by losing himself in thought sets him apart in their eyes. One of the themes of the *Symposium* is that Socrates' peculiarities so distinguish him from others that others begin to regard these distinctions as insulting. Thus, both Agathon and Alcibiades will speak of Socrates' hubris toward others, his remaining aloof and ironic.



Readers of the *Symposium* should constantly recall that our divisions of disciplines and subject areas were not those of the Greeks of Socrates' or Plato's time. The term *philosophoi* did not yet commonly possess a univocal meaning. It was not yet clearly distinguished from sophistry or rhetoric and certainly not from the disciplines that we would today regard as "scientific," such as mathematics or astronomy. The terms *poetry* and *poet* also carried very different connotations than they do today. Poets were men of wisdom, divinely inspired wisdom, and much of Athenian education consisted in the memorization and performance of poetry. Only in this context can one begin to understand what is meant by "the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy." Bearing this context in mind also helps one to appreciate the extent to which this rivalry, which Socrates in the *Republic* calls an ancient rivalry, is actually being rendered thematic by Plato, just as was the rivalry between philosophy and sophistry. The *Symposium* is truly unique among Plato's dialogues for its depiction of Socrates in conversation with famous poets, Aristophanes and Agathon. Nowhere else do we see the philosopher debating poets (into the wee hours of the night), and nowhere else are we provided with speeches Plato crafted for them. One must consider what the portraits and the speeches of the poets might tell us about Plato's estimation of poetry, notwithstanding the infamous mention of "an ancient quarrel" in the final book of *Republic*.

Seeing Socrates enter the room, Agathon, all alone on one of the couches, calls out: "Come lie down next to me. Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom that came to you under my neighbor's porch. It's clear that you've seen the light; if you hadn't, you'd still be standing there" (175c-d). This episode and Agathon's statement here confirm that many people regarded Socrates as the kind of person who would not let go of an interlocutor or an idea until he had pursued him or it to the bitter end. Rarely in Plato's dialogues does Socrates walk away from an argument or seek to adjourn a discussion prematurely. But Socrates responds to Agathon by saying that his own wisdom is a shadowy thing at best, as ephemeral as a dream (175d). Upon his arrival at Agathon's house for the symposium, the philosopher famous for his professions of ignorance imputes to Agathon the bright and wonderful wisdom he himself lacks and he ironically suggests that it is he who would be filled by the poet's overflowing wisdom (175e). This remark is one of the key references in this dialogue to the theme of Socratic Ignorance. Much depends on how one understands Socrates' claim that his own wisdom is defective in some way. Clearly, Socrates is being ironic with respect to Agathon's wisdom, as his other remarks to Agathon make clear; but it does not follow that Socrates' remarks regarding the ephemeral and dream-like quality of his own wisdom are insincere. Indeed, these remarks could very well foreshadow the erotic character of philosophy. Later, in recounting Diotima's teaching, Socrates will suggest that philosophy is essentially the love of wisdom and that as the love of wisdom it cannot be the possession of

wisdom. Yet *Erôs* is also said to be a messenger from the Divine; if all *Erôs* plays this role, then certainly the form of *Erôs* known as philosophy does so as well. Indeed, other considerations will suggest that in spite of philosophy's lack of wisdom it is rather more open to the messages of the Divine than are other forms of *Erôs*. For if the *Eidē* or Forms, are divine, and philosophy involves recollections or visions of the Forms, then surely philosophy is the *daimonic* messenger par excellence. But *Erôs* will also be said to both be desirous and possessed of resources and to be both constantly losing and renewing these resources. It possesses this dual nature through its kinship to both Poverty (*Penia*) and Resource (*Poros*). All of these ideas are tied later to the claim that philosophy stands between ignorance and wisdom, having and not having what it desires. It is enough here to suggest that Socrates' remarks about the evanescent character of his "wisdom" and Socrates' trance on the porch may be hints of the paradoxical character of the philosopher's simultaneous communion with and distance from the divinity he seeks.

In addition to minimizing his own wisdom, Socrates also calls into question Agathon's view of how wisdom is obtained, saying, "How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise" (175d). Socrates thus takes issue with a view of knowledge that is very prevalent even today—the "knowledge-transfer" or transfusion model of learning according to which the teacher can simply put understanding directly into the mind of the learner as though the learner were a passive receptacle. The knowledge-transfer paradigm of the learning process presumes that the teacher possesses knowledge and then simply imparts it to the student. Although this conception may be suitable for some limited kinds of pedagogy, it is not a suitable model for philosophy as Plato's Socrates seems to understand it. In the *Republic* Socrates also explicitly denies that education consists in imparting knowledge in this way, as though one could "put sight into blind eyes" (*Rep.* 518b-c). The Socratic method of question and answer is based on a contrary model of education, according to which the learner must play an active role, even, in a sense, the principal role, in the acquisition of knowledge. In the *Symposium*, Socrates seems to regard Agathon's conception of how knowledge is obtained as almost a hydraulic process. He says to Agathon, "If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn . . ." (175d). Agathon's mistake will be repeated later by Alcibiades when he admits to thinking that by getting next to Socrates in a sexual way, he will be able to receive Socrates' wisdom and guidance.

It could very well be that the passivity of the student in this model of learning is indicative of the passivity of the audience of poetry; and the image of water flowing from a full cup to an empty one reminds one of an image used in the *Ion* as an image of poetic inspiration, the image of the magnetism flowing from a lodestone to iron rings (*Ion* 533d-534a). One of the differences between philosophy and the tradition of poetic pedagogy in ancient

Greek is that the latter called for a more passive mind on the part of the student, whose psyche was to be shaped via a mimetic relation to the words and deeds of poetry. Philosophy by contrast demands active participation; the benefit to be gained from it demands personal and critical confrontation with and appropriation of the philosopher's way of thinking, examining and arguing, not some particular set of images or propositions. The philosopher's way of thinking is inherently dialogical, open to and indeed dependent on engagement with others in an activity that calls the self into question and subjects it to scrutiny. For these reasons, only those who exercise themselves in thought and inquiry will receive the benefits of philosophy. As with physical exercise, the benefits only accrue to those engaged in the activity. Hence, philosophy can never be a passive, spectator sport. The philosopher, believing that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being," needs the dialogue with others as a way of exposing the psyche and turning its vision toward the light.

Not only does Plato write in the dialogue form, but also it is suggested in many dialogues that the conversational method is the best model for learning. Recall again the proverb (taken from Homer, *Iliad* X.224), "When two go together, one has an idea before the other." Socrates alludes to this expression at *Symposium* 174d and quotes it at *Protagoras* (348d). There, Socrates adds this comment: "Human beings are simply more resourceful this way in action, speech, and thought. If someone has a private perception, he immediately starts going around and looking until he finds somebody he can show it to and have it corroborated."<sup>18</sup> This attitude is consistent with the usual procedure followed in the dialogues, in which the partners of conversations are invariably portrayed as searching together. Even in the common case in which one person, such as Socrates, is clearly in control of the conversation, it is continually suggested that in some way the other partner to the discussion is needed. The interlocutors are consistently treated as though they make some important contribution to the inquiry, even though it is not always clear to Plato's audience just how this is so. In Plato's *Seventh Letter*, the language in which philosophical inquiry is described also points to the value of more than one head:

For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after *long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil*, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the psyche and straightway nourishes itself. (341c-d; Morrow, trans.)

Only when all of these things—names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been rubbed against one another and tested, *pupil and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy*—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object. (344b-c; Morrow trans.)

In the *Alcibiades I* (132c–133c) Socrates uses the metaphor of an eye looking into another eye, in order to see itself, as the model of the method the psyche must use to know itself. The psyche must look at a psyche, and especially at the part of itself by which it knows and thinks and in which wisdom arises. Here the metaphor of an eye looking into another eye suggests that the psyche needs to encounter the thought of another psyche and the conversation becomes a soul-to-soul conversation.<sup>19</sup> Philosophy for Socrates entails mutual deliberation and shared inquiry, carried on dialectically, through many conversations. Dialogue is a cooperative probing and yielding, an exercise of one's whole character by which each interlocutor puts the other to the test. This exercise presumes that the two inquirers can each lead the other at different stages of the journey. The teacher is like a guide who knows the trail well; she can assist another along the journey, but she cannot presume to know it completely or to have reached the end of what must be a lifelong path. Each person can teach another something by disclosing to the other possibilities of which the other would not otherwise be aware. Now one goes ahead, and now the other, and when the guide guides well, the follower is still permitted to discover for herself what the guide has already discovered. The best guides empower their followers rather than keeping them ever dependent on guidance. Experience on the path affords one the opportunity to pass along certain lessons concerning the nature of the terrain and the attitude most likely to optimize the benefits to be derived from the process. Hence, philosophy entails getting on the road or path, and this introduces another metaphor for pedagogy that is exhibited in the *Symposium*. We shall say more about pedagogy as akin to the relation of guides and followers below.<sup>20</sup>

Socrates says that he can call as witnesses to Agathon's wisdom the thirty thousand people who attended the performance of Agathon's prize-winning play. This comment draws attention to the difference between an impromptu, one-on-one conversation, on one hand, and a rehearsed, mimetic performance in front of a large crowd, on the other. Plato's audience is led to reflect on the contrast between on the one hand a face-to-face or psyche-to-psyche encounter that occurs in a conversation with Socrates and, on the other hand, the act of writing a play, even a prize-winning one, staged before a large crowd. The theme of the contrast between philosophical and poetic/rhetorical discourse will recur in the comments with which Socrates will preface his speech. Agathon will say that he fears speaking in front of his intelligent friends, whereas he did not fear to speak in front of the ignorant crowd. This remark will prompt Socrates to note that it implies that Agathon is worried about getting caught doing something foolish (and perhaps being corrected), but apparently not at all worried about doing something foolish in front of those who would fail to catch him at it.

Socrates suggests that Agathon is more comfortable with show or mere appearance than he is willing to face the truth about the real condition of his psyche. Agathon is comfortable in large crowds because he believes that

he appears before them to his best advantage; whereas Socrates had earlier claimed to avoid the previous night's victory party because of his discomfort with large crowds (174a). The exercise of reason in dialectic and the pursuit of truth are more possible in smaller groups that can center their attention on one-on-one dialogue. One could say that large crowds have no capacity for either dialogue or dialectic and that their natural medium is rhetorical persuasion. The philosopher cares nothing for the opinion of a crowd as a crowd, but seeks to elicit from individuals the "one vote" of which Socrates speaks in the *Gorgias*, that is, the voice of reason inside the psyche of a single interlocutor (*Grg.* 471e–472c, 474a–b).

In response to Socrates' comment about Agathon's wisdom, Agathon replies "You are an insolent man [*Υβριστής εἶ*]" Socrates." He continues, "Dionysus will soon enough be the judge of our claims to wisdom" (175e7–9). This remark is the first of a number of clues that seem meant to indicate how we should understand the action of the main part of this dialogue. Agathon's words introduce the themes of the contest (*agōn*) and the trial by jury, foreshadowing the contest of speeches that is proposed shortly thereafter, a contest that becomes, among other things, a contest over truthfulness between Socrates and Alcibiades later in the dialogue. We shall see that the contest with Alcibiades will take the form of a mock trial in which Socrates is accused of hubris, and in which all of the other speakers are named as jurists competent to judge of Socrates' habitual behaviors and practices. But even before Alcibiades figuratively brings Socrates to trial on the charge of hubris, Agathon is suggesting that he and Socrates will "go to law" (*diadikasometha*) in a dispute over wisdom and that somehow, Dionysus, the god of wine, masks, and theatre, will be the judge of this dispute between them. Any interpretation of the *Symposium* must try to understand the significance of this image in the context of the dialogue as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

Agathon clearly knows Socrates well enough to see irony in what Socrates says. On the face of it, the irony is not obvious—in fact, it could even be that Agathon is "reading into" Socrates' words irony that is not there. It is only because of what we think we know about Socrates from other dialogues that we are inclined to suspect him of irony at this point. But it is also significant that Agathon was probably sincere in saying that he wanted to learn Socrates' wisdom, and when he interprets Socrates as rebuffing him with irony, he probably does at some level feel genuinely insulted, although his remark is surely meant to seem playful. Here is a man who has just achieved a tremendous victory and won the acclaim of thirty thousand Greeks; yet there is something he admires about Socrates. He covets Socrates' companionship and perceived wisdom, a feeling that Alcibiades will later express as well. One must consider the significance of this point. He regards Socrates' remarks as ironic, as though Socrates is holding himself aloof or playing hard to get. He sees pride in Socrates' response, rather than humility. Agathon sees a slight, rather than praise when Socrates acknowledges his acclaim. It

is as though Agathon has a sense that the philosopher's wisdom is somehow superior, some higher mysterious secret the mere existence of which threatens Agathon's image of himself. For this reason, Agathon would like to associate himself with the enigmatic philosopher and perhaps to learn his secrets. But this desire does not at all imply an interest in philosophy or even the remotest understanding of what it is. Rather, Agathon seems to be covetous of Socrates' wisdom out of a spirit of rivalry with him, and he seems to want to become more intimate with Socrates so as to find the philosopher's weaknesses and gain an advantage, much as Alcibiades will later report having tried to do.

The apparently playful rivalry between Socrates and Agathon regarding wisdom is perhaps not as playful as it seems; this rivalry surely represents the rivalry between philosophy and poetry (of which Socrates extensively speaks in *Republic*, Bk. X). This conclusion is supported by the remark Socrates makes about Agathon's wisdom having displayed itself before thirty thousand Greeks, which points to a characteristic difference between poetic "wisdom" and philosophical "wisdom": poetic wisdom depends upon or exists in the realm of mere appearance. Moreover, Socrates' remarks about the paltry character of his own "wisdom" are reminiscent of his remarks in the *Apology* regarding his merely "human" wisdom; in both cases Socrates seems to downgrade or belittle his own wisdom, and yet to do so in a way that is simultaneously ironic and sincere.

Socrates is sincere about the limits of his wisdom to the extent that he lacks the divine wisdom that he seeks; but he is ironic to the extent that his search has left him wiser, through his awareness of his own ignorance at least, than those around him. As will be suggested later in connection with Diotima's teaching about *Erôs* and philosophy, it is in the very awareness of ignorance and its concomitant *Erôs* for the wisdom that is lacked that an intimation of that wisdom comes to the psyche as though it were a message from the Divine; yet like Socrates' trance on the porch, the messages of *Erôs* never satisfy the psyche's erotic longing. They simply direct it further along its path. Perhaps one reason why philosophy is to be preferred to poetry for Plato is that rather than being content with images, as is poetry, philosophy belittles its own dream-like status even as it dreams of something beyond dreams.

After the celebrants pour a libation to the god Dionysus, their attention turns to the procedures for the evening's drinking. Pausanias confesses to being hung over from the previous night's celebration and says that he and many others too could benefit from taking it easy on this occasion, and Aristophanes agrees. Eryximachus jumps in to ask how Agathon feels, wondering if he is up for some "serious drinking." But Agathon confesses to having no strength left for anything, and Eryximachus calls this a lucky stroke, since it means that so many of the heavy drinkers are thus incapacitated. Then Eryximachus remarks that Socrates is able either to drink or not to drink and will be satisfied either way (176c). Socrates' ability to drink without intoxication

is referred to subsequently (214a, 220a), and the conclusion of the dialogue confirms this estimation of his abilities.

An adequate interpretation of the *Symposium* should explain what it means that Socrates is equally content with either drinking or abstention. Daniel Anderson points out the ambiguity of this detail. Socrates' sobriety might mean either that Apollo protects him, so that he is immune to Apollo's traditional rival, Dionysus; or it might mean that Socrates is always possessed by Dionysus, so that drinking does not alter his behavior. Alcibiades' use of Dionysiac satyr imagery suggests that he at least would opt for the latter interpretation of Socrates; but if Alcibiades is possessed by Dionysus, this could be a case of the god claiming Socrates as his own.<sup>22</sup> Rosen sees Socrates' sobriety as a sign of his unerotic character; we comment on his view at the appropriate place later in this commentary. We think that Socrates' sobriety indicates the superiority of philosophical *Erôs* to other forms of *Erôs*. The "divine madness" of philosophical *Erôs* actually stimulates, nourishes, and protects reason, and when it is strong it can overrule the passions that ordinarily distort reason. Socrates' sound-mindedness (*sophrosunê*) cannot be hindered by excessive appetitive desire or biased by the love of honor or other spirited passion, because Socrates' strongest form of *Erôs* is his love of truth and wisdom.

Eryximachus goes on to dispense his medical advice about the nature of intoxication, the main point of which is that inebriation is harmful to everyone; he says that this is why he refrains from heavy drinking and advises others to do the same. Phaedrus interjects that he always does what Eryximachus says, especially when he speaks as a doctor, and so the guests agree not to get drunk (176d-e). Eryximachus declares it has been so resolved, and then he proposes another motion, namely that they dispense with the flute-girl and engage in conversation. (The legal-political language of "it has been resolved" [*ἔδοκται* 176e4-5] pervades even the discussion of the evening's libations.) We should notice that Eryximachus, who as a physician is a follower of Apollo, has introduced two resolutions that attempt to banish Dionysos, Apollo's rival, from this symposium. This will be no ordinary symposium, to be sure.

All the others agree with Eryximachus's proposal and urge him to suggest a subject for the speeches. He says the idea actually comes from Phaedrus:

"Eryximachus," he says, "isn't it an awful thing! Our poets have composed hymns in honor of just about any god you can think of; but has a single one of them given one moment's thought to the god of love, ancient and powerful as he is? As for our fancy intellectuals, they have written volumes praising Heracles and other heroes (as did the distinguished Prodicus). Well, perhaps that's not surprising, but I've actually read a book by an accomplished author who saw fit to extol the usefulness of salt! How could people pay attention to such trifles and never, not even once, write a proper hymn to Love? How could anyone ignore so great a god?" (177a-c)<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in the *Symposium*, just as in the dialogue named after him, Phaedrus seems especially concerned with both love and rhetoric, and indeed these are two great forces that are capable of moving the psyches of human beings. Perhaps using Phaedrus to introduce the topic here is Plato's way of reminding us that Phaedrus was moved by love and by persuasive rhetoric to profane the mysteries (with Eryximachus and Alcibiades). In the *Symposium* as in the *Phaedrus* the themes of rhetoric and love are interwoven. Plato wants his audience to be aware of both themes—love, the topic introduced by Phaedrus, and rhetoric, which is emphasized by the contest of speeches and by Phaedrus's remarks about the failure of the poets to praise *Erôs* adequately. Phaedrus's criticism presents a challenge for the speakers. One is reminded here of Adeimantus's remarks concerning the deficiencies of the poet's praise of justice in the *Republic*; in that dialogue Plato clearly uses those remarks to establish a challenge that he intends to meet with his dialogue. He is in effect pointing out that no one has yet accomplished what he is about to do in the *Republic*, namely, achieve the proper praise of justice. Likewise, Phaedrus's remarks here indicate that no one has yet worthily praised *Erôs*, and it is hard not to think that this goal was part of what Plato hoped to accomplish with the *Symposium*. As we have already noted, the *Republic* is also a dialogue that has as one of its major themes the rivalry between poetry and philosophy. So in both the *Republic* and the *Symposium* Plato is displaying the superiority of philosophy (or of his philosophical poetry) over conventional poetry, by succeeding where the poets have failed in the all-important tasks of worthily praising justice and love.

Proposing that they begin with Phaedrus, moving from left to right, Eryximachus asks for the others' approval. Socrates asserts that no one will object to such an idea, adding, "How could I vote 'No,' when the only thing I say I understand is the art of Love [*ta erotica*]?" (177d-e). In what follows we will have to consider the significance of Socrates' claim to understand the art of love.

The prologue ends with Apollodorus reminding his audience that Aristodemus did not remember everything that was said, and that he (Apollodorus) did not remember everything Aristodemus told him, but that he would tell them what he considered most important (178a). This cautionary caveat puts Plato's audience at still further remove from the events that form the heart of the dialogue and serve to underline that this is no mere transcript or word-for-word rendering, for all that Apollodorus relates is what he supposes to be worth relating, and/or what had impressed itself most vividly on Aristodemus's mind. One is led to wonder what Apollodorus is leaving out and what Aristodemus might have forgotten or missed entirely. The total effect of the whole prologue (the narrative frame with Apollodorus plus Aristodemus's account of the events leading up to the speeches on *Erôs* themselves) is to prepare the minds of the audience for a great contest of speeches on love, a contest that may have everything to do with the rivalry between philosophy



and other claimants to wisdom, especially poetry—for it is through the contest of speeches that Socrates and Agathon “go to law concerning wisdom.”

The six speeches in praise of love that make up the heart of the *Symposium*, should “be heard” through the themes introduced by the narrative frame. One must ask oneself: What is the ultimate significance and outcome of this contest of speeches in praise of *Erôs*? We suggest that the contest is really a contest between philosophy and its rivals. Since each of the speeches not only expresses an understanding of love but each is also an expression of a certain kind of love, one could also say that the dialogue displays different concepts of *Erôs*, ranging between philosophic love and various alternative kinds of love. We must qualify this statement by saying that Diotima’s teaching will suggest that all forms of love are in some way philosophical to the extent that the love in a nonphilosophical breast represents the relatively most philosophical element in a nonphilosopher. Nonetheless, the dialogue presents the philosopher’s love as being one of a kind. Plato’s audience should consider the way in which such a rhetorical contest, a battle of rival praises of love, affords an entry into philosophy simply by juxtaposing alternative ways of being for review. The alternative views of what love is and of what is truly lovable are alternative understandings of the human good, and the need for philosophy grows out of the conflict of alternative understandings of the good. The need for philosophy also grows out of the inadequacy of the rhetoric of praise. By sending away the flute-girl and deciding not to drink excessively, but instead to compare speeches about what is dear to their hearts, the participants prepare the way for the entry of Socrates’ philosophical muse.

Plato’s audience should also bear in mind the way the entire account of the rhetorical contest is qualified by the other themes introduced in the narrative frame. For instance, one must recall that speeches themselves are objects of interest to Apollodorus and his unknown auditors. Their *Erôs* is directed toward knowing the content of the speeches, not only because they are interested in the topic, but also because they are interested in hearing an account of the views and deeds of certain of the participants. Recall Apollodorus’s story of Glaucon’s request; Glaucon had mentioned Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades in particular, as well as expressing an interest in the speeches on love. The first line of the *Symposium* suggests that Apollodorus’s new, unknown companion has made a similar request, since the whole reason Apollodorus claims that he is “not unprepared concerning the things about which you inquire” is that he has just related the same matter to a Glaucon “the day before yesterday.” Whether the new companion is interested in the speeches for the same reasons as Glaucon was, presumably Plato would not have included the specifics in Glaucon’s request if he did not intend them to color his audience’s understanding of the meaning of the symposium. Glaucon’s request highlights the roles of Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades, and indeed, later in the dialogue it becomes clear that dramatic interaction between these three characters has a special relevance; for

they will be exemplifying a kind of erotic triangle, as well as offering successive encomia in the dialogue. Moreover, Agathon will be critical of Socrates, even rude to him, whereas Socrates will reduce Agathon to an admission of ignorance in criticizing his speech as longer on form than on substance. Finally, Alcibiades will criticize Socrates, the only man who has ever made the self-assured Alcibiades feel shame. Also, if one recalls the two “trials” referenced earlier, that between Socrates and Agathon and that between Socrates and Alcibiades, it is safe to say that two of the most important subthemes of the dialogue concern Socrates’ relationship to Agathon and Socrates’ relationship to Alcibiades respectively. Plato’s audience must consider what these “trials” say about the erotic relationship and rivalry between Socrates, Agathon, and Alcibiades.

In addition, we have noted that when Apollodorus relays Aristodemus’s account of his meeting with Socrates in the dialogue’s frame, another organizing theme is introduced: the question of the relative value of Socrates, Aristodemus, and Agathon. For the question is implicitly raised whether or not Socrates is going as a beautiful man to a beautiful man or as a good man to a good man’s feast. Another question is whether or not Aristodemus is a good man or an inferior man who goes uninvited to a good man’s feast. All of this begs the further question of whether Agathon truly “lives up to his name” and is really good. These questions foreshadow the disputed theme between Agathon and Socrates over wisdom.

Finally, there is a theme that is not explicitly announced in the dramatic prologue to the speeches, but which would have been in the mind of Plato’s audience owing simply to the cast of characters, namely, the profanation of the mysteries and the desecration of the Herms. As we noted above, these were events that transpired in 415, the year in which the party occurred, just prior to the launching of the Sicilian Expedition, and in which three of the present partygoers (Phaedrus, Eryximachus, and Alcibiades) were allegedly involved. Commentators on the *Symposium* frequently wonder what Plato wants his audience to gather from these events. Like others, we see references to these events in the speech of Socrates on love and the speech of Alcibiades on Socrates, and we shall discuss their significance for the interpretation of the dialogue in our comments on these speeches. Adequate interpretation of *Symposium* requires bringing together all these themes and considering the various ways in which they might function together to enrich an understanding of the action and argument of the dialogue considered as a whole.