

LOVE AS THE CENTRE

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I must preface the main part of this paper with some remarks about how to read Plato, in general, and how to read his *Symposium*. I remember once in a seminar on Plato's *Republic* that Hans-Georg Gadamer said that we would read that text word by word. We did just that and so we did not read very far. I will not try to repeat that here, because I want to say some things about the latter parts of *Symposium*, but the advice is very good. Whatever might be the difficulties about understanding ancient authors, understanding the thought of one of the truly great thinkers of all western history requires considerable care and attention because of the depth of their thought and the quality of their art. Unfortunately this has too often not been the fault of the author but of the readers. Consider this example: the *Symposium* is written in fifty-one numbered sections of approximately equal length. The final section of the work deals with a speech made by Alcibiades. This section of the book occupies eleven of the sections, which is between a quarter and a fifth of the entire work. Until very recently, however, most commentaries in English completely ignored this large part of the whole work. Usually no reasons are given for this omission. Do such commentators know better than Plato? I doubt it. Fortunately in the last fifteen to thirty years this unfortunate carelessness has been left behind and this critical part of the whole text has attracted considerable attention.

The *Symposium* has suffered not only from careless reading but also from readings that are based on a very modern, possibly democratic, prejudice that assumes that everything is on the surface of a text, available for all to see. Plato

wrote differently. The literature on Plato's writing is vast and not something to discuss fully here. It is important, however, to understand that it is not simply a fault of modern interpreters that they hold many different views about what *Symposium* is about. The wide range of different *Symposiums* that can be found in the secondary literature are there because Plato deliberately places layer upon layer of meaning and illusion on top of each other until his 'real' meaning seems completely concealed. That this is so should not be surprising if we remember Plato's own remarks about writing in his Seventh Letter, where he cautions that the writings of a serious man never reveal his 'most serious interests...unless mortals "have utterly blasted his wits"'.¹

In this paper I am not planning to engage with the vast variety of interpretations of *Symposium*,² though some will be mentioned along the way. Rather, I will discuss with you an interpretation that I think has some merit and it might also be interesting. In any case this interpretation might contribute to our general topic of 'ways to the centre'.

I think that there are many signs in the text of *Symposium* that signal that one of the levels of meaning in it is religious. I intend to pursue such a way of interpreting this text. It has been read as a work that supports homosexuality, but I don't think this is its main concern. Indeed we find that Socrates, when he comes to the centre of his teaching, defers to a woman, Diotima. Neo-Platonists, both ancient and modern, have interpreted the *Symposium* as an esoteric writing setting out the mystical way of ascent away from the world. In recent years R. A.

¹ Plato, *Letter VII* in Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairns eds *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Bollingen Series LXXI, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1969. S344c. p1591.

² I have used the Penguin Books edition of *The Symposium*, trans by Walter Hamilton, Penguin Books, 1977.

Markus's interpretation illustrates this view.³ For Markus the speeches form a unity that gradually moves the conception of love through beauty and knowledge, through government and philosophy until the soul comes before the unmoved, unchanging god who is the true end of all things. But we must wonder about this interpretation. Why is it that this teaching is assigned to Diotima, and why is it only the teaching that Socrates received when he was a young man? Why should we ignore the rest of the *Symposium*? Why does so much of the text not follow on from the glorious ascent of love? The neo-Platonist readings often completely miss the fact that the majority of Plato's writings are in what we might call political philosophy. In Marsilio Ficino's Renaissance commentary the *Symposium*⁴ is both an esoteric religious text and a political document in a struggle against religious and political orthodoxies. The political theme came to the fore in the seminar Leo Strauss taught in the University of Chicago. For many years this text circulated privately. Then aspects of it appeared in two commentaries by Strauss's students Stanley Rosen⁵ and Allan Bloom.⁶ Finally, an edited form of Strauss's own writing has just been published.⁷ In his Introductory remarks Strauss comments:

... the Symposium is the dialogue of the conflict between philosophy and poetry where the poets are in a position to defend themselves. They cannot in the

³ See for example his essay 'Love and the will' in *Christian Faith and the Philosophers*, by Armstrong and Markus, London, 1960; and his essay in the second volume of *Plato: a collection of critical essays*, ed. Gregory Vlastos. Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Books, 1971.

⁴ Marsilio Ficino *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, trans and introduction by Sears Jayne. Second revised edition 1999, Spring Publications, Connecticut. Ficino lived from 1433 to 1499.

⁵ Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, Carthage Reprint, St Augustine's Press, Indiana, 1987.

⁶ Allan Bloom 'The Ladder of Love' in his *Love & Friendship*, Simon & Schuster, 1993, pp.431 – 551.

⁷ Leo Strauss *On Plato's Symposium*, ed. & Foreword by Seth Benardette, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2001.

Republic and the Laws. Secondly, its subject is the foundation of the political – the natural. Somehow this is strongly identified with eros, poetry and eros. Somehow we feel that there is a certain connection between these two themes. Poets seem to be particularly expressive of eros, and eros seems to require poetic treatment.⁸

The *Symposium* can be seen as a political writing in this broad sense. It can also be seen a political writing in a narrower sense. You will recall that Socrates was brought to his death on two charges: that he corrupted the youth of Athens and that he defamed the gods of the city. One of the intriguing levels on which the entire *Symposium* moves is a justification of Socrates on these charges and an indictment of all the other participants on exactly those charges which were brought against Socrates.

Others have tried to interpret the *Symposium* against the Christian tradition. Anders Nygren's study of *Agape and Eros* sets out in a determined fashion to show that the Platonic *eros* is essentially self-centred, unlike the divine *agape*, known in Jesus, that is always and only seeking the good of the object of that love.⁹ This interpretation suffers from a very Protestant and neo-Orthodox determination that the love of the Christian god is unlike that of any other. It doesn't rest on the evidence of the Greek words or on an adequate understanding of *Symposium*. A richer study, by far, is Isenberg's,¹⁰ which gives careful attention to the complex patterning of love in Plato's text. Isenberg shows that the *Symposium* develops an increasingly complex conceptualisation of *eros* as the speeches progress. At first love is a single concept, pure and undivided, then it becomes a dyadic concept through several variations, and

⁸ Ibid p.11

⁹ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1953.

¹⁰ M. Isenberg, *The Order of the Discourses in Plato's Symposium*, Chicago, 1940.

then it becomes a triadic concept, again of several forms, that are completed in the entire dialogue. Through his careful analysis he puts to rest the views of those who would have a simplistic understanding of what lay before or outside their Christian tradition. Of course, such a view of Christianity is far from the whole of that tradition. In particular it cannot do justice to those patristic theologians such as Clement or Augustine who were astounded that these ancient Greeks must have already heard the Gospel.

Now we must turn to the text and notice some of the interesting and rich treasures we might find. In the beginning of the text we find ourselves caught up in a typical Platonic strategy. Plato distances himself from the people and events that he will depict. I have already remarked upon the hidden and textured nature of the text. This process of concealment and distancing fits, of course, with the political strategy and issues that it deals with. It should also remind us that distance and hiddenness are central to most religious traditions. Quickly, too, Plato introduces Socrates. Socrates and Apollodorus are on their way out of the Athens, and Socrates is newly washed as if prepared for a religious ceremony. Indeed there were important religious ceremonies just north of Athens in Eleusis. When they arrive at the house that is their destination Socrates stands outside to meditate. We do not hear that elsewhere. Surely it is not unimportant.

Inside the house a feast is about to begin. The preparations include a discussion that decides that speeches will be made during the feast honouring the god *Eros*. This is the only Platonic writing in which the subject is a god. There follow seven speeches honouring *Eros*. In four of the speeches there are important references to what students of religion will recognise as creation narratives. The progress of the speeches also sees a build up of references to various religious accompaniments such as music and ivy wreaths. The words that are used again and again are words that

come into the history of religious movements. For example, the whole group gathered together is referred to with the word *koinonia*, a word that the early Christians used to speak about their common gatherings.

There are seven speeches in the *Symposium*. They proceed through the night and end with intoxication. In a fascinating collection of essays from the Eranos Conferences, *The Mysteries*,¹¹ there are references to liturgical feasts that culminated in religious ecstasy. These mysteries included feasts that killed a lamb and divided it up into seven parts, which matches the number of speeches in our text, and the eating of the parts in order and drinking wine and blood mixed together in a liturgy that is not unfamiliar.

The first speech, by Phaedrus, includes one of the several creation narratives in *Symposium*. Phaedrus' creation story is borrowed from Hesiod's *Theogony* (which is 'the birth of the gods') and he supports his view with a quotation from Parmenides.¹² Eros, he tells us, is the oldest of the gods and the first god to come into existence after the cracking open of the primordial nothingness from which Earth and Eros emerge. This god, uncreated, has no parents, which means that there is nothing before the god in terms of which the god can be explained. This creation story is quickly opposed by another, in Pausanias' speech. Pausanias is the voice of practical wisdom, concerned that a love that is answerable to nothing will be a wild, demonic being which will be appreciated only by those whose unanswerable passion allows them to tyrannize others. Pausanias relativises Eros to the idea of the *good*. The third speech sees the medical practitioner, Eryximachus, extending

¹¹ *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series XXX.2. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J. 1955/1978.

¹² Hesiod, *Theogony*, Trans and Intro. Norman O. Brown. New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1953.

Pausanius' view in terms of a dialectical theory of opposed principles and humours typical of early Greek medical theory.

That brings us to one of the best-known speeches in all of Plato's writing. It brings us to the speech of the comic poet Aristophanes. He too tells us a creation story. His story has its roots in Pythagorean religion. Because human beings were made by the gods they must have been made in the shape of circles, for circles are the most perfect of shapes according to Pythagorean mathematics. These strange circular creatures, each with double our complement of arms and legs and two faces, were able to get around much faster than we can, and their doubleness enabled them to make twice as much noise as we can. Eventually the speed and noise of these creatures interfered with the peace and quiet of the gods. They went and complained to Zeus about his creatures and asked him to destroy them. Zeus, reluctant to see his creation fail, caused the creatures to fall asleep, and while they slept he operated surgically upon them, cutting each in half, so that humans arrived at the shape we know. This procedure slowed human beings down and reduced their capacity for noise. Even more important, however, is the full consequence of the divine surgery. From now on all human beings will spend their energy and effort in the search for their 'other half', and once they find them they will be so filled with joy that they will embrace each other in the deepest of embraces. Eros is both the search for one's other half and the unity that follows from successfully finding the one to whom we belong. Aristophanes concludes his speech with these words:

It is Love who is the author of our well-being in this present life, by leading us to what is akin to us, and it is Love who gives us a sure hope that, if we conduct ourselves well in the sight of heaven, he will hereafter

make us blessed and happy by restoring us to our former state and healing our wounds.¹³

The solidarity that Eros bestows is central to the argument that sees this text as a text about political philosophy. This solidarity turns us away from Nygren's understanding of Plato.

Immediately following Aristophanes, the host of the Banquet, Agathon, tells us another creation story. For him the fresh spontaneity of Love is proof that Eros is the youngest of the gods. He then tells us something quite wonderful about the nature of Love. Simone Weil has described his words as the most beautiful words in the whole of Greek writing.¹⁴ Listen to this famous passage:

...in his dealings with gods and men Love neither inflicts wrong upon either, nor suffers it from them. When he is passive it is not because violence is put upon him, for violence never touches Love, and when he is active he never employs it, for everyone willingly obeys Love in everything, and where there is mutual consent there is also what 'the law, the sovereign ruler of society,' proclaims to be right.¹⁵

These lines along with Weil's comments upon them affected Albert Camus deeply. In respect to this he produced a small volume of his writings and titled the work *Neither Victims nor Executioners*.

I do not plan to comment any further upon Socrates' speech, except to underscore my view that the teaching of Diotima is not Plato's or Socrates teaching and to draw your attention to the fact that in the speech there is another

¹³ p.65.

¹⁴ Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, ed. and trans Elisabeth Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1957. See esp. p116.

¹⁵ pp.69-70.

creation story and a brief discussion about human immortality. I might also say that I read this speech once at Delphi. The ascent of the soul in love does fit perfectly with the walking of the Sacred Way.

Following Socrates' speech there is a great commotion and Alcibiades arrives, somewhat intoxicated and garlanded. His speech is passionate and stirring. It has gone from being the most neglected part of *Symposium* to the part that recent commentators have been most interested in. Jacques Lacan, for example, writes on Alcibiades with understanding and insight. The passage certainly calls for those kinds of understandings of tension and grief that psychoanalytic thought addresses. My own interest, however, turns in a different direction. Let me first draw your attention again to Alcibiades' discussion of Socrates' hiddenness. The inward beauty that is Socrates has caught hold of Alcibiades in ways that a more open relationship will scarcely sustain. But the capture of Alcibiades' soul goes even deeper. Rudolf Otto¹⁶ is famous for his analysis of the phenomenon of religion. You will remember that he sees religion lying in that which is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This impressive nature of religious experience is deeply connected with a sense of *the holy* and that, in turn, leads to a sense of guilt and the need to confess the causes of that guilt. That is what Alcibiades is telling us. He tells us:

Whenever I listen to him my heart beats faster than if I were in a religious frenzy, and tears run down my face, and I observe that numbers of other people have the same experience. Nothing of this kind used to happen to me when I listened to Pericles and other good speakers; I recognized that they spoke well, but my soul was not thrown into confusion and dismay by the thought that my life was no better than a slave's.

¹⁶ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey. New York, OUP, 1950.

That is the condition to which I have been reduced by our modern Marsyas, with result that it seems impossible to go on living in my present state.... He is the only person in whose presence I experience a sensation of which I might be thought incapable, a sensation of shame; and he alone, positively makes me ashamed about myself.¹⁷

I have discussed this passage with many Christians, both theologians and lay people. This passage causes many of them a great deal of confusion because it runs against the view that Greek religion had no deep or strong notion of repentance, and that the discovery of that was made by Christianity. Here, Alcibiades is making a confession from the depths of his soul.

It is important, also, to see that this profound grief and confession is made through Alcibiades' experience of love. Various contemporary writers, particularly Martha Nussbaum,¹⁸ have said that Plato's account of love is that love is essentially impersonal and detached. It seems to me that this passage contradicts that view. Platonic love has often been depicted that way – as something cool and impersonal. We even use the phrase 'Platonic love' to mean a love that is detached. I think the reason for this lies in the attraction many find with the account of the experience of the god who is completely detached at the height of Diotima's teaching of the ascent of love to god who is unmoving and completely still. But that is far from the whole of the Platonic teaching.

Alcibiades' experience forces on us one further question. What exactly is it that Alcibiades responds to? Are we being told that Socrates is 'the god', or are we being told

¹⁷ p.101.

¹⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* 'The speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the Symposium' Cambridge University Press, 1986. pp.165 – 199.

that there is a god inside Socrates and that such a god can also be found inside other people, or are we being told that there is no god beyond the human and that when we love and are loved profoundly then human beings need no other god?

Let me respond to these questions by turning to some general features of the *Symposium*. Plato's masterpiece is written in a way that is determined by an understanding that the nature of the way to love and what love is are essentially connected, and that this understanding also controls the structure and shape of this writing. In terms of the topic of this conference we might say that a study of the *Symposium* teaches us that the way to love, which is the centre of human existence, must be congruent with that love which is the centre that we seek to arrive at. The *Symposium* is a very unusual piece of writing in its endless preoccupation with indirection, privacy and discretion. At times the writing also deliberately shocks the reader so that by this surprise the reader is drawn towards what is not said but meant.

These remarks are not so surprising to those of us exposed to the complexities of meaning and understanding in post-modern, post-colonial and feminist art and theory, but the claim that this text is also shaped by religious understanding can be puzzling for those who think that religion is a clear and distinct idea. Yet the liturgical character of the *Symposium* is an essential part of the strategy of the text and the understanding it intends to lead us to. As we are drawn into this strategy and experience we find that we are being taught the nature of attention, which is essential to the possibility of love.

The *Symposium*, I believe, can be understood to be a liturgy.¹⁹ Good liturgies, we should understand, are very

¹⁹ I am grateful to Catherine Pickstock's recent book *After writing: on the liturgical consummation of philosophy*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford,

complicated phenomena. On the one hand you have the spectators who watch very, very carefully, hoping to see the magic moment when the transformation is achieved, and then go away very puzzled by what all the fuss might be about; and on the other hand you have the participants, for whom the mystery and transformation is so very real that it is self-evident, and so, inexpressible. Plato's followers were such participants. They believed that Plato died on his eighty-first birthday while reading the *Symposium*. So the academy continued the reading of the *Symposium* on Plato's birthday until the time of Plotinus and Porphyry. For them the master, Socrates, was present in this liturgy. Of course what I have said is not a direct answer to the questions posed above. The most I can suggest is that you read this book very carefully and attentively, and see what it has to say to you.

1998. I had already developed the religious character of this work over some 20 years of lecturing on *Symposium*, but her comments on liturgy were helpful. I am also indebted to Soren Kierkegaard's *The Works of Love*, John Burnaby's *Amor Dei*, Jose Ortega y Gasset's *On Love: aspects of a single theme*, George Grant's *Technology and Empire*, and the various writings of Simone Weil. The novels of Charles Williams have illuminated the text in countless ways. Conversations with Harry Wardlaw and John Coburn over many years have been very generous and helpful.