

## The power of Love and the Love of Power in Plato's *Symposium*\*

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Plato's *Symposium* is one of the most influential texts to have survived from classical antiquity.<sup>1</sup> It continues to shape modern ideas about Socrates and the culture of Athens in the late fifth-century BC, about Greek sexuality and, above all of course, about *erōs*, love and desire. It is hard to think of any theorist of love, whether divine or secular, from the Renaissance on who has not been forced to frame his or her ideas as a response to the *Symposium*, and in particular to the speech which the Platonic Socrates reports from the Mantinean priestess Diotima, a speech which takes *erōs* quite literally to a higher plane.

In singling out Diotima's speech, as in fact it is almost impossible not to do, I do not want to do an injustice to the other speeches, all of which are brilliantly imagined by Plato and all of which are characterised by an amused sense of self-parody which is very well suited to the atmosphere of the fashionable symposium, at least as it is imagined in elite literature throughout antiquity. One other speech, however, very obviously stands out from the perspective of later reception. This is Aristophanes' marvellous parable of how we were once all double people (two faces, four arms and legs etc), some all male, some all female and some half-and-half, and, when we threatened to get out of hand, Zeus split us in two to put humankind in a weaker position. Now we spend our lives looking for our lost 'other half', and to that search for wholeness should be given the name 'love'. For many modern readers (and not just *very* modern ones), Aristophanes' speech is the only one in the *Symposium* which offers an account of what 'being in love' can realistically feel like; finding your other half does indeed bring a sense, so very many people affirm, of joyous completion, just as losing that half diminishes the self both emotionally and physically. Moreover, and this is something which perhaps resonates more strongly now than ever before, Aristophanes' story explains (part of) what we call 'sexual preference', even if the comic poet was unable to foresee the very rich smorgasbord of preferences which are on show in the modern western world. Aristophanes' story also has a logic which appeals to a widely held view, even if one not articulated as often as it should be, that the reasons why we fall in love are precisely not susceptible to 'rational' explanation. Though this romantic view may seem under attack by scientists who think it is all a matter of chemicals ('my pheromones fancy yours', or something along those lines), the serendipitous nature of desire remains one of its most powerful fascinations. Aristophanes' story, moreover, works on the level of the 'just-so' story, not on the

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\* This is a reconstructed version of a talk given in Nunspeet in September 2019. I am very grateful to the organisers of that conference, in particular Remco Regtuit, for their invitation and for the sunny hospitality I received there. Perhaps inevitably, the talk revisited some of the themes discussed at greater length in my *Plato's Symposium* (Oxford 2004). Some of the translations used in this paper are those of the Loeb Classical Library; where no indication is given, the translation is my own.

<sup>1</sup> Three helpful collections of modern studies on all aspects of Plato's *Symposium*, including its reception in antiquity and beyond, are C. Horn ed., *Platon Symposium* (Berlin 2012), J. Leshner, D. Nails, F. Sheffield (eds.), *Plato's Symposium. Issues in Interpretation and Reception* (Washington DC, 2006) and M. Tulli and M. Erler eds., *Plato in Symposium* (Sankt Augustin 2016).

level of genetic science; the fact that our distant ancestors were once split in half no more explains why each of us today looks ceaselessly for our other half than the fact that a baby elephant once had its nose elongated by a crocodile explains why all elephants today have long noses.

For many readers, Diotima's speech is as impossibly high-minded as Aristophanes' is pleasingly confirming. Aristophanes' speech has in fact been used to defend Plato from the charge, which many people associate with Gregory Vlastos, one of Plato's greatest modern interpreters, that he (and his Socrates) simply did not understand what love between two people was like. Be that as it may, Aristophanes' speech certainly does show us something very important about the whole design of the *Symposium*. At one point, Aristophanes imagines that the separated halves have indeed found each other and been reunited:

καὶ εἰ αὐτοῖς ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ κατακειμένοις ἐπιστὰς ὁ Ἥφαιστος, ἔχων τὰ ὄργανα, ἔροιτο· Τί ἔσθ' ὃ βούλεσθε, ὧ ἄνθρωποι, ὑμῖν παρ' ἀλλήλων γενέσθαι; καὶ εἰ ἀποροῦντας αὐτοὺς πάλιν ἔροιτο Ἄρα γε τοῦδε ἐπιθυμεῖτε, ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ γενέσθαι ὅτι μάλιστα ἀλλήλοις, ὥστε καὶ νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν μὴ ἀπολείπεσθαι ἀλλήλων; εἰ γὰρ τούτου ἐπιθυμεῖτε, ἐθέλω ὑμᾶς συντῆξαι καὶ συμφυσεῖσθαι εἰς τὸ αὐτό, ὥστε δύο ὄντας ἓνα γεγονέναι καὶ ἕως τ' ἂν ζῆτε, ὡς ἓνα ὄντα, κοινῇ ἀμφοτέρους ζῆν, καὶ ἐπειδὴν ἀποθάνητε, ἐκεῖ αὖ ἐν Ἅιδου ἀντὶ δυοῖν ἓνα εἶναι κοινῇ τεθνεῶτε· ἀλλ' ὁρᾶτε εἰ τούτου ἐρᾶτε καὶ ἐξαρκεῖ ὑμῖν ἂν τούτου τύχητε· ταῦτα ἀκούσας ἴσμεν ὅτι οὐδ' ἂν εἷς ἐξαρνηθεῖν οὐδ' ἄλλο τι ἂν φανείη βουλόμενος, ἀλλ' ἀτεχνῶς οἴοιτ' ἂν ἀκηκοέναι τοῦτο ὃ πάλαι ἄρα ἐπεθύμει, συνελθὼν καὶ συντακεῖς τῷ ἐρωμένῳ ἐκ δυοῖν εἷς γενέσθαι.

Suppose that, as they lay together, Hephaestus should come and stand over them, and showing his implements should ask: 'What is it, good mortals, that you would have of one another?' —and suppose that in their perplexity he asked them again: 'Do you desire to be joined in the closest possible union, so that you shall not be divided by night or by day? If that is your craving, I am ready to fuse and weld you together in a single piece, that from being two you may be made one; that so long as you live, the pair of you, being as one, may share a single life; and that when you die you may also in Hades yonder be one instead of two, having shared a single death. Bethink yourselves if this is your heart's desire, and if you will be quite contented with this lot.' Not one on hearing this, we are sure, would demur to it or would be found wishing for anything else: each would unreservedly deem that he had been offered just what he was yearning for all the time, namely, to be so joined and fused with his beloved that the two might be made one.

Plato, *Symposium* 192c-e (trans. Lamb)

Aristophanes claims that we would all consent that Hephaestus has accurately expressed what we all want. But is it, or, rather, should it be from a Platonic point of view? Surely not. What we should want from love is that it makes us better, more virtuous and more knowledgeable about what really matters: the lovers to whom Hephaestus speaks are, like Ares and Aphrodite in Demodocus' song in *Odyssey* 8, bound, perhaps we should say 'trapped', in a sterile union from which no progress, let alone offspring worthy of the name, is possible. This 'love' does nothing for us, except give us a recurrently warm glow. The symposiasts had agreed that each of

them would deliver an encomium ‘worthy of the god’, and tradition dictates that such an encomium would not merely explain and praise the god’s power, but would also explain what benefits the god brings us. This is what would constitute a proper encomium. If *erōs* is *erōs* ‘of something’, then a proper encomium will explain why that ‘something’ is (or should be) supremely desirable, and this is what Diotima, but not Aristophanes, does.

Diotima’s speech does indeed show us ‘the end’ of our search, namely the Form of Beauty:

πρῶτον μὲν αἰεὶ ὄν καὶ οὔτε γιγνόμενον οὔτε ἀπολλύμενον, οὔτε ἀυξανόμενον οὔτε φθίνον, ἔπειτα οὐ τῆ μὲν καλόν, τῆ δ’ αἰσχρόν, οὐδὲ τοτὲ μὲν, τοτὲ δ’ οὐ, οὐδὲ πρὸς μὲν τὸ καλόν, πρὸς δὲ τὸ αἰσχρόν, οὐδ’ ἔνθα μὲν καλόν, ἔνθα δὲ αἰσχρόν, ὡς τισὶ μὲν ὄν καλόν, τισὶ δὲ αἰσχρόν· οὐδ’ αὖ φαντασθήσεται αὐτῷ τὸ καλὸν οἷον πρόσωπόν τι οὐδὲ χεῖρες οὐδὲ ἄλλο οὐδὲν ὧν σῶμα μετέχει, οὐδέ τις λόγος οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη, οὐδέ που ὄν ἐν ἑτέρῳ τινί, οἷον ἐν ζῳῳ ἢ ἐν γῆ ἢ ἐν οὐρανῷ ἢ ἐν τῷ ἄλλῳ, ἀλλὰ αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μεθ’ αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς αἰεὶ ὄν, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα κατὰ ἐκείνου μετέχοντα τρόπον τινὰ τοιοῦτον, οἷον γιγνομένων τε τῶν ἄλλων καὶ ἀπολλυμένων μηδὲν ἐκεῖνο μήτε τι πλεόν μήτε ἔλαττον γίγνεσθαι μηδὲ πάσχειν μηδέν.

It is eternal; it does not come to be or cease to be, and it does not increase or diminish. It is not beautiful (*kalon*) in one respect and ugly in another, or beautiful at one time but not at another, or beautiful in one setting but ugly in another, or beautiful here and ugly elsewhere, depending on how people find it. The lover will not perceive beauty as a face or hands or any other physical feature, or as a piece of reasoning or knowledge, and he will not perceive it as being anywhere else either – in something like a creature or the earth or the heavens. No, he will perceive it in itself and by itself, constant in form and eternal, and he will see that every beautiful object somehow partakes of it, but in such a way that their coming to be and ceasing to be do not increase or diminish it at all, and it remains entirely unaffected.

Plato, *Symposium* 210e5-211b5

A passage like this allows us to see why Plato, and in particular Plato’s Forms, metaphysical realities existing beyond time and circumstance and to be grasped only by the intellect, have been so influential on ideas of ‘the classical’, on – in fact – the very idea of what the subject of Classics is.<sup>2</sup> There is of course a danger here of anachronism and misrepresentation. Classics is now a much more diverse and variegated (some might say ‘chaotic’) discipline than it was; concentration (by dead white males) on wonderful and unchanging objects of intellectual or aesthetic contemplation is not what many universities now encourage. What is undeniable, however, is that Plato’s *Symposium* remains a foundational text for how we think about the classical past and for the very meaning of classicism. This is the context in which we must place another crucial theme of the *Symposium*.

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed this at greater length in ‘The idea of the classical in classical antiquity’ *Proceedings of the Academy of Athens* 90 (2015) 51-68.

Diotima's speech can seem much more about the process by which *erōs* can help us to progress than it offers any details about what we will find at the end. Yes, we will hope to see the eternal vision I have just quoted, but that is described in a manner which is very short on 'detail'; Diotima's speech is no prescription for progress. What is particularly important is the role of the teacher who will help and guide along the way, and that is as true today as it was in Plato's imaginative construction. It is indeed the process which is crucial and where mistakes are all too easy. Alcibiades thought that it was very simple: in return for what he assumed Socrates wanted from him, Socrates would supply him with wisdom, as though wisdom was indeed something to be poured into empty bottles, an idea which Socrates has dismissed with his very first words:

εὖ ἂν ἔχοι, φάναι, ὦ Ἀγάθων, εἰ τοιοῦτον εἶη ἡ σοφία, ὥστ' ἐκ τοῦ πληρεστέρου εἰς τὸν κενώτερον ῥεῖν ἡμῶν, ἐὰν ἀπτώμεθα ἀλλήλων ...

It would be good, Agathon, if wisdom was such a thing that flowed from the fuller to the emptier of us, just when we touch each other...

Plato, *Symposium* 175d

Education, particularly the philosophical education which should be the purpose of serious conversation with Socrates, is not like that. Teachers guide and help the young to 'give birth'; they do not (or should not) simply pour 'wisdom' into their charges, if only because, Plato would hold, what such teachers offer is very unlikely to be 'wisdom'. It is an exaggeration, but perhaps not a drastic one, to claim that the purpose of ancient education at the higher levels was to turn out pupils who resembled their teachers as closely as possible. In one sense, this is what lies at the heart of Pausanias' speech: in Pausanias' model, the older 'lover' (*erastēs*) passes on the ideals and attitudes of elite Athenians, what we might call 'civic virtue', to a younger man, 'the beloved' (*erōmenos*). The older man is motivated by an *erōs* of which he makes no secret, a desire for physical gratification which he hopes a grateful young man will grant, and also (so we must presume) by a desire to see civic virtue (as he understands it) passed on to the next generation (cf. 184c-d); in other words, the behaviour arising from such an *erōs* may be seen as what keeps elite society going. The younger man is motivated by a desire for education and wisdom (184e1), but not by *erōs*. This is where Pausanias' speech falls down as an encomium: what does the older man, the 'teacher', derive from his *erōs*? Little or nothing apparently, except perhaps the sexual favours of a grateful young man. Education and wisdom is certainly the end to be aimed at, but they do not exist in a vacuum: who is to judge the kind of values and ideas which the older man transmits? Everything suggests that the kind of *paideia* which the older man offers in Pausanias' model is both traditional and unexamined; Diotima's speech is, among other things, a call to a radical examination of how we teach and how we might try to decide whether what we teach has any value.

Teachers of course also teach by example, and this idea was perhaps even more potent in antiquity than it is today. Whether through his fortitude on military campaign or his sexual abstinence in bed, Socrates was both a θαῦμα and a παράδειγμα, although, however, one which it was all but impossible to imitate, except in the most artificial ways (as with Aristodemos' shoelessness, 173b). Nevertheless, the *Symposium* shows us *how* we might go about learning. Diotima is there (in part) to prevent us from

thinking that Socrates got where he is all by himself; her (in part) hilarious dialectic cross-examination of the young Socrates (201e-2d), recalled by a now older and wiser man, suggests the extraordinary contribution which a teacher can make to a pupil's intellectual development.

Alcibiades' mistake about the acquisition of wisdom has been repeated countless times over the ages. Alcibiades did, however, learn some things. One of them is the art of interpretation, what we might today call 'lessons in reading':

Καὶ γὰρ οὖν καὶ τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις παρέλιπον, ὅτι καὶ οἱ λόγοι αὐτοῦ ὁμοιώτατοί εἰσι τοῖς Ἐσιληνοῖς τοῖς διοιγομένοις. εἰ γὰρ ἐθέλει τις τῶν Σωκράτους ἀκούειν λόγων, φανεῖεν ἂν πάνυ γελοῖοι τὸ πρῶτον· τοιαῦτα καὶ ὀνόματα καὶ ῥήματα ἕξωθεν περιαμπέχονται, σατύρου δὴ τινα ὕβριστοῦ δορᾶν. ὄνους γὰρ κανθηλίους λέγει καὶ χαλκέας τινὰς καὶ σκυτοτόμους καὶ βυρσοδέψας, καὶ ἀεὶ διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν ταῦτα φαίνεται λέγειν, ὥστε ἄπειρος καὶ ἀνόητος ἄνθρωπος πᾶς ἂν τῶν λόγων καταγελάσειεν. διοιγομένους δὲ ἰδὼν αὖ τις καὶ ἐντὸς αὐτῶν γιγνόμενος πρῶτον μὲν νοῦν ἔχοντας ἔνδον μόνους εὕρησει τῶν λόγων, ἔπειτα θειοτάτους καὶ πλεῖστ' ἀγάλματ' ἀρετῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἔχοντας καὶ ἐπὶ πλεῖστον τείνοντας, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐπὶ πᾶν ὅσον προσήκει σκοπεῖν τῷ μέλλοντι καλῶ κἀγαθῶ ἔσεσθαι.

“For there is a point I omitted when I began—how his talk most of all resembles the Silenuses that are made to open. If you chose to listen to Socrates’ discourses you would feel them at first to be quite ridiculous; on the outside they are clothed with such absurd words and phrases—all, of course, the hide of a mocking satyr. His talk is of pack-asses, smiths, cobblers, and tanners, and he seems always to be using the same terms for the same things; so that anyone inexpert and thoughtless might laugh his speeches to scorn. But when these are opened, and you obtain a fresh view of them by getting inside, first of all you will discover that they are the only speeches which have any sense in them; and secondly, that none are so divine, so rich in images of virtue, so largely—nay, so completely—intent on all things proper for the study of such as would attain both grace and worth.

Plato, *Symposium* 221d-2a (trans. Lamb)

Words require ‘opening up’, we have to ‘get inside’ them; what is needed is careful thought and examination, not the assumption that words carry their full meaning on the surface. Among so many other things, the *Symposium* both teaches us how to read and is an invitation to do so; it is, along with everything else, a foundational text for the hermeneutic tradition.

One aspect of this lesson about reading is the narrative framing of the whole work. We are going to hear about a famous occasion in the past, one of which more than one account is in circulation. Competing narratives urgently raise the question ‘Why should we believe this one?’. Symposia were in any case occasions where free speech reigned, partly because what was said was (at least in the cultural *imaginaire*) intended as the property of the guests alone, not to be repeated to the world at large. ‘I hate a drinking-companion with a memory’ runs one soberingly wise Greek proverb. What the elaborate frame of Plato’s *Symposium* in fact suggests is that, if we ask ‘What really happened?’, we are missing the point, we have not learned to ‘get inside’

Plato; the Platonic dialogues are not historical documents, but more akin to ‘myths’ whose meaning requires interpretation and thought. Myths are normally set in the distant past; Plato’s *Symposium* is set not many years before it was written, but it exhales a palpable sense of a lost world, and anyone who knows anything about what happened to Athens and to Socrates and Alcibiades since Agathon’s dinner-party in 416 BC will not need to be told why and how that world has been lost. The only way, of course, that we can start to recover it is through serious philosophical engagement with Plato’s own dialogues, which is the closest we can get to conversation with Socrates.

Alcibiades is the model for someone who was offered the chance for that engagement.<sup>3</sup> He was with Socrates long enough and often enough to realise what such a chance would mean. He describes how Socrates’ words, which produce a gripping *ekplexis* no less than did the first music for Plato’s cicada-men in the *Phaedrus*, make him feel ashamed of his political life:

βία οὖν ὥσπερ ἀπὸ τῶν Σειρήνων ἐπισχόμενος τὰ ὄτα οἴχομαι φεύγων, ἵνα μὴ αὐτοῦ καθήμενος παρὰ Βτούτῳ καταγηράσω.

I force myself to block my ears and run away as if from the Sirens, so that I should not grow old sitting here beside [Socrates].

Plato, *Symposium* 216a

‘Growing old beside Socrates’: this is a new vision of the victims of Homer’s Sirens – after old age will come wasting and death, unless the gods grant, as some said they did to Tithonus, metamorphosis into a cicada. Alcibiades places his comparison of Socrates to a Siren in the context, first, of the difference between Socrates and other powerful speakers he has heard and, second, of the difference between the philosophical life to which Socrates beckons and the life of ‘the Athenians’ business’ (216a6) and of popular *τιμή* (216b5), that is the life of the politician/orator. The two contrasts are very closely related: both are essentially between Socratic philosophy and the political life, that contrast which is also central to both the *Gorgias* and the digression of the *Theaetetus*. Whereas, however, the words even of the very best politician have no real or lasting effect (215d2), Socrates’ words contain an irresistible and shaming force of compulsion urging one to a complete revolution of life. Unlike the words of a politician, even a Pericles, these are not words which permit of counter-arguments (216b3-4). Alcibiades’ dichotomy between, on one side, the political life and the pursuit of *τιμή* and, on the other, ‘listening to Socrates’ is one of a number of passages in Plato which seem to oppose the life of public activity and the philosophical life; the *Gorgias* is perhaps Plato’s most famous (and most robust) declaration of his own choice. The decision which Alcibiades must make is essentially the same, though rather differently expressed, as that which Callicles lays before Socrates in the *Gorgias*. What for Alcibiades was the prospect of ‘growing old beside Socrates’ is for the scornful Callicles ‘whispering in a corner with three or four lads (*μειρακίων*)’ (*Gorgias* 485d7-8). To look further ahead, Aristotle’s discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* 10 will always have pride of place in any history of this dichotomy in antiquity, but no subsequent figure perhaps so embodies both sides of

<sup>3</sup> The following paragraph is largely derived from *The Measure of Homer* (Cambridge 2018) 211-12.

the choice as does Cicero, who in *De finibus* puts into the mouth of Marcus Piso a Peripatetic discourse in which the Homeric story of the Sirens is turned into one about the innate human desire for knowledge and intellectual advancement (*De finibus* 5.48-57); what stopped men from leaving the Sirens was, in this telling of the story, the *discendi cupiditas*, ‘desire for learning’, which is characteristic of higher human ideals.

When Alcibiades is finished his encomium, Socrates’ picks up Alcibiades’ likening of him to a satyr by calling his speech a ‘a satyric and indeed silenic drama’ (222d3). As has long been recognised, Plato has indeed shaped Alcibiades’ riotous entry to Agathon’s party as the satyr-play which each tragic poet presented to follow his three tragedies in the competition of the Great Dionysia.<sup>4</sup> As the tragic poet Agathon has hosted the symposium we have been witnessing, it is only proper that we should also be treated to a satyr-play. Moreover, just as, at least later in antiquity, the satyr-play was often explained as a way of ensuring the continued presence of Dionysus in his festival after poets began to offer tragedies on non-Dionysiac subjects,<sup>5</sup> so the drunken arrival of Alcibiades quite literally brings back a Dionysus to a symposium, itself a Dionysiac rite *par excellence*, at which the god had been explicitly marginalised (176b1-e10). Alcibiades appears too with the suddenness with which the philosophical lover at the climax of his ascent will catch sight of the Form of the Beautiful (210e4 ~ 212c6); Alcibiades is as physically present as the Form is metaphysically absent. Only one Athenian satyr-play has survived to us complete, the *Cyclops* of Euripides, although we do have significant fragments of other satyr-plays by both Aeschylus and Sophocles (most notably the latter’s *Ichneutai*, ‘Trackers’), and so it is very difficult to generalise about the relationship expected between any satyr-drama and the tragedies which preceded it; nevertheless, the idea which one often meets in modern writing about the Athenian theatre, namely that satyr-plays picked up tragic themes and replayed them in a lighter, more humorous mode, might find support in Alcibiades’ speech. Alcibiades’ famous narrative of the chaste night he spent with Socrates, a night on which he did catch a fleeting glimpse of the ‘divine and golden and entirely beautiful and wondrous’ images inside Socrates (216e-17a), clearly replays in some way Diotima’s account (quoted above) of the ineffable beauty visible at the end of the erotic ascent. Like the Form of the Beautiful, Socrates too never changes – it is those around him who do.

Alcibiades did change, but not enough. The apologetic aspect of Plato’s *Symposium* is clear, though understated. Socrates cannot be held responsible for the damage that Alcibiades was perceived to have done to the Athenian democracy, though there can be little doubt that prejudice against him on precisely those grounds is part of the background to his trial and execution. We are not told how and when Alcibiades left the symposium, but where he was going (in both senses) is not hard to guess. The Platonic Alcibiades himself is made to say that Socrates’ words force him to admit that ‘though I myself lack a great deal, I neglect myself and do the Athenians’ business’ (216a). It is very hard, I think, here not to be reminded of a famous passage

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<sup>4</sup> See especially F. Sheffield, ‘Alcibiades’ speech: a satyric drama’ *Greece and Rome* 48 (2001) 193-209 and M.D. Usher, ‘Satyr play in Plato’s *Symposium*’ *American Journal of Philology* 123 (2002) 205-28.

<sup>5</sup> For helpful discussion of the sources and full bibliography cf. R. Laemmle, *Poetik des Satyrspiels* (Heidelberg 2013) 99-107.

in Plato's *Apology* in which Socrates says that, for as long as he is alive in Athens, he will just keep on doing what he has always been doing:

... εἰ οὖν με, ὅπερ εἶπον, ἐπὶ τούτοις ἀφίοιτε, εἵπομι' ἂν ὑμῖν ὅτι “Ἐγὼ ὑμᾶς, ὧ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, ἀσπάζομαι μὲν καὶ φιλῶ, πείσομαι δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ θεῷ ἢ ὑμῖν, καὶ ἕωσπερ ἂν ἐμπνέω καὶ οἷός τε ὦ, οὐ μὴ παύσωμαι φιλοσοφῶν καὶ ὑμῖν παρακελευόμενός τε καὶ ἐνδεικνύμενος ὅτῳ ἂν ἀεὶ ἐντυγχάνω ὑμῶν, λέγων οἷάπερ εἶωθα, ὅτι ὦ ἄριστε ἀνδρῶν, Ἀθηναῖος ὢν, πόλεως τῆς μεγίστης καὶ εὐδοκιμωτάτης εἰς σοφίαν καὶ ἰσχύν, χρημάτων μὲν οὐκ αἰσχύνῃ ἐπιμελούμενος ὅπως σοὶ ἔσται ὡς πλείστα, καὶ δόξης καὶ τιμῆς, φρονήσεως δὲ καὶ ἀληθείας καὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς βελτίστη ἔσται οὐκ ἐπιμελῆ οὐδὲ φροντίζεις;” καὶ ἐάν τις ὑμῶν ἀμφισβητήσῃ καὶ φῆ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι, οὐκ εὐθὺς ἀφήσω αὐτὸν οὐδ' ἄπειμι, ἀλλ' ἐρήσομαι αὐτὸν καὶ ἐξετάσω καὶ ἐλέγξω, καὶ ἐάν μοι μὴ δοκῆ κεκτηῖσθαι ἀρετὴν, φάναί δέ, ὄνειδιῶ ὅτι τὰ πλείστου ἄξια περὶ ἐλαχίστου ποιεῖται, τὰ δὲ φαυλότερα περὶ πλείονος. ταῦτα καὶ νεωτέρῳ καὶ πρεσβυτέρῳ ὅτῳ ἂν ἐντυγχάνω ποιήσω, καὶ ξένῳ καὶ ἀστῶ, μᾶλλον δὲ τοῖς ἀστοῖς, ὅσῳ μου ἐγγυτέρῳ ἔστὲ γένει. ταῦτα γὰρ κελεύει ὁ θεός, εὖ ἴστε, καὶ ἐγὼ οἶομαι οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μεῖζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν. οὐδέν γὰρ ἄλλο πράττων ἐγὼ περιέρχομαι ἢ πείθων ὑμῶν καὶ νεωτέρους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους μήτε σωμάτων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι μήτε χρημάτων πρότερον μηδὲ οὕτω σφόδρα ὡς τῆς ψυχῆς ὅπως ὡς ἀρίστη ἔσται ...

... if you should let me go on this condition which I have mentioned, I should say to you, “Men of Athens, I respect and love you, but I shall obey the god rather than you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy or stop exhorting you and pointing out the truth to any one of you whom I may meet, saying in my accustomed way: “Most excellent man, are you who are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power, not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honour, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul?” And if any of you argues the point, and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once, nor shall I go away, but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue, but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth. This I shall do to whomever I meet, young and old, foreigner and citizen, but most to the citizens, inasmuch as you are more nearly related to me. For know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god. For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls ...

Plato, *Apology* 29d1-30b2 (trans. Fowler)

Caring for ‘the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honour’ applies as much to Alcibiades as to any Athenian citizen. If, however, Alcibiades is a special case of the random Athenian male citizen to whom Socrates addresses his protreptic in the *Apology*, then his desertion, his turn to the life of politics rather than the life of philosophy, cost Socrates very dear indeed, or would to most people have appeared so

to do. One exception might be Socrates himself, for whom death is indeed a step into the unknown, but perhaps a step towards something better.

Plato's *Symposium* is full of 'might have beens', of roads not taken, and possibilities glimpsed but then closed off. It is not, however, just a work of sad nostalgia. Indeed, it is likely to have been a kind of foundational model text for symposia in Plato's fourth-century Academy, one to be imitated in spirit (at the very least), just as we know that it was later in antiquity. At the end Socrates is glimpsed attempting to convince Agathon and Aristophanes, the tragic poet and the comic poet, that

τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμωδίαν καὶ τραγωδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέχνη  
τραγωδοποιὸν ὄντα καὶ κωμωδοποιὸν εἶναι

it belonged to the same man to know how to compose comedy and tragedy and that the person who was by *technē* a tragic poet was also a comic poet

Plato, *Symposium* 223d

The passage has been subject to very many different modern interpretations – it is common to see Plato nudging us towards the view that there is indeed a literary form, Platonic dialogue, which combines the best of tragedy (and satyr-play) and comedy – but what sticks most in the mind is the picture of the philosophical life, a life of commitment to discussion and argument even after a long night on the wine. There is, I hope, a lesson for all of us there.