The Moral of the Story: on Fables and Philosophy in Plato’s *Symposium*

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Scholars have puzzled over the fact that Plato’s criticisms of poetry are themselves contained in mimetic works. This paper sheds light on that phenomenon by examining an analogous one. The *Symposium* contains one fable (told by Aristophanes) which is criticised by means of another (told by Diotima) which is thought to represent Plato’s own view. Diotima’s fable, however, is suspended within a larger narrative that invites us to examine and question it. The *Symposium* thus affords opportunity to observe Plato’s criticisms of a genre and the qualifications that must be made regarding his own use of it. In particular, the *Symposium* emphasises that stories have no automatic claim to authority, whether they are told by a poet, or a priest or a philosopher. The upshot for Plato’s dialogues is that they remain always a starting point for philosophy: they are neither specimens of philosophical poetry nor philosophy *per se*.

I. Greek Fables and Their Significance for Plato

Fables belonged to Greek cultural heritage from pre-literate times. As Plato informs us, they were told by mothers and nurses as part of traditional upbringing (*Republic* 377a). From about the sixth century BCE, fables entered the canon of Greek literature, where they were associated with the legendary figure of Aesop. These Aesopic “conventional” fables, which were restricted to simple language, quotidian elements, and a straightforward moral, belonged to the genre of mimetic prose, considered stylistically by ancient critics to have been a low artform (Kurke, 2006:8; Rothwell, 1995:236). Nevertheless, the sort of *muthoi* on which they were based had already been elevated to poetic status in Homer (*Odyssey* 14.457–522) and Hesiod (*Works and Days* 202–211), and fable-telling found its way into the works of Aristophanes (*Wasps, Frogs*) and Sophocles (*Ajax* 1142–62). According to Plato, Socrates himself was busy setting Aesop’s fables to verse in his last days (*Phaedo* 60c). Thus, we may say that fables belonged to Greek poetics in general, at least insofar as their content...
is concerned. That Plato treated them so is clear from the fact that he bundles fables and poetry together in his criticism of poetry in Republic II.

Fables also had an important didactic function in Greek society. They served as preliminary to education in poetry, in which teachers would set before their students “stories praising and extolling the good men of yore” (Plato, Protagoras 326a1–4).¹ We know, too, that from at least the fifth century BCE, fables continued to be used in education well after students had learned their letters. Within the sophistic movement, thinkers like Protagoras, Prodicus and Antiphon all used fables to adumbrate philosophical lessons (Kurke, 2011: chapter 8). Often these “sophistic” fables were stylistically and thematically complex, and provided opportunity for philosophical reflection. Plato’s dialogues contain examples of teachers using fables to adumbrate a philosophical point (Protagoras 320c–328d, Symposium 203b–212c, Statesman 268d–275d), and some scholars have argued that when Plato’s Socrates presents fables (for example at Phaedo 60c), he does so with the same purpose.²

Given the way that Socrates and others within the frame of Plato’s dialogues use narrative, it is worth remembering that Plato’s dialogues were themselves species of mimetic prose (a point recognised by Aristotle, Poetics 1447b9–13, and emphasised by Kurke, 2006:7–12). It is plausible that the didactic function of mimetic prose remained important to Plato throughout his career. In that case, the more we know of Plato’s views about fables, both in their conventional and later sophistic uses, the better we can understand his adaptation of mimetic prose to his own philosophy.

There is no place in the dialogues where Plato presents a theory about the proper construction and purpose of fables, but there is an excellent opportunity to glimpse his view. The Symposium presents both a “conventional” fable (Aristophanes’ fable of the circle-men, 182c–192e) and a “sophistic” fable (Diotima’s fable about the birth of Love, 202e–204c). Aristophanes’ fable is more or less self-contained, and the lesson we should draw from it is obvious. Diotima’s fable is enigmatic, hence it requires exegesis. This is recounted by Socrates in a synopsis of what Diotima taught him over the course of many lessons (201d, 206b, 207a, 212b). In a striking anachronism, Diotima’s exegesis explicitly refers to the views contained in Aristophanes’ fable (205d–206a; cf. 212c). In fact, it appears that Diotima’s fable is “intended to counter and trump Aristophanes’ fable point by point” (Kurke, 2011:308). Thus by examining the two fables together we can see an implicit criticism of one in terms of the other.

But that is not the end of the story. There is a third fable in the Symposium, whose character as fable has gone unnoticed by commentators. That is the story that Socrates tells about Diotima and his lessons with her once upon a time. Although she is presented in a realistic way, Diotima appears to be an invented character.³ She is

¹ All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.
² See Gabor Betegh’s account of Socrates’ fable about Pleasure and Pain in Phaedo 60c (Betegh, 2009), and G. R. F. Ferrari’s account of the fable of the cicadas in Phaedrus 259b–d (Ferrari, 1987).
³ Dover’s suspicion is palpable: “We do not know whether Diotima is real or fictitious and it does not
completely unknown to history, despite Socrates’ claim that she brought about a ten
year postponement of plague at Athens (201d3–5), and despite the notoriety that we
would expect to accompany a female “itinerant charismatic” (Burkert, 1987:43) who
taught erotics professionally at Athens in the fifth century. Moreover, even if Diotima
was a real person, the speeches that Socrates puts into her mouth are invented. As if by
magic, they refer to one after another of the symposiasts’ views. She refers specifically
to Aristophanes’ view that lovers are people who are looking for their other halves
(205d–e). And in the heart of her revelations about love she professes a metaphysical
doctrine so reminiscent of the Platonic theory of forms that it cannot credibly be
assigned to any earlier philosopher. Diotima, as she appears in the
Symposium, is a
creature of fantasy; the story Socrates tells about her, however true or false its content
might be, is a fabrication.

Accordingly, we should take special note of the remarks Socrates makes at the
conclusion of his speech. There he says, not that he mastered Diotima’s teachings, but
that he was “persuaded” (pepeismai) by them (212b1–2), and immediately adds that,
being persuaded, he tries to persuade others that Love will enable, encourage and
help them to attain virtue (212b2–9). This sort of pragmatic coda is typical of those
offered by Socrates after presenting a muthos, and strongly suggests we should regard
the whole passage (201b–212c) as a story whose function in the dialogue requires
interpretation. In particular, we must wonder about the implications of a story in
which the main character uses a story to criticise another story.

In what follows I discuss the three fables in the Symposium, with a view towards
understanding what they show us about Plato’s views on narrative in general, and what
the implications of those views are for how to read the dialogues. To avoid ambiguity,

much matter, considering the extreme improbability that even if she really existed she entertained the
Platonic theory of ideas in any form” (1980:137). Dover then provides an explanation for the construc-
tion of Diotima’s character and name on the assumption that she is fictitious. In a recent paper, Nancy
Evans associates Diotima with Demeter and suggests that the name “Diotima” is “not without heavy
irony for Plato’s original audience” (Evans, 2006:8).

4 Erotics is explicitly identified as the subject matter of Diotima’s teaching at 201d5 (kai eme ta erōtika
edidaxen), and the label is oft-repeated in Socrates’ speech (207c3, 207c6, 209e5, 210e2, 211c1, 212b6).
The suggestion that Diotima provided professional education in erotics is supported by her remark
about Socrates becoming “frightfully clever” (deinos, 207c3; cf. 193e5) as a result of her teaching, and
by Socrates’ explicit comparison of Diotima to a sophist at 208c1. For the notoriety that such teaching
would attract at Athens, compare the story of Theodote in Xenophon, Memorabilia III.11.

5 Her references to Alcestis and Achilles (208d) recall the speech of Phaedrus (179–180). Her descrip-
tion of the dual nature of Eros (204b) recalls Pausanius’ account of the two Aphrodites (180d–e). Her
comprehensive treatment of all the phenomena of love under “poetics”, is reminiscent of Eryximachus’
treatment of all the phenomena of love under the art of medicine. Her fable about the birth of Eros
responds to Aristophanes’ fable. And it “just so happens” that Socrates had been talking to Diotima
about exactly the things he was talking to Agathon about (201e4). For a review of the way that Diotima’s
teachings systematically take up the views of the symposiasts, see Markus, 1971.

6 See Gorgias 526d, Meno 81d (cf. 86b), Phaedo 114d, Republic 621b.

7 Whether Diotima “speaks for Plato” (White, 2004:366n2) or not (Osborne, 1994:56–57) is not the issue.
The issue is what is expected of a reader upon encountering these assertions in a fabricated story.
I distinguish between “Diotima’s fable” and “the fable of Diotima” in the following way: when considering what Diotima says, within the frame of her discourse, I will speak of “Diotima’s fable”; when considering, at one remove, Socrates’ narration of his encounter with Diotima, I use the term “fable of Diotima”.

The fable of Diotima has similarities to both Aristophanes’ fable and Diotima’s fable. Like Aristophanes’ fable it is self-contained. Socrates does not tell us how to read it. But like Diotima’s fable the moral of the story is not obvious. The most important implication this has for us is that we must examine it. The philosophical work is left for us, and that reminds us that we must examine all the speeches in the Symposium. This is a point the other symposiasts, and many readers of the Symposium fail to appreciate. Although the symposiasts are not impartial to the speeches, they remain indifferent to the truth (Symposium 198e; cf. Wohlmann 1992:19). Socrates’ fable of Diotima reminds us that we cannot remain indifferent to truth even when the story is presented with a claim to authority, such as divine inspiration or technical expertise. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us examine Aristophanes’ fable first.

II. Aristophanes’ Fable, Symposium 189c–192e

Aristophanes tells a tale so simple and attractive that it has appeared to many as the most persuasive view in the Symposium. Yet if we focus only on the basic plot of lovers’ search for their “other halves”, we will miss much of Plato’s criticism of the conventional fable. As with most conventional fables, the plot is an ancient one (a point Plato makes clear by reference to the old lovers’ folly of using of tallies to “recognise” each other, 191d3–5). What matters more is how the story is told, by whom, and for what reason. But let us first remind ourselves of the details.

According to Aristophanes, human beings were once very different than they are now. They were double-beings, with two faces, four arms, and four legs. There were three varieties: double-male, double-female, and hermaphrodite. As they were twice the size of modern humans, they were quicker and more powerful. They could move about with ease simply by extending their arms and legs and rolling “like acrobats turning cartwheels” (190a6). But they had “big ideas” (190b6), and in their arrogance they set upon the gods.

In order to save them from themselves, Zeus cut them in half—“just as people chop sorb-apples when they are going to preserve them, or just as they slice eggs with a hair” (190d7–e2) — thereby achieving the double purpose of weakening them and making them more numerous (so there would be more sacrifices). He bid Apollo to turn their heads around, so that seeing their wounds they might become more orderly. And then he asked Apollo to close up the incisions, which he did by pulling the skin

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over the wounds and drawing it together “like a draw-string bag” (190e7–8) at the navel. After that, humans walked on two legs, as they do now. And Zeus warned that if they continued in wantonness, he would split them again.

As a consequence of the division, each of the two-legged beings yearned for its other half. But because they could not achieve union, they simply embraced one another and would not let go. And so they were dying. Zeus took pity on them and moved their genitals to the front, so that “if a man happened upon a woman, they would copulate and reproduce, whereas if a man happened upon another man, he might at least get fulfilment from conjugation, take a rest, and return to business” (191c6–7).

Thus, each of us is just a “tally” (191d4) of a whole person, always seeking the one who tallies with us. Whenever two people meet their other half they do not want to be separated for a moment. They “cannot say” (192c3, d1) what they want from one another; they only divine it darkly and refer to it in riddles. Nevertheless, our original nature is responsible for the desire to be whole. So we must always be mindful of the “original sin” (tēn adikian, 193a2), and fear the gods, lest we be split again. Aristophanes closes his remarkable speech with an important concession. It is difficult to find the perfect match. As things stand now, we should aim for the next best thing, which is simply to find someone with a nature congenial to our own (193c5–8).

Dover long ago observed (1980:113), that Aristophanes’ story has all the elements of a conventional fable. Recently, Leslie Kurke has shown this in much greater detail (2011:310–312). She points out that the style of Aristophanes’ fable is simple, linear, and artless, and the content “teems with common, quotidian stuff in vivid images drawn from everyday life” (2011:310). Thus, we have the cartwheels, the sorb-apples and the boiled eggs, the draw-string bags, the tallies, and so on. It is important to note, however, the special use of the conventional fable by a comic poet. In fact, Plato goes out of his way to emphasise this point, by having Aristophanes acknowledge his muse (189b7) at the start of his speech.9 Whereas conventional fables expressed the tacitly subversive perspective of the lower classes (Rothwell, 1995:234–5), Aristophanes’ fable reinforces the overall conservative message of Old Comedy. Thus, it stresses the consequences of hubris, the virtue of simple piety, and the conventional moral order of gods and men.

Aristophanes’ fable goes a step further by laying the blame for our condition at the door of human ingenuity. It was “big ideas” (phrōnēmata megalā, 190b6) that brought about our downfall. Apart from this single instance, Aristophanes locates all deliberation and planning with the gods. By contrast the ordinary activities of the circle-men are mindless and purposeless: they go about turning cartwheels like circus performers. Once filleted, the appropriate activities of humans include sacrificing,
copulating, and working — not thinking. The responsibility for their preservation belongs with Zeus, not with them.

Thus, there is a gulf between gods and mortals that must at all times be respected. Rationality lies on the gods’ side of the divide, as even Aristophanes’ account of love shows. On his view, love is an irrational longing for a particular “other half”. It is irrational in two ways. First, it cannot be attained. Zeus’ cut is final. Even the circle-men cannot be put back together; they enjoy at best the temporary satisfaction of coitus. Second, the search is impossible. The idea of restoration may have made some sense for the circle-men, but it makes no sense for the generations of humans who came after. There literally is no particular other half of them. They simply imprint on a particular other, who, if they are lucky, is “the next best thing” (193c7) and “congenial to [their] nature” (193c8). Plato foregrounds the irrationality of love in Aristophanes’ fable by making lovers unable to say what they want from each other (192c3, d1). Their longing is a riddle without resolution.

The consequences of Aristophanes’ fable for reason are targeted by Diotima, who introduces a new class of beings, daimones, to fill the gaps between humans and gods. On her account, Love is one of these beings, who stands midway between ignorance and wisdom: “for wisdom pertains to the most beautiful things, and Love is love of the beautiful; therefore Love is a lover of wisdom, and love of wisdom lies halfway between wisdom and ignorance” (204b2–5). This syllogism, which identifies wisdom as the object of Love, allows Diotima to underscore the importance of reason to human beings. But all is not what it seems in the speech of Diotima, and to see that, we must now examine her discourse in more detail.

III. Diotima’s Fable, Symposium 202e–204c

We saw that Aristophanes’ fable is conventional in its form and conservative in its message. We shall now consider specifically how Diotima’s fable responds to it. It is important to foreshadow, however, that the speech within which Diotima’s fable is contained — Socrates’ speech — is presented in response to Agathon. In the next section we will see how Socrates’ fable of Diotima achieves this response, and how this matters for our interpretation of the Symposium. But for the moment let us remain within the frame and remind ourselves what Diotima says about Love.

She begins by describing the daimones. They are intermediate between men and gods, and “being in the midst of both, they suffuse the space completely, so that the whole is bound together, itself to itself” (202e6–7). When Diotima says that Love is one of the daimones, Socrates asks who his parents were.10 “That’s rather long to set out in detail,” she says (203b1), but she tells him anyway. It happens that when

10 This is probably an intentional allusion to the issue about the parentage of Love raised by Phaedrus (178a) and then contradicted implicitly by Pausanias (180d) and directly by Agathon (195b). Once again, it highlights the artificiality of Socrates’ whole story.
Aphrodite was born and the gods were feasting, Need came begging at the door. Meanwhile, Resource, who was drunk from nectar, had fallen asleep in the garden, and Need, considering her own resourcelessness, devised a scheme to get a child by him. So she lay with him and conceived Love. Thus Love, who was begotten on the day of Aphrodite’s birth, attends Aphrodite, and “by nature loves the beautiful, since Aphrodite is beautiful” (203c3–4).

Love in Diotima’s fable is a sort of half-breed, possessing some of the traits of his father and suffering some of the fate of his mother. As a child of Need, he is “always needy” (203c6). He lacks beauty and delicacy; rather he is “hard, withered, barefoot and homeless, always sleeping on the ground beneath the stars, in doorways or in the streets” (203c7–d2). Then again, he has his father’s cunning for [obtaining] beautiful and good things; he is “brave, bold, eager, and full of schemes; a mighty (deinos) hunter, both craving and capable of ingenuity, a lover of wisdom throughout life, a fearsome (deinos) wizard, sorcerer and sophist” (203d4–8). Love is neither mortal nor immortal, he is never completely at a loss or completely satisfied, he is “midway” (203e5) between wisdom and ignorance.

We can already see some striking differences between Diotima’s fable and Aristophanes’ Aristophanes’ world is one of persistent division. There is the division between gods and men, which cuts the whole world in half. Then there are pervasive images of division: half-men and women, chopped sorb-apples, sliced eggs, broken tallies, halved flatfish, profile bas-relief images, and so on. The isolated half (indicated by the term hemisui), is fundamental in Aristophanes’ story.\textsuperscript{11} By contrast, Diotima’s story emphasises persistent connection. The concept of an intermediate (indicated by the term metaxu) provides for connection between complementary opposites.\textsuperscript{12} The daimones, including Love, are such intermediates. As if to emphasise the contrast with Aristophanes, Diotima says that intermediates are “half-way between” the extremes (en mesoi, 202e6, 204e5). Whereas Aristophanes’ fable merely dreams of reunification, that goal is already realised in Diotima’s metaphysics.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, it is difficult to see Diotima’s claim that “the whole is bound together, itself to itself” (202e6–7) as anything but a response to Aristophanes’ fancy that Hephaestus could (but doesn’t) weld two lovers together for all time (192d–e).

There is also an obvious difference between the way the two fables handle thinking. Whereas Aristophanes placed thinking on the side of the gods, and scorned humans for having big ideas, Diotima goes out of her way to emphasise that the gods simply are wise (204a), while planning, scheming, thinking, and philosophising belong to

\textsuperscript{11} See 190e3, 191a6, 191b2, 191b4, 192b6.
\textsuperscript{12} In the build-up to her story Diotima uses metaxu five times: 202a3, 202a9, 202b5, 202d11, 202e1. She then returns to it at 204b1, 204b5.
\textsuperscript{13} This contrast is marked by the use of optative, subjunctive and future conditionals in Aristophanes’ speech (192d–e, 193d; all expressing unreality) and by the perfect infinitive sundekelthai in Diotima’s speech (203e7; expressing a present state — the “bound-together” nature of the whole — resulting from completed action).
Love (203d). It is in connection with this difference that the most explicit contrast between the two fables is drawn. For planning is impossible without a goal, and Aristophanes’ lovers cannot say what they want. By contrast Love, in Diotima’s fable, seeks beauty, wisdom and goodness (203c4, 203d4–5, 204b2–5). Thus, Diotima can say in closing her story: “Some tell a tale that lovers are seeking their own half. But my story says that a lover [seeks] neither half nor whole unless in some way it happens to be good” (205d10–e3).

There appears ample evidence, then, for treating Diotima’s fable as a response to Aristophanes. But what are we to make of that? Is Diotima’s fable just Plato’s correction of an Aristophanic hypothesis? To see why we should not make that inference, we need to consider the literary dimension of Diotima’s fable. Leslie Kurke has made a careful study of the style and development of Diotima’s speech (2011:310–322). She concludes that Diotima’s fable belongs to the genre of “Sophistic fables” along with Prodicus’ Choice of Heracles, Antiphon’s On Concord, and the fable told by Protagoras in Plato’s Protagoras. She notes that all of these have a polished, rhetorical style, borrow vocabulary from technical or poetic sources, have complex sentence structures and carefully balanced clauses, and make abundant explanatory claims. In all of these ways, Diotima’s fable is like a Sophistic fable, and unlike the humbler Aristophanic one.

There is further evidence in the way Diotima’s fable develops. Whereas conventional fables were entirely self-contained, many Sophists deployed fables in a larger educational context, placing them at the beginning of a display piece which then developed and explained the ideas and implications of the fable in a makrologia or “long speech”. Diotima’s fable is like this too: it is, she says, “rather long to set out in detail” (makroteron ... diēgēsasthai, 203b1). The “detail” can hardly refer just to the story of Love’s birth, which is only eleven lines; it must include the whole exegesis that follows.

Finally there is evidence, which Plato carefully placed in the text, that Diotima was a sophist herself. Even when introducing her, Socrates calls her “wise in matters of love and many other things” (201d3), a remark that recalls the polymathic wisdom of sophists. She is a foreigner (201d2, e3), a teacher (201d5; 207a5, c6) and a technician. Like the daimones she later describes, she possesses “the art (technē) of divination, the priestly arts, and those concerning sacrifices, incantations, oracles and sorcery” (202e8–203a1). Through such skill she managed to suspend the onset of plague at Athens for ten years (201d3–5), for “the one who is wise about such things is divine (daimonios) with a wisdom superior to that of the manual and banausic arts” (203a4–6). Such a person would be, like Resource in Diotima’s own fable, “a fearsome (deinos) wizard, sorcerer and sophist” (203d4–8).14

Given all this, it should come as no surprise, and need no explanation, that Socrates says Diotima answered him “just like a consummate sophist” (208c1). What needs explanation is Plato’s motive in presenting a sophistic fable, in a sophistic manner, in

14 Note the similar terminology in each context — goēteian, 203a1 and goês, 203d8 — and cf. Dover (1980:140).
what is usually taken to be the philosophical core of the dialogue. That explanation is forthcoming only when we examine the function of Socrates’ whole speech, which includes his fable of Diotima.

IV. Socrates’ Speech, Including the Fable of Diotima.  
*Symposium* 198b–212c

The beginning of our explanation lies, not with Aristophanes, but with Agathon. Agathon had praised Love as the youngest, loveliest, daintiest, softest, most temperate, most manly, most just, wisest, most creative and best of all the gods (195b–197e). This speech, which bristles with superlatives and is supported by the flimsiest of justifications, has been judged by most commentators to be vacuous.15 Within the dialogue, Socrates certainly takes it that way. He praises it, ironically, as “comprehensively beautiful” (198b3), but he singles out “the beauty of diction” (198b4–5), which reminded him so much of the rhetorician Gorgias that he feared Agathon would “send the terrifying Gorgian head” (198c3–4) upon him and strike him stone dumb. He then rebukes Agathon (and all the symposiasts) for showing no concern for truth, concluding, “I won’t praise [Love] in this way, for I wouldn’t be able, but all the same I want to tell the truth [about Love] in my own way, not yours” (199a7–b2).

Socrates’ claim that he “wouldn’t be able” to praise Love as the others have is ironic. As in other dialogues, he gives a speech that is rhetorically superior to Agathon’s in every way.16 What is more, he presents it in a way that is recognisably rhetorical, since Diotima’s fable and its subsequent exegesis adopt the genre of sophistic fable. In fact, Socrates is able to escape the charge of contradicting himself about how he will speak only by the rhetorical device of putting his speech in the mouth of someone else—the sophist Diotima.

Plato adds a flourish of his own to Socrates’ rhetorical *tour de force*. After Socrates finishes speaking, Alcibiades arrives, and crowns Agathon’s head with ribbons. When he notices Socrates, he says to Agathon, “return [some] of the ribbons, that I might crown the [head] of this [sc. Socrates] with them, the wondrous head” (213e1–2). I translate these lines quite literally, to show how Plato put the phrase *tēn thaumastēn kephalēn* (“the wondrous head”) in emphatic position, at the end of the clause. Moreover (and what is not seen in most translations), by moving the phrase to the end, it becomes the grammatical subject of the verb *memphētai* in the next line: “... and so [so

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16 For another instance where Socrates’ feigns incapability, only to surpass expectation see *Protagoras* 334c, followed by Socrates’ long speech from 342a–347a. For an occasion on which Socrates makes highly rhetorical speeches in competition with a previous speech see *Phaedrus* 237a ff., 243a ff. For an occasion on which Socrates claims he will not speak in rhetorical fashion but then does, see *Apol.* 17b followed by the sublime speeches in his defense. That Socrates is capable of speaking at length in highly rhetorical fashion see *Ion* 533c ff., *Gorgias* 523a ff.
that] *it* [sc. the wondrous head] does not *blame* me that I crowned *you*" (*kai* [*hina*] *mē* moi memphētai hoti se men anedēsa, 213e3). This image of a talking head is surely meant to recall the “Gorgian” head of Agathon, which Socrates feared might strike him dumb. Yet by his own admission Agathon never inhibited anyone, not even his slaves (175b6–7), while Socrates, as Alcibiades says, “with mere words" (215c7) “strikes us dumb and binds us fast” (215d5–6).

It makes sense to treat these remarks of Alcibiades’ as, among other things, a warning not to be struck dumb by the wondrous head of Socrates. When we look at Socrates’ speech, we can see it as two responses in one. One response is contained in Diotima’s fable. By specifically challenging and undermining the content of Aristophanes’ fable, Diotima engages in a contest of one-upmanship. Furthermore, by presenting her own fable in a distinctively fifth century form, Diotima usurps the older conventional fable genre. In these ways Diotima’s fable *is* seen to “trump” Aristophanes’ (though whether it ultimately “wins” is another question, cf. 212c). A second response is contained in Socrates’ fable of Diotima. This masterful display of rhetoric, which disguises itself as something other than rhetoric, is a response to Agathon. Like the response to Aristophanes, it pays Agathon back in kind. It trumps Agathon’s speech to such an extent that Alcibiades removes some of the ribbons he placed on Agathon’s head and replaces them on Socrates’, claiming “*he* [Socrates] is victorious in words over all mankind” (213e3–4).

It might be said, however, that whereas Agathon’s speech was vacuous, Socrates’ fable of Diotima is philosophically substantial. After all, it contains a theory about human motivation, a theology of gods, daimones, and mortals, and a metaphysics of transcendent reality. Closer inspection reveals, however, that “Diotima has not offered us good grounds for believing any of her psychological, religious and metaphysical assertions” (Dover, 1980:159). Indeed, there is considerable sleight of hand in her responses to the fundamental question, “What does Love want?”. At one point it is wisdom (204b), at another possession of the good (206a); then again it is procreation (206b), immortality (207a), or a vision of the beautiful itself (211d). Clearly these cannot all be interchangeable. If the fable of Diotima contains more assertions than Agathon’s speech does, it is no less dogmatic.

The difference is that the fable of Diotima is not presented dogmatically, as Aristophanes’ fable and Diotima’s fable were. Aristophanes provided the moral of his story: fear the gods and hope that Love may help us. Diotima provided an exegesis to explain the moral of her story, but the exegesis, brilliant as it is, remains confusing and difficult to follow (206b, 207c). Only the most capable of imitates can understand it (209c, 210e). Although Socrates claims that he *did* understand — a claim which we shall presently expose as impossible to read — he never says he expected his fellow symposiasts, who are less capable and less keen than he is (cf. 204a3–4), to understand Diotima’s highest mysteries. He presented the fable of Diotima to persuade others that Love (i.e. philosophy) will enable, encourage and help them to attain virtue (212b2–9). This is Socrates’ familiar exhortation to practice philosophy.
Philosophy is a practice hardly anyone at Agathon's symposium engages in. Even Socrates hardly does so. He attends the dinner party having bathed and put on shoes, two things he rarely did (174a2–3). In doing so, he adopts an appearance unlike that of the philosopher — Love — who goes about barefoot and sleeps on the earth. For most of the night he retains that unphilosophical appearance. For two brief moments before his speech he slips back into typical philosophical mode. The first is at 194a–d, when he starts to question Agathon about how one should act in front of wise or ignorant people. On that occasion he is stopped by Phaedrus, who remarks that the questions will never end if they let Socrates continue. The second time is from 199c–201d, when Socrates briefly interrogates Agathon about his claim that Love is a beautiful god. That elenchus is cut short by Socrates himself, in order to present the fable of Diotima.

Socrates not only enforces a ban on his own philosophising, he enforces a ban on his usual profession of ignorance. Near the beginning of the dialogue he boldly asserts that he understands ta erōtika (177d7–8). Later, first Eryximachus and then Socrates repeat this claim (193e4–5, 198d1–3). Socrates then says that what Diotima taught him was ta erōtika (201d5), and Diotima refers to ta erōtika several times as the subject matter of Socrates' lessons (207c3, 207c7, 209e5, 210e2, 211c1). Socrates concludes by saying that as a result of Diotima's teaching, he honours ta erōtika above all things (212b6). The conclusion seems inescapable: Socrates has understood Diotima's teachings, and beheld the beautiful itself.

Yet perhaps the taste of philosophy in Socrates' two lapses is enough to make us pay attention to a contradiction in his account. Recall that Love, in Diotima's fable, is a philosopher. He is a seeker of wisdom "throughout all of life" (203d7). Although he is cunning (203d4) and ingenious (203d6), he remains always in need (203c6) and never completely satisfied (203e4–5). The gods alone are wise; Love, being a daimon, is always between wisdom and ignorance. Humans, as inferior to daimones, must remain even further away from wisdom. If Socrates has really learned all there is to know about love from Diotima, then what he relates in the story must be true. But if the story is true, then neither he nor Diotima could understand the highest mysteries, since those truths lie beyond the capability of human beings. Socrates' claim to understand ta erōtika is unproven; his evidence is self-falsifying. But why has he made such a point of asserting the claim in the first place?

V. The Moral of the Story

The answer has to do with the supposed authority of one who knows. Both Aristophanes and Agathon repose in the traditional view that poetic authority results from the inspiration of a god or a Muse.17 On this view, poets are authoritative because

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17 Agathon explicitly refers to the divine inspiration of the poet (196d6–e6, cf. 197c3), while Aristophanes reminds his audience that being funny "comes with the territory of our Muse" (189b6–7). Both are responding to Eryximachus, who had appealed to the authority of his own technē, the art of medicine (186a–187a).
they are “representatives of the gods” (cf. hoi de poïētai ouden all' ē hermēnēs eisin tôn theôn, Ion 534e4–5). Socrates presents himself (superficially) as having a similar claim to authority: he has received instruction from Diotima, who was versed in the priestly arts through contact with daimones, who are representatives of the gods (cf. hermēneuon ... ta para theōn, Symposium 202e3–4). In fact, Socrates makes considerable effort to present himself as superior to the poets on poetic terms. He addresses both Aristophanes and Agathon using literary forms familiar to them. He presents a fable (Diotima’s fable) that surpasses Aristophanes’ fable in form and content. And he presents another narrative (the fable of Diotima) which implies that Agathon’s skill with “words and phrases” (198b5) belongs to a narrow conception of poetry as “music and meter” (205c6).

In terms of his own story, Socrates appears to be a better kind of poet. For Diotima says that poetry in its widest sense includes “whatever is responsible for bringing anything from not being to being” (205b8–c2), and Love — a wizened, homely, barefoot philosopher reminiscent of Socrates (203c7–d4, 204b4) — is characterised as a poet in this sense. He longs to “beget in the presence of the beautiful” (206b7–8), where “he will beget not semblances of virtue” (212a3–4) — which is what Socrates accused the other symposiasts of doing in their sort of eulogy — but genuine virtue, because he does not touch semblances but rather, truth. Thus, a philosopher who brings genuinely beautiful things into being would be a poet in the truest sense.

All this belongs to the tactic of undermining the authority of the other poets. But there is a twist, because Socrates’ own claim to authority is impossible. At one level, then, Socrates competes directly with Aristophanes and Agathon. He assumes the appearance of an authoritative poet in order to present the story of the only sort of poetry that could genuinely represent the beautiful. On closer inspection, however, his fable of Diotima turns out to be a beautiful lie. Thus, at another level, Socrates is not the enlightened philosopher-poet he appears to be. The vision of the beautiful itself exceeds even his capability. This sting in the tail has important consequences for the Symposium. It implies that no simple claim to authority is a sufficient guarantee of a story: not that of a comic poet, nor that of a tragic poet, nor that of a storytelling priestess, nor even that of a philosopher-poet. Fables are not to be believed simply because of their provenance. Even a fable plus exegesis is inadequate if the exegesis rests solely on the authority of the storyteller, as in Diotima’s fable. All stories and their explanations must be subjected to critical examination. In a statement that both reasserts and undermines his ambiguous position, Socrates says: “evidently it is the truth you are unable to refute ... [to refute] Socrates is nothing difficult” (201c8–9).

This final point appears to have wider implications. The Symposium shows us Plato’s reservations about the uncritical reception of conventional fables. It also shows us, if we look carefully, his objections to the sophistic expansion of the fable genre: explaining what a story means is not equivalent to showing that it is true. Perhaps the lesson of the Symposium ends there, but the need to examine the claims of a story philosophically suggests a qualification to Plato’s own use of mimetic prose. It is not
just that we are intended to subject the fables in the Symposium to a critical examination, but that we are intended to examine the whole dialogue (which is a story told by Aristodemus to Apollodorus and then by Apollodorus to Glaucon), and indeed all the dialogues of Plato, with a view not towards their authority or provenance, but only towards truth. If refuting Socrates is nothing difficult, then surely it is something we should try to do. And if that is the moral of the story, then the dialogues are not presented as the doctrinal assertions of an accomplished sage, but as invitations to the practice of philosophy.

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