EXHIBIT 4

6 The speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the *Symposium*

He had a golden shield made for himself, which was emblazoned not with any ancestral device, but with the figure of Eros armed with a thunderbolt.
(Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 16)

'I'm going to tell the truth. Do you think you'll allow that?' (214E).

He was, to begin with, beautiful. He was endowed with a physical grace and splendor that captivated the entire city. They did not decline as he grew, but flourished at each stage with new authority and power. He was always highly conscious of his body, vain about its influence. He would speak of his beauty as his 'amazing good fortune', and his 'windfall from the gods' (217A). But this was not the limit of his natural gifts. Energy and intellectual power had made him one of the best commanders and strategists Athens had known, one of the most skillful orators ever to enchant her people. In both careers his genius was his keen eye for the situation – the way he could discern the salient features of the particular case and boldly select appropriate action. About all these gifts he was equally vain – yet also almost morbidly concerned with criticism and gossip. He loved to be loved. He hated to be observed, skinned, discovered. His heart, generous and volatile, was rapidly moved to both love and anger, at once changeable and tenacious. He was, then, a man of great resources who made deep demands on the world, both emotional and intellectual; and he did what resource and courage could to guarantee success.

What else? He hated flute-playing, and the flute-playing satyr Marsyas... He laughed, he staged jokes – at the expense of enemies, of lovers, at his own. He once arranged for a suitor of his, a resident alien, to win the bid for the local tax receipts, to the great discomfiture of local suitors and tax-farmers... When he wanted to win something, he took no chances. He entered seven chariots at Olympia and walked off with first, second, and fourth prizes. He once sliced off the tail of his own dog, saying, 'I am quite content for the whole of Athens to chatter about this. It will stop them from saying any worse about me.'... He financed extravagant spectacles. The people never had enough of him; he was their darling, their young 'lion'. Those who hated democratic disorder hated him as its inspiration... Once he invited a philosopher to dinner and told him the truth about a particular soul... He betrayed two cities. He said, 'Love of city is what I do not feel when I am wronged. It is what I felt when I went about my political

business in safety.'... One night he went for a walk through the streets of Athens and defaced the statues of the gods, smashing genitals and faces... The philosopher he loved looked like a snub-nosed Silenus, as he lay on the bed beside him, aloof and self-contained – like one of those toy Sileni you open up to see the shining statues of the gods inside.[1] All these things.

His story is, in the end, a story of waste and loss, of the failure of practical reason to shape a life. Both the extraordinary man and the stages of his careening course were legendary at Athens; they cried out for interpretation, and for healing. The *Symposium* situates itself in the midst of this life and confronts the questions it raises for our thought above love and reason. Alcibiades is, of course, a major character in the dialogue; many details of his life are recounted explicitly in his speech. But there are also more subtle signals. A man who died shot by an arrow will speak of the words of love as arrows or bolts wounding the soul (219B). A man who influentially denounced the flute as an instrument unworthy of a free man's dignity will describe himself as a slave to the enchanting flute-playing of a certain satyr (215B–D, 213C, 219C). A man who will deface holy statues compares the soul of Socrates to a set of god-statues and speaks of the injustice of rubbing out, or defacing, Socratic virtues (213E, 215B, 216D, 217E, 222A). A man who will profane the mysteries puts on trial the initiate of the mystery-religion of *erōs*. These connections suggest that we need to read the work against the background of the already legendary stories of the life, trying to recover for ourselves the Athenian fascination with Alcibiades. Only in this way will we grasp the significance of many apparently casual remarks and, through these, of the whole.

It is commonly charged against Plato that, in the *Symposium*, he ignores the value of the love of one unique whole person for another such whole person. By treating the person as a seat of valuable properties and describing love as directed at those repeatable properties, rather than at the whole person, he misses something that is fundamental to our experience of love. Professor Gregory Vlastos, one of the most eloquent expositors of this view, writes:

> We are to love the persons so far, and only insofar, as they are good and beautiful. Now since all too few human beings are masterworks of excellence, and not even the best of those we have the chance to love are wholly free of streaks of the ugly, the mean, the commonplace, the ridiculous, if our love for them is to be only for their virtue and beauty, the individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality, will never be the object of our love. This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato's theory. It does not provide for love of whole persons, but only for love of that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities. This is the reason why personal affection ranks so low in Plato's *scala amoris*... The high climactic moment of fulfillment – the peak achievement for which all lesser loves are to be 'used as steps' – is the one farthest removed from affection for concrete human beings.[2]

This is all a bit mysterious. We would like to ask just what this uniqueness and individuality come to. Are they merely a subjective impression we have because we have not yet grasped all the properties? Or is uniqueness perhaps the occurrence of certain properties, each itself repeatable, in a hitherto unexemplified

combination? Or is it something more elusive and shadowy than this? And yet, despite our questions, we feel that Vlastos must somehow be right. He is certainly pointing to something that we say and feel about being in love, however unsure we are of what we mean in saying it.

But there is a problem in using this as a criticism of Plato's perceptions. This is that it requires us to treat as Plato's only the view expressed in the speech of Diotima as repeated by Socrates, and to charge him with being unaware of the rest of what he has written. For following that speech is another speech that claims to tell the truth – a speech that ends with these words:

> One could find many other wonderful things about Socrates to praise. But these same virtues one might attribute to someone else as well. The really wonderful thing about him is that he is not similar to any human being, past or present... This man is so strange – he himself and his speeches too – that you could look and look and find nobody even near him. (221C–D)

But that is, more or less, what Vlastos was talking about. If a writer describes a certain theory of love and then follows that description with a counterexample to the theory, a story of passion for a unique individual as eloquent as any in literature – a story that says that the theory omits something, is blind to something – then we might want to hesitate before calling the *author* blind.[3] We might want to read the whole of what he has written, and find his meaning emerging from the arrangement of all its parts. I believe that a deep understanding of the *Symposium* will be one that regards it not as a work that ignores the pre-philosophical understanding of *erōs*, but as one that is all about that understanding, and also about why it must be purged and transcended, why Diotima has to come once again to save Athens from a plague. (Perhaps also why she can't save us – or, at any rate, can't save *us*.)

The *Symposium* is a work about passionate erotic love – a fact that would be hard to infer from some of the criticism written about it. Its only speech that claims to tell 'the truth' is a story of complex passion, both sexual and intellectual, for a particular individual. There is, indeed, at its heart a speech that challenges or denies these 'truths' in the name of true goodness. But we can hardly hope to understand the motivation for that challenge, or to assess its force, without first understanding Plato's depiction of our actual attachments and their problems. We have to be willing to explore with this work our own thoughts and feelings about erotic attachment and to ask whether, having done this, we are, like Socrates, ready to be 'persuaded' by the revisionary speech of Diotima. That is why we must turn our attention, as Plato's audience would have done, to the life and character of Alcibiades.

I

This dialogue consists of a series of elaborately nested reports. Like a Chinese box, it gives us a conversation of Apollodorus[4] with a friend, which reports a

previous conversation of his own, in which he recalls a speech of Aristodemus, who reports (among others) a speech of Socrates, who reports a speech of Diotima, who reports the secrets of the mysteries. This distancing, continually present to us in the indirect-discourse constructions of the Greek, makes us always aware of the fragility of our knowledge of love, our need to grope for understanding of this central element of our lives through hearing and telling stories. It also reminds us of the fact that Socrates' pupils, inspired by personal love, tend not to follow his advice. Instead of ascending to an equal regard for all instances of value, they, like Alcibiades, remain lovers of the particulars of personal history. In these two ways, the dialogue as a whole is the speech of Alcibiades rather than of Socrates – reminding us that it is as unreformed people that we must learn and judge of the value of Socratic teaching.

The settings of the various conversations are chosen with precision to point us to the dialogue's central themes. Apollodorus, asked by an anonymous friend to repeat the story of the drinking party, replies that he has just had occasion to practice telling it. An acquaintance of his, Glaucon by name, stopped him two days ago in a state of great excitement. He had been looking for Apollodorus all over town in order to hear from him, from start to finish, the story of the party at Agathon's house where Socrates and Alcibiades were guests. Glaucon was extremely eager to hear what their speeches about love were like, but the friend who had informed him of the party, having heard the story at second hand, could not give him a clear account (172A–B). Apollodorus, surprised, had answered that it must have been an unclear account indeed – for this party, which Glaucon seems to think a recent event, took place years ago. Doesn't Glaucon know that Agathon has been out of town for 'a number of years' and that he, Apollodorus, has been a follower of Socrates for only three? The party took place, in fact, back 'when we were boys' (173A5), the day of Agathon's first victory at the tragic festival – for us, in the year 416 B.C.

Now this is, on the face of it, very strange – so strange that it looks as if Plato must be up to something. A busy, active man, apparently sane, goes running all over town to hear a story about a party where some speeches were made about love. And he does not even know that this party took place over ten years ago. (Agathon left Athens in 408 or 407.) He is clearly not an aficionado of either literature or philosophy, or else he would have been aware of the relevant facts about Agathon and Apollodorus. He is characterized as a busy man of action (173A).[5] Perhaps, then, we ought to look to politics for an explanation of his eagerness.

R. G. Bury and other commentators have explored the problem of dating the exchange more precisely.[6] It cannot, Bury persuasively argues, be after Socrates' death in 399, since Apollodorus speaks of his discipleship in the present tense (172E5). It must be 'a number of years' after Agathon's departure, but before his death (probably also 399), since he is described as still 'living out of town'. To make sense of the 'a number of years', Bury argues, we might as well date it as late as possible within this range, therefore in the year 400.

But this ignores politics, and Alcibiades. Alcibiades was murdered in 404. Recalled to Athens in 407 by the restored democracy, he then lost prestige because of the Athenian losses at Notium – for which, however, his subordinates, not he, deserved the blame. He retired to the Chersonese. In 405, his good advice concerning the battle of Aegospotami was disregarded by the commanders. Angry and embittered, he departed to Asia Minor, planning to give his services to the Persian king, Artaxerxes. In 404, while staying in a small village in Phrygia, he was assassinated by a Persian agent, probably as the result of a conspiracy between the Spartan commander Lysander and Plato's uncle Critias, the oligarch.

The date 400 thus becomes impossible as a date for Glaucon's misguided question. No man of affairs would long have remained unaware of the death of Alcibiades. Nor could a reader around 375[7] have believed this possible. (For we must be interested less in the actual facts than in the historical presuppositions and beliefs of Plato's audience.) It would be like supposing that an audience of our day could believe that a drama which mentioned John Kennedy as living could be set in 1968. Some events are indelibly marked on the consciousness of a people; Alcibiades' death is among these. In the last months of his life he was, wherever he traveled, the object of intense, almost obsessive attention.[8] Athens was on the verge of military capitulation to Sparta; internally she was torn by years of struggle between an oligarchic party, now sympathetic to Sparta, and the traditional democratic sentiments, still strong in the hearts of the impotent majority. A moderate oligarchical government led by Theramenes is on the verge of collapse; the extremists, the so-called 'Thirty Tyrants', led by Critias and other associates of Plato's family, promise to obliterate from the city all traces of democratic institutions. The hopes of the defenders of tradition, and freedom, are in disarray. Aristophanes' *Frogs*, produced in 405, testifies to the fear that not only political freedom, but poetic speech as well, are on the verge of extinction. The Chorus pleads for the chance to speak out on serious, as well as comic, matters, asking the god's protection for its truths (384–93).[9]

In the midst of Athenian anxiety and pessimism, there is one hope: that Alcibiades, consenting to return to the city that has mistreated him, may lead a restored democracy to victory and safety. As Plutarch tells us,

> In despair they recalled their past mistakes and follies, and they considered that the greatest of all had been their second outburst against Alcibiades... And yet... a faint glimmer of hope remained, that the cause of Athens could never be utterly lost so long as Alcibiades was alive. In the past he had not been content to lead a peaceful or passive existence in exile and now, too,... they believed that he would not look on supinely at the triumph of the Spartans or the outrages of the Thirty Tyrants.[10]

In the *Frogs*, Alcibiades is a central character long before he is mentioned by name (1422). The pivotal test for the two dead poets in Hades, to determine whose moral advice will save the city in its time of trouble, is a test concerning his return. The city 'longs for him, it hates him, and it wants him back' (1425). What should it do? Euripides, using language linked with sophistic and Socratic philosophizing,

gives an oligarch's answer: think of him as a self-centered and useless individual, and hate him. Aeschylus, in obscure and noble poetic language, urges the city to take him back.[11] This tough old democrat who fought at Marathon, not the refined comrade of allegedly anti-democratic intellectuals, proves in this way that he is the poet that the soul of Dionysus, god of tragic and comic poetry, desires (1468). He will be brought back from the dead, and, together, tragedy, comedy, and Alcibiades will save Athens from the death of her freedom; also, as they see it, from Socrates.[12]

Glaucon's eagerness now begins to make sense to us. Suppose it is 404, shortly before the assassination, at the height of this frenzy over Alcibiades. (This still satisfies Bury's demand that we remove the setting by several years from the time of Agathon's departure.) Now suppose that a rumor circulates, to the effect that there has been a party, attended by Socrates and Alcibiades, where speeches were made about love. A political man (ignorant of the cultural facts that date this story) would immediately wonder whether the spurned leader had finally agreed to return to Athens, drawn, perhaps, by his famous love for Socrates. He might well drop his ordinary business at such news, pregnant with possibilities for both political parties, and run all over town to pursue the story. If he were a democrat, he would be in a mood of swelling hope and barely suppressed joy. If he were an oligarch, he would be nervous and fearful, annoyed that all the attempts of his party to observe Alcibiades' every movement had miserably failed. Which is Glaucon? His brief questions give us no sign. Since Apollodorus, a disciple of the historical Socrates, is likely, with him, to be opposed to the extreme unconstitutional measures of the Thirty,[13] Glaucon's silence about his deeper concerns may suggest a link with the oligarchs. This Glaucon is not clearly identified; but the two known Platonic characters of this name are both close relatives of Plato and linked with the oligarchs.[14] It is not impossible that this is Plato's brother, the Glaucon of the *Republic*; at any rate, the name, at least, would suggest to a reader these anti-democratic associations.

We have, it appears, a conversation set very shortly before the murder of Alcibiades, between a neutral or sympathetic person and one who may be linked with his murderers. But this is not the conversation that the opening dialogue actually gives us. The dialogue itself takes place two days after the reported Glaucon conversation; and it takes place between Apollodorus and an anonymous 'friend'. We are not told why there should be this two-day gap, or why the conversation should now be repeated. But it leaves room for thought. These baroque complications of discourse are not in themselves pretty or amusing, even if we could believe that Plato invents such things only for amusement's sake. We want a fuller meaning. The 'friend', apparently, is not laboring under Glaucon's delusion that the rumored conversation was recent; and yet he wants to hear it anyway. One sufficient explanation for his greater clarity, which would account also for his desire to hear the story again, would be the death of Alcibiades in Phrygia. This remains conjectural; but in any case we are surely intended to tie the dialogue closely to the death, to think of Alcibiades as dead, or dying, even

while 'he' speaks, and to see the oligarch's fear of a love that would reunite Alcibiades and Athens as one of the fears that led to the killing.[15]

But this leaves us with a further question: when, in terms of these events, was the reported banquet, at which speeches are made about love? Here, even more patently, Plato is precise: January of 416.[16] Agathon, the victor, was under thirty. Alcibiades was thirty-four. Socrates was fifty-three. A little over a year later, the Hermae were sacrilegiously mutilated – an incident that was to prove ruinous for Alcibiades' military and political career. Whether or not he was really guilty (in the end, even the official indictment charged him only with the profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries, not with the desecration of the statues), it remained true that rumor and popular belief, and the general consensus of fourth-century writers, ascribed the incident to his leadership.[17] Not only would Plato himself, as an associate of the oligarchs, very probably have believed it, but so, also, would most of his fourth-century audience. This incident was taken to be the most egregious case of the recklessness and disorder that repeatedly undercut Alcibiades' genius. The dialogue will show us this recklessness as that of a certain sort of lover. The frequent references to statues are probably not accidental. The atmosphere of mock-threat and mock-violence surrounding Alcibiades' speech goes deeper than a game, since we know it to be the speech of a man who will soon commit real acts of violence. When Alcibiades expresses anger, pain, and frustration (e.g. 219C–E, 217E–218A); when Socrates speaks of his fear of Alcibiades' violent jealousy and even appeals for help, should Alcibiades attempt to 'force' him, inspired by 'madness and passion for love' (213D5–6); when Alcibiades says, 'There is no truce between me and you, but I'll get my revenge on you some other time' (213D7–8), we are surely meant to think of another time, and of an assault allegedly made against the stone genitals and the 'wonderful head' (cf. 213E2) of Hermes, god of luck.[18]

II

We can begin with the only one among the original symposiasts who does not praise the speech of Socrates (212C4–5). At the dialogue's end, Socrates attempts to persuade Agathon and Aristophanes that, contrary to popular superstition, one and the same person can be a poet in both the tragic and the comic genres. It is clear, besides, that the comic speech of Aristophanes and the tragic (or tragic-comic) speech of Alcibiades contain the most serious objections raised in the *Symposium* against Socrates' program for the ascent of love. These facts suggest that we should study the two speeches together, asking whether they reveal a shared account of the nature of *erōs* and its value, illuminating both one another and the Socratic alternative. Aristophanes never succeeds in telling us his objections to the ascent story, because Alcibiades' entrance disrupts the dialectic. But perhaps it is this entrance, and the ensuing scene, that make known to us the comic poet's most serious reservations.

The comic poet speaks later than originally scheduled. The orderly plan of the

symposium is disrupted by a ridiculous bodily contingency: an attack of hiccups. It makes Aristophanes (and us) wonder at the way in which the good order of the body (*to kosmion tou sōmatos*, 189A3) gives way, as though a willing and desiring victim (*cf. epithumei*, 189A4), to the most absurd of sub-human noises (189A4–5).[19] Recovered, he offers a story about love that wonders, itself, at the power of the body's contingencies to disrupt and subdue the aspirations of practical reason.

We were once, he tells us, perfect and self-sufficient physical beings. We had the circular form, 'similar in every direction', imagined by early philosophy to be the shape of the god.[20] Now punished for our overweening attempt to make ourselves rulers of everything, we are creatures cut in half, severed from our other part and made, by a turning of our heads, to look always at the cut, jagged front side of ourselves that reminds us of our lack (190D–E). And, looking at the contingent loss that cuts us off from the wishes of our imagination, itself still apparently intact, we become preoccupied with the project of returning to the wholeness of our former natures. But to remedy one piece of luck another must happen: we must each find the unique other half from which we were severed. The one hope of 'healing' for our human nature (191D1) is to unite in love with this other oneself and, indeed, to become fused with that one, insofar as this is possible (192B–E). Eros is the name of this desire and pursuit of the whole (192E–193A).

The story is comic because, while it is about us and our deepest concerns, it at the same time distances itself from the inner delight and pain of those concerns, asking us to watch ourselves as we watch a species remote from us and our needs. We think, as humans, that the human shape is something beautiful; the story gets us to consider that, from the point of view of the whole or the god, the circular shape may be formally the most beautiful and adequate. A jagged form, equipped with these untidy folds of skin around the middle (191A), its head turned towards this imperfection and newly expressing, in its searching gazes (191A, 191D), its sense of incompleteness; its exposed and dangling genital members now no longer efficiently, externally, sowing seed into the earth (191B–C), but instead, placed on the side of the 'cutting', attendant upon desire for both reproduction and healing – this looks like the shape of something that is the object of a joke, or a punishment. From the point of view of desire, again, the penetration of a part of one's own body into some opening in the loved one's body is an event of excitement and beauty. From the outside it just looks peculiar, or even grotesque; it certainly seems to be without positive aesthetic value. It is not even functionally efficient as a means of reproduction. Sowing into the earth was both more controlled and more reliably fruitful.

As we hear Aristophanes' distant myth of this passionate groping and grasping, we are invited to think how odd, after all, it is that bodies should have these holes and projections in them, odd that the insertion of a projection into an opening should be thought, by ambitious and intelligent beings, a matter of the deepest concern. How odd that we should have taken as natural, and even fine, this extraordinary fact that our separate bodies actually fit into the insides of other

bodies, that bodies are soft and open, not round and shiny-smooth, like stones. (Stone, said Callicles, was the best embodiment of one high ambition.) Finally, from the inside, the disharmony in the nature of these creatures, whose reason still aspires to completeness and control, but whose bodies are so painfully needy, so distracting – from the inside this would feel like torment. From the outside, we cannot help laughing. They want to be gods – and here they are, running around anxiously trying to thrust a piece of themselves inside a hole; or, perhaps more comical still, waiting in the hope that some hole of theirs will have something thrust into it.[21]

And, yet, we are aware that we are those creatures. If the story were told about some completely alien race, in whom we could not see ourselves and our desires, it would be a natural history. If it were told from the inside, it would, as we have said, be tragedy. The comedy comes in the sudden perception of ourselves from another vantage point, the sudden turning round of our heads and eyes to look at human genitals and faces, our unrounded, desiring, and vulnerable parts. It is like those moments in Aristophanes' actual plays, when we are shown some absurd or even base behavior and then, all at once, are made to see that it is our own.*

We seem to have in this story much of what Vlastos wanted from an account of love. The objects of these creatures' passions are whole people: not 'complexes of desirable qualities', but entire beings, thoroughly embodied, with all their idiosyncrasies, flaws, and even faults. What makes them fall in love is a sudden swelling-up of feelings of kinship and intimacy, the astonishment of finding in a supposed stranger a deep part of your own being. 'They are struck in extraordinary fashion by friendly feeling (*philia*) and intimacy (*oikeiotēs*) and passion (*erōs*), and are hardly willing to be apart from one another even a little time' (192B–C). It is a love that is said to be in and of the soul and body both, and of the soul's longings as expressed in the movements and gestures of the body (cf. 192E7–D1).

Nor are love objects interchangeable for these people, as seats of abstract goodness or beauty might be. The individual is loved not only as a whole, but also as a unique and irreplaceable whole. For each there is, apparently, exactly one 'other half' (192B6, 191A6). Although upon the death of the half each will begin a search for a replacement, there is no evidence that this search will bring success. There is nothing like a general description of a suitable or 'fitting' lover, satisfiable by a number of candidates, that could serve as a sufficient criterion of suitability. It is mysterious what does make another person the lost half of you, more

* One example will indicate the technique. In the *Clouds*, after some typical jokes at the expense of passive homosexuals, at which the audience has been laughing with superiority, the character mocked turns his mocker around towards the audience and asks him what sort of people, after all, are sitting out there. The answer is unequivocal: 'By the gods, the vast majority are wide-assholes.' 'Well, what do you say to that?' 'I admit defeat. O buggers, by god, take my cloak off, I'm deserting to your side.' And he exits, cloakless, presumably into the audience. Aristophanes, like Plato (cf. Chs. 5 and 7) uses this example to make complex points about passivity and receptivity, dependence on chance, hedonism, democracy.

mysterious still how you come to know that. But there they find it, both body and soul, not like anyone else in the world. (We can see how close we are to a view of *erōs* frequently expressed in tragedy, if we recall a moment in the *Antigone*. Creon argued for the replaceability of love partners with a crude agricultural metaphor: there are 'other furrows' for Haemon's 'plow'. The more conservative Ismene answers, 'Not another love such as the one that fitted him to her.'[22] With their shared emphasis on special *harmonia* (carpenter's 'fit' or musician's 'harmony'), tragedy and Aristophanes seem to capture the uniqueness, as well as the wholeness, that Vlastos found lacking in Plato's view of *erōs*.)

But the picture also shows us problems. First of all, Aristophanes' myth vividly dramatizes the sheer contingency of love, and our vulnerability to contingency through love. The very need that gives rise to erotic pursuit is an unnatural, contingent lack – at least it is seen as such from the point of view of the ambitions of human reason. Here are these ridiculous creatures cut in half, trying to do with these bodies what came easily for them when they had a different bodily nature. The body is a source of limitation and distress. They do not feel at one with it, and they wish they had one of a different sort; or, perhaps, none at all.

Then *erōs*, so necessary to continued life and to 'healing' from distress, comes to the cut-up creature by sheer chance, if at all. His or her other half is somewhere, but it is hard to see what reason and planning can do to make that half turn up. The creatures 'search' and 'come together', but it is plainly not in their power to ensure the happy reunion. It is difficult to accept that something as essential to our good as love is at the same time so much a matter of chance. The creatures would plainly like to believe, with an optimistic modern philosopher, that 'If a person is disappointed in love, it is possible to adopt a vigorous plan of action which carries a good chance of acquainting him with someone else he likes at least as well.'[23] The comic myth doubts it.

And it is not simply that a particular part of the creatures' good seems to resist control by practical reason. For this component, being absent or unhappily present, causes the creature to lose rational control over all the rest of its planning for a life. Before the invention of sexual intercourse, the two halves embraced unsatisfied, until both died of hunger and other needs (191A–B). The possibility of intercourse, a new 'stratagem' provided by the pitying god (191B), brought the procreation of children and a temporary respite from physical tension: 'Satiety might come to be from intercourse, and they might be assuaged and turn to their work and take thought for the rest of their lives' (191C). But this happy possibility indicates to us that the creature remains always in the grip of these recurring needs, which distract him (or her) from work and the rest of life, except where satiety provides a small interval of calm.

It emerges, moreover, that the satisfaction achieved in this way is, even as temporary, incomplete. The aim of desire is more intractable. What these lovers really want is not simply a momentary physical pleasure with its ensuing brief respite from bodily tension. Their erotic behavior expresses a deeper need, one

that comes from the soul – a need 'that the soul cannot describe, but it divines, and obscurely hints at' (192D):

> Suppose Hephaestus with his tools were to visit them as they lie together and stand over them and ask: 'What is it, mortals, that you hope to gain from one another?' Suppose, too, that when they could not answer he repeated his question in these terms: 'Is the object of your desire to be always together as much as possible, and never to be separated from one another day or night? If that is what you want, I am ready to melt and weld you together, so that, instead of two, you shall be one... Would such a fate as this content you, and satisfy your longings?' We know what their answer would be: no one would refuse the offer. (192D–E, trans. Hamilton)

It is a wish for the impossible. However ardently and however often these lovers may enter one another's bodies, they are always going to remain two. No amount of interpenetration will cause even the smallest particle of flesh to fuse with the other flesh. Their act leads inexorably back to separation and inactivity, never to any more lasting or more thoroughgoing union.

But this impossible story of welding is a far simpler miracle than the one that would have to take place if they were really to become one. For these creatures have souls; and their desire for unity is a desire of the soul, a desire of desires, projects, aspirations. (For the lovers' problem to arise they do not, and we do not, need to be dualists. Aristophanes' *psuchē* is probably not an incorporeal substance, but the 'inner' elements of a person – desires, beliefs, imaginings – however these are, ultimately, to be analyzed and understood. The operative contrast is the one between the 'internal' and the 'external'. The lovers' problem will arise for any people who doubt that the external movements, gestures, and speeches of their limbs, trunk, face, genitals, always fully and adequately express the person that they feel themselves to be.)[24] Hephaestus' tools could do nothing to satisfy their desire – unless their souls, in intercourse, had first become thoroughly fused with their own bodies. What would this mean? That each would have to regard his or her bodily movements as fully expressive of and in harmony with the needs and imaginings of the soul or the 'insides', so that intercourse was at the same time an interpenetration of imagination with imagination and spirit with spirit. Hephaestus can weld only what is engaged in the bodily act of lovemaking and identifies itself with it. If the mind stands to one side, if it asks, even momentarily, 'Is this me?' or 'Is everything that I am in this?' or, 'Does that person moving around inside my body really know anything about *me*?', then the welding will be at best a partial welding. There will be a little detached being left on the outside, who resists the craftsman and remains unengulfed, solitary, proud of its secrets. For these creatures, this is almost certain to be the case. Don't they resent the awkwardness of their bodies, those flawed, imperfect surfaces? Don't they pride themselves on the wholeness and beauty of their natures? Then how will they be willing to identify their proud souls with a cut and jagged face, a set of queerly shaped organs? One miracle presupposes a greater miracle: to get to be the whole, you first have to be willing to be the half.

Let us now suppose that, by a miracle, these two fusions have occurred. Each of the lovers makes himself one with his body, and Hephaestus then makes two soul-bodies into one. Wrapped in each other's arms, there they lie, for the rest of their lives and on into death, welded into one, immobile. (Let us also suppose that the gap between interpenetration and fusion has really been bridged: they can 'die in common' (192E)[25] not just in the sense of simultaneity of experience, but in the sense of unity of experience.) Here we meet, unexpectedly, a second comedy. For what they thought they most wanted out of their passionate movement turns out to be a wholeness that would put an end to all movement and all passion. A sphere would not have intercourse with anyone. It would not eat, or doubt, or drink. It would not, as Xenophanes shrewdly observed, even move this way or that, because it would have no reason; it would be complete (B25; cf. Ch. 5). *Erōs* is the desire to be a being without any contingent occurrent desires. It is a second-order desire that all desires should be cancelled. This need that makes us pathetically vulnerable to chance is a need whose ideal outcome is the existence of a metal statue, an artifact. It is not accidental that the myth speaks of welding, and uses the tools of the smith instead of the instruments of the doctor. Once we see the self-cancelling character of this *erōs*, we are not at all clear that our first, enthusiastic 'yes' to Hephaestus' proposal expressed our deepest wish. (When Hephaestus chained Ares in bed with Aphrodite, Ares was angry, and the gods all laughed at him; only Hermes was willing to risk immobility for love.[26]) But can our deepest wish be to live always in the grip of recurrent needs, and never to reach a stable satisfaction? As Socrates asks in the *Gorgias*, can we choose the life of leaky jars or torrent-birds? We would like to find a way to retain our identity as desiring and moving beings, and yet to make ourselves self-sufficient. It takes considerable ingenuity.

This is only a comedy, and only a myth, about distant beings. We are not sure that it is really our story – whether seen one by one, in detail, and from the inside, our loves really look like that. But we are left with questions.[27] We have a sense that there may be trouble around in the land of 'uniqueness and integrity', that personal affection may not be in control of its world. We turn now to the speech that attempts to restructure that world, making it safe for practical reason.

III

Socrates does not present the account of the ascent of desire in the first person, as a theory of his own developed through experience and reflection. He introduces it, instead, as an account of whose value he was *persuaded* by a woman, and of whose value he will try, in turn, to persuade others (212B). Indeed, when he first heard it, he was, he tells us, dubious about its truth (208B); she, answering 'like a perfect sophist', convinced him. Diotima's teaching depends in a fundamental way on Socrates' own beliefs and intuitions; like Socrates himself when he examines a pupil, she claims to be showing him what he himself really thinks (201E, 202C). But the fact remains that it took an external intervention to convince him

that clinging to certain beliefs required abandoning others. Without this, he might have continued living with incompatibles, not seeing how they clash.

Socrates' teacher is a priestess named Diotima. Since she is a fiction, we are moved to ask about her name, and why Plato should have chosen it. The name means 'Zeus-honor'. Alcibiades had a famous mistress, a courtesan whose name history records as Timandra. This name means 'man-honor'. Here, then, Socrates too, takes a mistress: a priestess instead of a courtesan, a woman who prefers the intercourse of the pure mind to the pleasures of the body, who honors (or is honored by) the divine rather than the merely human.[28] Diotima's fictional fame and authority derive, Plato tells us, from her benefits to Athens at the time of the great plague, when she succeeded in postponing the catastrophe for ten years (201D). This invention is also significant. Here, says Plato, is a person who is capable of bringing great benefits to the city, even of averting a dangerous illness, if only we will be persuaded to depart, with her as our guide, from our human-centered, human-honoring ways. Plato's picture of the external guide indicates that our salvation may have to come to us from without – i.e. at the cost of abandoning some beliefs and relationships that we, as humans, now cherish. (The *Protagoras* gave us a vivid sense of our 'diseases'.) And yet the presentation of Socrates' learning as working through his own antecedent beliefs tells us that a need to be so saved is, even now, in us, ready to be awakened (as it was by the *Protagoras*) if we can only be brought to a clear view of our situation.

The crucial pieces of persuasion work their way unobtrusively into the teachings – both into Diotima's teaching of Socrates and into Socrates' teaching of us. We first discover that we believe (or partly believe) that we love individuals for their repeatable properties by following and being (almost) persuaded by an argument that employs this as a hidden premise. In this argument, whose logical form is unusually perspicuous – it is, for example, one of the easiest in all Plato to formalize, and every step is, usually explicitly, universally quantified – Socrates persuades Agathon that *erōs* is not beautiful (199Eff.). (This argument precedes the explicit introduction of Diotima, but it is clearly the fruit of her teaching, and its premises are further explored in her speech.) At the heart of the argument is a difficulty. We have the following steps:

1. For all y, if y loves, then there is an x such that y loves x. (Agreed, 199E6–7)
2. For all y and all x, if y loves x, y desires x. (Agreed, 200A2–4)
3. For all y and all x, if y desires x, then y lacks x. (Agreed, 200A5–7)[29]
4. For all y and all x, if y has x, then y does not desire x. (200E; from 3 by contraposition)[30]
5. For all y and all x, if y has x, y does not love x. (From 2, 4)
6. For all y and all x, if y loves x, x is beautiful. (Agreed, 201A)
7. For all y and all x, if y loves x, y lacks beauty. (201B)
8. For all y, if y lacks beauty, y is not beautiful. (201B6–7)
9. For all y, if y loves, y is not beautiful. (From 1, 7, 8)

The trouble comes, for us (though not for Agathon), at step 7. Even if we grant Socrates' controversial claims about the logic of wanting and possessing, even

if we grant him, too, that all love objects must be *kalon* (a claim less implausible if we think of the broad range of the Greek word),* we do not understand how he has reached the conclusion that *y* lacks beauty. We thought that he was talking about people. We had a situation where some *y* – let us say Alcibiades – is in love with beautiful Agathon. He wants to possess this beautiful person, and yet he is aware that he does not possess him. If he is lucky enough to be enjoying at present the charms of Agathon, still he cannot count on fully and stably possessing them for the rest of his life. So there is a beautiful person whom he both loves and lacks. This does not, however, show that he himself lacks beauty, even given the earlier premises of the argument. He may be quite beautiful, for all we know. What he lacks is beautiful Agathon. Socrates' conclusion would follow only if we reinterpret step 6 – which, in the Greek text, was literally the claim '*erōs* is of the beautiful'. From our first interpretation, that the lover's love is for someone (something) that has the property of being beautiful, it follows only that the lover lacks that particular beautiful person (thing). But suppose we now reinterpret step 6 to read:

> 6′. For all *y* and all *x*: if *y* loves *x*, *x* is a beauty.

– i.e. an instance of beauty, the beauty *of* some person or thing. From this there follows, at least, the conclusion that there is *an* instance of beauty that the lover does not possess, viz., the instance that he (she) loves. (That this is the correct understanding of the ambiguous sentence is suggested by the ensuing claim that 'there cannot be love for the ugly' (201A5): for, as Vlastos remarks, any whole person has uglinesses and faults. To avoid being directed at ugliness, love must be directed at a property of the person, not the whole. 'Love is not for the half or the whole of anything, unless, my friend, that half or whole happens to be good' (205E1–3).)

But we are not yet all the way to Plato's conclusion. So far there is some beauty loved by the lover: Alcibiades loves the beauty of Agathon. From this it follows only that Alcibiades lacks *that* beauty – not that he lacks *all* beauty. He might have some other type of beauty. Or he might even have some other token of the same type. The second possibility may not be relevant: it may be part of the psychological claims of the preceding steps that I will not desire something if I have, stably, something that is qualitatively the same, though a countably different instance.[21] But the first seems important: if Alcibiades is *kalon* in physical appearance, can he not still love and lack the beautiful soul of Socrates? What

* In assessing the relationship of this dialogue to the *Protagoras*, we should bear in mind that '*kalon*', which I shall continue to translate as 'beautiful', is here such a broad moral/aesthetic notion that it might be more accurate to render it as 'valuable' and the corresponding noun as 'value'. 201C2 states that (all) good things (*agatha*) are *kala*; and the biconditional is required for the validity of the argument at 201C4–5. It may, then, actually be a single unifying notion of value in terms of which we are to see the special values such as justice and wisdom. It is clear, at any rate, that the *kalon* is supposed to include everything that is relevant to the experience of passionate love, including the love of institutions and sciences – everything that is lovable in the world. Thus a belief in its qualitative homogeneity takes us far along the way to the complete elimination of ethically relevant qualitative differences.

we now see is that Socrates' argument depends on a strong hidden assumption: that all beauty, *qua* beauty, is uniform, the same in kind. All manifestations of the *kalon* must be sufficiently like one another that if you lack one kind it is natural to conclude that you lack them all. The beauty of Alcibiades must be distinct from the beauty of Socrates not qualitatively, but only in terms of contingent spatio-temporal location (and perhaps in *quantity* as well).

And, in fact, this claim about beauty and goodness is explicitly asserted in Diotima's teaching. In her account of the soul's development towards the fullest understanding of the good, the idea of uniformity plays a crucial role. (The section of her speech is introduced as a revelation for the initiate, which will go beyond what Socrates could understand on his own (209E5–210A2).) The young lover beginning the ascent – always under the direction of a 'correct' guide (210A6–7) – will begin by loving a single body, or, more exactly, the beauty of a single body: 'Then he must see that the beauty in any one body is family-related (*adelphon*) to the beauty in another body; and that if he must pursue the beauty of form, it is great mindlessness not to consider the beauty of all bodies to be one and the same' (210A5).

First, he or she sees only one loved one's beauty. Then he must notice a close family resemblance between that beauty and others. Then – and this is the crucial step away from the Vlastos view – he *decides* that it is prudent to consider these related beauties to be 'one and the same', that is, qualitatively homogeneous. He then sees that he 'must set himself up as the lover of all beautiful bodies, and relax his excessively intense passion for one body, looking down on that and thinking it of small importance' (210B). So the crucial step is, oddly, a step of decision, involving considerations of 'senselessness' and good sense. We begin to wonder what sort of need drives this lover. Where, for example, do all these 'must's come from? Why does he think it foolish not to see things in a way that appears, *prima facie*, to be false to our ordinary intuitions about the object of love? What leads us to believe that truth is to be found in the denial of these perceptions? The references to 'excessively intense passion' and to a 'relaxing' raise the possibility that this strategy is adopted at least in part for reasons of mental health, because a certain sort of tension has become too risky or difficult to bear. A kind of therapy alters the look of the world, making the related the same, the irreplaceable replaceable. If one 'must' (by nature) 'pursue the beauty of form', be sexually drawn to bodily beauty, it is most sensible to do it in a way that does not involve this costly tension. And one can do this, if one is determined enough and has the help of a skillful teacher.

At the next stage, once again, the lover makes a decision to consider something the same and to adjust values accordingly: 'He must consider that the beauty in souls is more honorable than that in the body' (210B6–7). This judgment must clearly have been preceded, as was the last, by the perception of a relatedness and a prudent decision to treat the related as intimately comparable. Once again, indications are that he is coming to see a truth that he had not previously seen; but, as before, the negative motivation that comes from his need is at least as

prominent as the positive one that comes from the truth. So, in each stage of the ascent, the aspiring lover, aided by his teacher, sees relationships between one beauty and another, acknowledges that these beauties are comparable and intersubstitutable, differing only in quantity. He emerges with a proportionally diminished, though not fully extinguished, regard for those he formerly prized. His vision is broadened to take in the beauty or value of laws, institutions, sciences. We hear talk about comparisons of *size* between one value and another (210B6, 210C5), of a 'vast amount' of value (210D1). (Later Socrates will ascribe to Alcibiades the desire to 'make an exchange of *kalon* for *kalon*' (218E) – and, since Socrates' *kalon* is 'entirely surpassing', Alcibiades stands accused of *pleonexia*, a greedy desire for *more*.)[32] The teacher leads him, makes him see (210C7), until at last he is able to conceive of the whole of beauty as a vast ocean, whose components are, like droplets, qualitatively indistinguishable:

> And looking towards the vast amount of the beautiful, he will no longer, like some servant, loving the beauty of a particular boy or a particular man or of one set of customs, and being the slave of this, remain contemptible and of no account. But turned towards the vast sea of the beautiful and contemplating, he gives birth to many beautiful and grand speeches and reasonings in his abundant love of wisdom. (210C7–D5)

Education turns you around, so that you do not see what you used to see.[33] It also turns you into a free man instead of a servant. Diotima connects the love of particulars with tension, excess, and servitude; the love of a qualitatively uniform 'sea' with health, freedom, and creativity. The claim for the change of perception and belief involved in the ascent is not just that the new beliefs are *true*. In fact, questions of truth seem muted; the gap between 'family-related' and 'one and the same' indicates that the ascent may be playing fast and loose with the truth, at least as human beings experience it. (Whatever my brother (*adelphos*) is, he is certainly not one and the same with me.) Its strategy for progress is no less radical than the *technē* of the *Protagoras*, to which it now draws surprisingly close.

It is a startling and powerful vision. Just try to think it seriously: this body of this wonderful beloved person is *exactly* the same in quality as that person's mind and inner life. Both, in turn, the same in quality as the value of Athenian democracy; of Pythagorean geometry; of Eudoxan astronomy. What would it be like to look at a body and to see in it exactly the same shade and tone of goodness and beauty as in a mathematical proof – *exactly* the same, differing only in amount and in location, so that the choice between making love with that person and contemplating that proof presented itself as a choice between having n measures of water and having $n + 100$? Again, what would it be like to see in the mind and soul of Socrates nothing else but (a smaller amount of) the quality that one also sees in a good system of laws, so that the choice between conversing with Socrates and administering those laws was, in the same way, a matter of qualitative indifference? What would it be like, finally, to see not just each single choice, but

all choices (or at least all choices involving love and deep attachment) as similarly unvariegated? These proposals are so bold as to be pretty well incomprehensible from the ordinary point of view. We can perhaps, though with difficulty, get ourselves, in imagination, into the posture of seeing bodies as qualitatively interchangeable with one another – because we have, or can imagine having, relevant experiences of promiscuity or of non-particularized sexual desire. We might even imagine the interchangeability of souls, helped by a religious heritage according to which we are all equally, and centrally, children of God. We might even try putting these two together, to get a thoroughgoing interchangeability of persons; and we can see how that sort of replaceability would indeed subvert motivations for certain troublesome and disorder-producing acts. (Think of Epictetus's profound observation that if Menelaus had been able to think of Helen as just another woman, 'gone would have been the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey* as well'.) But the wide sea of the *kalon* is beyond us. We sense only that to see in this way, if one could do it, would indeed change the world, removing us both from vulnerable attachments and from severe conflicts among them. We can comprehend the extent to which it would erode the motivation for running after Alcibiades, for devoting oneself to a particular beloved person, even for loving one city above all other things. Nor will such commitments collide painfully, since all *kalon* is one thing (cf. Ch. 5, §v). The lover, seeing a flat uniform landscape of value, with no jagged promontories or deep valleys, will have few motivations for moving here rather than there on that landscape. A contemplative life is a natural choice.

At each stage, then, the teacher persuades the pupil to abandon his or her cherished human belief in irreplaceability in the service of his inner need for health. Socrates is among the convinced; and he is now trying to convince us that our human nature could find no better ally or collaborator (*sunergos*) than this sort of *erōs* (212B). An ally comes from another country to help me win my battles. If the ascent appears remote from human nature, that is because, like the *Protagoras* science but more explicitly, it is a device for progress beyond the merely human.

A central feature of the ascent is that the lover escapes, gradually, from his bondage to luck. The Aristophanic lover loved in a chancy way. He or she might never meet the right other in the first place; if he did, the other might not love him, or might die, or leave him. Or he might cease to love; or leave; or retreat; or be tormented by jealousy. Often his passions will distract him from his other plans, and from the good. Even at the best of times he would be trying to do something both impossible and self-defeating. The philosopher is free of all this. His or her contemplative love for all beauty carries no risk of loss, rejection, even frustration. Speeches and thoughts are always in our power to a degree that emotional and physical intercourse with loved individuals is not. And if one instance of worldly beauty fades away or proves recalcitrant, there remains a boundless sea: he will feel the loss of the droplet hardly at all.

But the final revelation to the initiate lover takes him beyond this minimal

dependence on the world. Like the other advances, this one comes as a new vision (210E2–5). He sees it 'all at once' (*exaipbnēs*), the culmination of all his efforts:

> First of all, it is always, and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither grows nor decays; then it is not beautiful in this respect but ugly in this, nor beautiful at one time and not at another, nor beautiful by comparison with this, ugly by comparison with that, nor beautiful here, ugly there, as though it were beautiful for some, and ugly for others... He will see it as being itself by itself with itself, eternal and unitary, and see all the other beautifuls as partaking of it in such a manner that, when the others come to be and are destroyed, it never comes to be any more or less, nor passively suffers anything... This indeed is what it is to approach erotic matters correctly, or to be led to them by another... In this place, my dear Socrates, if anywhere, life is livable for a human being – the place where he contemplates the beautiful itself. If ever you see that, it will not seem to you to be valuable by comparison with gold and clothing and beautiful boys and youths, the sight of whom at present so inflames you that you, and many others, provided that you could see your beloved boys and be continually with them, are prepared to give up eating and drinking, and to spend your whole time contemplating them and being with them. What do we think it would be like... if someone should see the beautiful itself – unalloyed, pure, unmixed, not stuffed full of human flesh and colors and lots of other mortal rubbish, but if he could see the divine beautiful itself in its unity? Do you think life would be miserable for a man who looked out there, and contemplated it in an appropriate way and was with it? Or don't you understand that there alone, where he sees the beautiful with that faculty to which it is visible, it will be possible for him to give birth not to simulacra of excellence, since it is no simulacrum he is grasping, but to true excellence, since he is grasping truth? And as he brings forth true excellence and nourishes it, he will become god-loved, and, if ever a human being can, immortal? (210E6–212A7)

So ends Diotima's speech of persuasion. I have quoted it at length not only to indicate the powerfully rhetorical character of her discourse, which moves and persuades us as it does Socrates, but also to show, in it, further evidence of the practical motivation lying behind the ascent. The lover's final contemplative activity meets the *Republic*'s standards of true value in every way. Its objects are 'unalloyed, pure, unmixed' (211E); it is itself in no way necessarily mixed with pain. It is a stable activity, giving continuous expression to our truth-loving and creative nature; and one reason why it can be so stable is that it addresses itself to an unvarying and immortal object. We have, at the end, an object of love that is always available, that will to the highest degree satisfy our longing to 'be with' the beloved all the time. Sexual 'being-with' (the word used at 211D6, '*suneinai*', is also the ordinary word for intercourse) cannot be stably prolonged, both because of its internally 'impure' structure of need and repletion, and also because it relies on the presence of an object that is not the lover's to command. Intellectual intercourse ('*suneinai*' is used of the form at 212A2) is free of these defects. Furthermore, as Diotima says, this activity also gets us to the truth, instead of mere simulacra. But considerations of truth are very closely interwoven, in this speech as previously, with motivational appeals based on need. The ascent is true; but it requires us to sacrifice 'truths' that we deeply know. So she must motivate

the change in vision for us from where we are. She does so by reminding us of the deep demand of our nature – a demand altogether familiar to us from our empirical lives – for self-sufficient love. The ascent passage accepts Aristophanes' characterization of the misery and the irrational tumult of personal erotic need, agreeing that *erōs* disrupts our rational planning to the point where we would willingly give up everything else, even health, even life. But that is intolerable. Such a life is not 'livable';[34] we must find another way. Instead of flesh and all that mortal rubbish, an immortal object must, and therefore can, be found. Instead of painful yearning for a single body and spirit, a blissful contemplative completeness. It is, we see, the old familiar *erōs*, that longing for an end to longing, that motivates us here to ascend to a world in which erotic activity, as we know it, will not exist.[35]

As Socrates concludes, we are moved to think back through this story (which, we now recall, is being told to us through Aristodemus, a convert and 'lover' of Socrates, as reported by Apollodorus, another formerly wretched person whom philosophy has made happy), and to look at the life and behavior of Socrates as exemplifying the benefits of ascent. It is, first of all, striking that the lives of Socrates and the Socratic narrator appear remarkably orderly and free from distraction. 'I used to rush around here and there as things fell out by chance', Apollodorus remembers, at a distance (172C). And his master too seems at this point in his life to be always remarkably in control of his activities, free from ordinary passions and distractions. He is reliably virtuous – courageous, just, temperate – all without lapses of weakness or fatigue. And this seems intimately connected with his imperviousness to happenings in the world. He cares little about clothing, either for beauty or for comfort. We will hear later of his remarkable endurance of cold and hardship. He walks barefoot over the ice, faces the coldest frosts without any coat or hat. This could be interpreted as the behavior of an arrogant man bent on self-display; so, we are told, it was interpreted by the soldiers (220B). But the correct interpretation seems to be that Socrates has so dissociated himself from his body that he genuinely does not feel its pain, or regard its sufferings as things genuinely happening to him. He is famous for drinking without ever getting drunk, and without the hangovers complained of by the others (176A–B, 214A, 220A). He does not succumb to the most immediate and intense sexual temptation (219B–D). He can go sleepless without ever suffering from fatigue (220C–D, 223D). We cannot explain all this by supposing his physiology to be unique. We are invited, instead, to look for the explanation in his psychological distance from the world and from his body as an object in the world. He really seems to think of himself as a being whose mind is distinct from his body, whose personality in no way identifies itself with the body and the body's adventures. Inside the funny, fat, snub-nosed shell, the soul, self-absorbed, pursues its self-sufficient contemplation. We see him, at the beginning of the walk to the party, 'turning his attention in some way in upon himself' (174D, cf. 220C–D), so that he becomes, at a point, actually forgetful of the world. He falls behind the group; they find him much later, standing in a neighbor's porch, literally deaf

to all entreaties. The sounds that enter in at the well-functioning ears never penetrate to the mind. There is a gulf. 'Leave him alone', warns Aristodemus. 'This is a habit of his. Sometimes he stops and stands wherever he happens to be.'

These details have usually been read as intriguing pieces of biography. Perhaps they are. But they are also more than that. They show us what Diotima could only abstractly tell: what a human life starts to look like as one makes the ascent. Socrates is put before us as an example of a man in the process of making himself self-sufficient – put before us, in our still unregenerate state, as a troublesome question mark and a challenge. Is this the life we want for ourselves? Is that the way we want, or need, to see and hear? We are not allowed to have the cozy thought that the transformed person will be just like us, only happier. Socrates is weird. He is, in fact, 'not similar to any human being'. We feel, as we look at him, both awestruck and queasy, timidly homesick for ourselves. We feel that we must look back at what we currently are, our loves and our ways of seeing, the problems these cause for practical reason. We need to see ourselves more clearly before we can say whether we would like to become this other sort of being, excellent and deaf.

IV

The summit of the ascent, Diotima tells us, is marked by a revelation: 'All at once (*exaiphnēs*) he will see a beauty marvelous in its nature, for the sake of which he had made all his previous efforts.' Now, as we begin our reflective descent into ourselves, at this moment when some of the symposiasts are praising Socrates and Aristophanes is trying to remind us again of his view of our nature (212C), we see another sort of revelation, and another beauty. 'And all at once (*exaiphnēs*) there was a loud knocking at the outer door. It sounded like a drunken party; you could hear the voice of the flute girl... And a minute later they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the courtyard, very drunk and shouting loudly, asking where Agathon was and demanding to be taken to Agathon.' The form of the beautiful appeared to the mind's eye alone, looking 'not like some face or hands or anything else that partakes in body' (211A); it was 'unalloyed, pure, unmixed, not stuffed full of human flesh and colors and lots of other mortal rubbish' (211E). Alcibiades the beautiful, the marvelous nature, presents himself to our sensuous imagination, an appearance bursting with color and all the mixed impurity of mortal flesh. We are made to hear his voice, vividly see his movements, even smell the violets that trail through his hair and shade his eyes (212E1–2), their perfume blending with the heavier odors of wine and sweat. The faculty that apprehends the form is preeminently stable, unwavering, and in our power to exercise regardless of the world's happenings. The faculties that see and hear and respond to Alcibiades will be the feelings and sense-perceptions of the body, both vulnerable and inconstant. From the rarified contemplative world of the self-sufficient philosopher we are suddenly, with an abrupt jolt, returned to the world we inhabit and invited

(by the parallel 'all at once') to see this vision, too, as a dawning and a revelation.[36] We are then moved to wonder whether there is a kind of understanding that is itself vulnerable and addressed to vulnerable objects – and, if there is, whether the ascent comprehends it, transcends it, or simply passes it by. (The philosopher asks to be taken to the *agathon*, the repeatable universal Good. Alcibiades asks to be taken to Agathon, a not-very-good particular boy.)

Alcibiades takes up this theme at the very opening of his speech. 'You there', says Socrates, 'What do you mean to do?' (A question that reverberates ominously for us in view of our greater knowledge of what this man will soon be up to.) 'Do you mean to give a mock-praise of me? Or what are you going to do?' The answer is a simple one, though difficult to understand. 'I'm going to tell the truth. Do you think you'll allow that?' (Why should anyone, especially a pupil of Socrates, think that philosophy might be resistant to the truth?) When, shortly after, he tells us more about his sort of truth-telling, we begin to understand why he is on the defensive. 'Gentlemen, I shall undertake to praise Socrates through images. He may think that it is a mock-praise, but the image will be for the sake of the truth, not for ridicule.' Asked to speak about Love, Alcibiades has chosen to speak of a particular love; no definitions or explanations of the nature of anything, but just a story of a particular passion for a particular contingent individual. Asked to make a speech, he gives us the story of his own life: the understanding of *erōs* he has achieved through his own experience. (The concluding words of his speech are the tragic maxim *pathonta gnōnai*, 'understanding through experience' or 'suffering' – cf. Ch. 2.) And, what is more, this story conveys its truths using images or likenesses – a poetic practice much deplored by the Socrates of the *Republic*, since images lack the power to provide us with true general accounts or explanations of essences (cf. Interlude 1; Ch. 7 §III). But his opening remarks indicate that Alcibiades is not simply ignorant of these philosophical objections. He anticipates criticism. He anticipates, in fact, that the philosopher will not *allow* his truths, or not allow their claim to be the truth. And he asserts, in the face of this danger, that, nonetheless, what he will tell will be truth – that the truth can and will be told in just this way.

What could lie behind this claim? Perhaps something like this. There are some truths about love that can be learned only through the experience of a particular passion of one's own. If one is asked to teach those truths, one's only recourse is to recreate that experience for the hearer: to tell a story, to appeal to his or her imagination and feelings by the use of vivid narrative. Images are valuable in this attempt to make the audience share the experience, to feel, from the inside, what it is *like* to be that. The comparison of Socrates to the Silenus-statue, for example, takes this man who is not intimately known to the hearer and, by comparing him to something that is part of everyday experience, makes available to the hearer something of the feeling of what it is like to want and to want to know him. We shall examine this and other such cases later on; we shall also see that Alcibiades, drunk, wound round with ivy, presents himself to our understanding as an image that tells the truth.

We now notice that Alcibiades is aligning himself with a tradition that defends the role of poetic or 'literary' texts in moral learning. Certain truths about human experience can best be learned by living them in their particularity. Nor can this particularity be grasped solely by thought 'itself by itself'. As Aeschylus or Sophocles might well have argued, it frequently needs to be apprehended through the cognitive activity of imagination, emotions, even appetitive feelings:[37] through putting oneself inside a problem and feeling it. But we cannot all live, in our own overt activities, through all that we ought to know in order to live well. Here literature, with its stories and images, enters in as an extension of our experience, encouraging us to develop and understand our cognitive/emotional responses.[38]

If this is, indeed, Alcibiades' view, it is not surprising that he is on the defensive in this company. If the symposiasts have anything in common, it is that they seem to believe that *erōs* can and should be praised in the abstract. Particular stories enter in briefly as examples of general principles, but none is described fully or concretely, in a way that would appeal to the sensuous imagination. Aristophanes' myth might be said to teach through an image of human nature; and his poetic gifts are evident in the vividness with which he describes the movements and feelings of the mythic creatures. But the creatures remain anonymous exemplars; and their loved ones, though individuals, are abstractly characterized. We have a hard time seeing ourselves in them, our particular loves in this odd fitting-together. Socrates, meanwhile, has attacked even this limited appeal to lived experience in the name of philosophical wisdom. Nobody loves a half or a whole, unless that half or whole is beautiful and good. Socrates claims to have *epistēmē* of erotic matters (177D); and Socratic *epistēmē*, unlike Alcibiades' *pathonta gnōnai*, is deductive, scientific, concerned with universals. (When Aristotle wants to defend the role, in practical wisdom, of a non-deductive intuition of particulars through feeling and experience, he does so by *contrasting* this intuitive grasp with *epistēmē* – *EN* 1142a23ff.). The Socratic search for definitions embodying *epistēmē* is, throughout the dialogues, the search for a universal account that covers and explains all the particulars. To answer a Socratic 'What is *X*?' question by enumerating particular examples or telling stories is either to misunderstand or to reject his demand. In the early dialogues, examples provide material towards *epistēmē*, material a definition must take into account; they can never on their own embody *epistēmē*.[39] And here in the *Symposium* Socrates' attitude to the particular case seems to be harsher still. Examples are relevant not as complex wholes, but only insofar as they exemplify a repeatable property. And, as for images, the revelation of the beautiful can count as truth for him only because it is *not* a (sensory) image (212A) and does not present itself *through* images. Images are contrasted with truth both as objects and as sources of understanding.[40] Only with the dulling of the 'sight of the body', the senses and the sensuous imagination, does intellect, the 'sight of the mind', begin to flourish (219A).

Socratic philosophy, then, cannot allow the truths of Alcibiades to count as contributions to philosophical understanding. It must insist that the non-repeatable

and sensuous aspects of the particular case are irrelevant, even a hindrance to correct seeing. And it is not only the philosophy of Socrates against which Alcibiades must defend his claim to teach. It is also most of the tradition of ethical discourse that got its start with Socrates. Very few moral philosophers, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, have welcomed stories, particulars, and images into their writing on value. Most have regarded these elements of discourse with suspicion (cf. Ch. 1).[41] As a result, contrasts between the mixed and the pure, between story and argument, the literary and the philosophical are as sharply drawn in much of the modern profession of philosophy as they are in this text by Plato – but culpably, because unreflectively, and without Plato's loving recreation of the speech of the other side, his willingness to call into question the contrasts themselves.

The *Symposium* and Alcibiades have fallen victim to these suspicions. Frequently ignored by the philosophers of our tradition (or studied in judiciously selected excerpts), this entire dialogue has been described in its most recent edition as 'the most literary of all Plato's works and one which all students of classics are likely to want to read whether or not they are studying Plato's philosophy'.[42] Which is to say, we will let Alcibiades have his say in some other department, since he clearly has not grasped the way philosophy does things. (And even a piece of critical writing about the *Symposium*, if it responds to Alcibiades' stylistic claims in its own style, will be likely to encounter this resistance. It will be addressed as a literary diversion, or asked to prove Socratically that it, too, is pure enough to tell the truth.)

But to place in this way the burden of proof on Alcibiades – to force him either to argue with Socrates on Socrates' own terms or to take his love stories elsewhere – is simply a refusal to hear him or to enter his world. It is a refusal to investigate and to be affected, where the strangeness of the material calls, above all, for questioning and humble exploration. It is Socrates' response.

Alcibiades' story is, in fact, just a love story. It is, however, not *a* love story, but the story of Socrates, and of the love of Alcibiades for Socrates. Alcibiades, asked to speak about *erôs*, talks about one person.[43] He cannot describe the passion or its object in general terms, because his experience of love has happened to him this way only once, in connection with an individual who is seen by him to be like nobody else in the world. The entire speech is an attempt to communicate that uniqueness. He might have begun his answer by enumerating the excellent qualities of this unlikely figure. This might all have been true, and yet it would not have been sufficient to capture the particular tone and intensity of the love; it might even mislead, by implying that another person turning up with these same repeatable properties would make Alcibiades feel the same way. But he doesn't know that. So Alcibiades tells some Socrates stories; he gropes for images and associations to communicate the inside feel of the experience. He mentions Socrates' virtues in the process of describing the wholeness of a unique personality. The speech, disorganized and tumultuous, moves from imaging to describing, response to story, and back again many times over. It is precisely its

groping, somewhat chaotic character that makes it so movingly convincing as an account – and an expression (cf. 'even now' at 215D, 216A) – of love.

Two things in the speech, above all, strike us as strange. Using them as clues we may perhaps be able to understand more fully its teaching and its relationship to Socratic teaching. The first is its confusion about sexual roles. Alcibiades begins as the beautiful *erōmenos*, but seems to end as the active *erastēs*, while Socrates, apparently the *erastēs*, becomes the *erōmenos* (222B). The second is Alcibiades' odd habit of incarnation – the way he speaks of his soul, his reason, his feelings and desires, as pieces of flesh that can experience the bites, burns, and tears that are the usual lot of flesh.

The *erōmenos*, in Greek homosexual custom (as interpreted, for example, in Sir Kenneth Dover's authoritative study),[44] is a beautiful creature without pressing needs of his own. He is aware of his attractiveness, but self-absorbed in his relationship with those who desire him. He will smile sweetly at the admiring lover; he will show appreciation for the other's friendship, advice, and assistance. He will allow the lover to greet him by touching, affectionately, his genitals and his face, while he looks, himself, demurely at the ground. And, as Dover demonstrates from an exhaustive study of Greek erotic painting, he will even occasionally allow the importunate lover to satisfy his desires through intercrural intercourse. The boy may hug him at this point, or otherwise positively indicate affection. But two things he will not allow, if we judge from the evidence of works of art that have come down to us. He will not allow any opening of his body to be penetrated; only hairy satyrs do that. And he will not allow the arousal of his own desire to penetrate the lover. In all of surviving Greek art, there are no boys with erections. Dover concludes, with some incredulity, 'The penis of the *erastēs* is sometimes erect even before any bodily contact is established, but that of the *erōmenos* remains flaccid even in circumstances to which one would expect the penis of any healthy adolescent to respond willy-nilly.'[45] The inner experience of an *erōmenos* would be characterized, we may imagine, by a feeling of proud self-sufficiency. Though the object of importunate solicitation, he is himself not in need of anything beyond himself. He is unwilling to let himself be explored by the other's needy curiosity, and he has, himself, little curiosity about the other. He is something like a god, or the statue of a god. (The *Philebus* (53D) cites the pair *erōmenos/erastēs* as a paradigmatic example of the contrast between the complete or self-sufficient (*auto kath' hauto*) and the incomplete or needy – illustrating its praise of philosophical contemplation with this sexual analogy.)

For Alcibiades, who had spent much of his young life as this sort of closed and self-absorbed being, the experience of love is felt as a sudden openness, and, at the same time, an overwhelming desire to open. The presence of Socrates makes him feel, first of all, a terrifying and painful awareness of being perceived. He wants, with part of himself, to 'hold out' (216A), to remain an *erōmenos*. His impulse, in service of this end, is to run away, hide, stop up his ears – openings that can be entered, willy-nilly, by penetrating words (216A–B). But he senses at the same time that in this being seen and being spoken to, in this siren music (216A)

that rushes into his body in this person's presence, is something he deeply needs not to avoid: 'There's something I feel with nobody else but Socrates – something you would not have thought was in me – and that is a sense of shame. He is the only person who makes me feel shame... There are times when I'd gladly see him dead. But if that happened, you understand, I'd be worse off than ever' (216A–C). The openness of the lover brings with it (as Phaedrus has already insisted – 179A) this naked vulnerability to criticism. In the closed world of the *erōmenos*, defects and treasures, both, hide comfortably from scrutiny. Being known by the lover can, by contrast, bring the pain of shame, as the lover's eye reveals one's own imperfections. On the other hand this pain, as he dimly sees it, may lead to some kind of growth.

So Alcibiades is thrown into confusion about his role. He knows himself to be, as an object, desirable. 'I was amazingly vain about my beauty' (217A). He thought of his alliance with Socrates as a decision to grant a favor, while remaining basically unmoved (217A). And yet now he wants and needs, the illumination of the other's activity.

More confusing still, he feels, at the same time, a deep desire to know Socrates – a desire as conventionally inappropriate as his desire to be known. His speech makes repeated and central use of the image of *opening up* the other: an image which is essentially sexual, and inseparable from his sexual aims and imaginings, but which is also epistemic, intended to convey to us his desire 'to hear everything that he knew' (217A) and to know everything that he was. In the early days of his vanity, this longing appears to be confused with personal ambition (217A); but as his love persists and his vanity abates (compare the present tenses of 215D, 216A, etc., with the past tense of 217A), the desire to know and to tell truth about Socrates does not abate. The speech expresses the understanding he has gained, as well as his continuing curiosity.

Socrates, he tells us, is like one of those toy Sileni made by craftsmen. On the outside they look unremarkable, even funny. But what you are moved to do, what you cannot resist doing once you see the crack running down the middle, is to open them up. (They can be opened up because they have this crack or scar, and are not completely smooth.) Then, on the inside, you see the hidden beauty, the elaborate carving of god-statues. We might imagine the effect to be like that of the amazing mediaeval rosary bead in the Cloisters in New York. On the outside, a decorated sphere, nothing remarkable. Then you pry the two halves apart to reveal 'the treasure inside' (216E) – a marvelously wrought scene of animals, trees, and men, all carved with the most delicate precision. That something you thought to be a sphere should contain its own world: that is the surprise, and the reason for awe.

Among our first and best-loved toys are things that can be opened to show something on the inside. Even before we can speak, we are trying to open things up. We spend hours sitting on the floor in rapt attention, pulling our spherical balls of wood or plastic apart into their two halves, looking for the hidden ball, or bell, or family. By using such toys as images, Alcibiades reminds us that the

urge to open things up, to get at and explore the inside concealed by the outside, is one of our earliest and strongest desires, a desire in which sexual and epistemological need are joined and, apparently, inseparable. We long to probe and bring to light what is concealed and secret; and when we see a crack, that is, to us, a signal that this aim can be fulfilled in the object. We long to open the cracked object up, to make the other's beauty less rounded and more exposed, to explore the world that we imagine to be there, coming to know it by means of feelings, emotions, sensations, intellect. Alcibiades sees his sexual aim, the fullest fulfillment of which demands both physical intimacy and philosophical conversation, as a kind of epistemic aim, the aim to achieve a more complete understanding of this particular complex portion of the world.

It is easy enough to see structural parallels between sexual desire and the desire for wisdom. Both are directed towards objects in the world, and aim at somehow grasping or possessing these objects. The fulfilled grasp of the object brings, in both cases, satiety and the temporary cessation of desire: no sphere seduces, 'no god searches for wisdom' (204A). (The *contemplation* of truth is, of course, another matter.) Both can be aroused by beauty and goodness, and both seek to understand the nature of that goodness. Both revere the object as a separate, self-complete entity, and yet long, at the same time, to incorporate it. But Alcibiades appears to want to claim something more controversial and anti-Socratic than this parallelism. With his claims that a story tells the truth and that his goal is to open up and to know, he suggests that the lover's knowledge of the particular other, gained through an intimacy both bodily and intellectual, is itself a unique and uniquely valuable *kind* of practical understanding, and one that we risk losing if we take the first step up the Socratic ladder. (The *Phaedrus* will develop this suggestion, confirming our reading.)

Socratic knowledge of the good, attained through pure intellect operating apart from the senses, yields universal truths – and, in practical choice, universal rules. If we have apprehended the form, we will be in possession of a general account of beauty, an account that not only holds true of all and only instances of beauty, but also explains why they are correctly called instances of beauty, and grouped together.[46] Such understanding, once attained, would take priority over our vague, mixed impressions of particular beautifuls. It would tell us how to see.

The lover's understanding, attained through the supple interaction of sense, emotion, and intellect (any one of which, once well trained, may perform a cognitive function in exploring and informing us concerning the other – cf. Ch. 7) yields particular truths and particular judgments. It insists that those particular intuitive judgments are prior to any universal rules we may be using to guide us.[47] A lover decides how to respond to his or her lover not on the basis of definitions or general prescriptions, but on the basis of an intuitive sense of the person and the situation, which, although guided by general theories, is not subservient to them. This does not mean that their judgments and responses are not rational. Indeed, Alcibiades would claim that a Socratic adherence to rule and refusal to see and feel the particular as such is what is irrational. To have seen that, and

how, Socrates is like nobody else, to respond to him as such and to act accordingly, is the rational way to behave towards another individual. Nor does it mean that this love neglects the repeatable general features in which Socrates is interested: for Alcibiades sees Socrates' virtues and is moved by them. But his knowledge sees more, and differently; it is an integrated response to the person as a unique whole.[48]

It is tempting to try to understand the contrast between these two kinds of knowledge in terms of the contrast between propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance. This would, I believe, be an error. First of all, Socratic knowledge itself is not simply propositional knowledge. Because of Socrates' constant emphasis on the claim that the man with *epistēmē* is the man who is able to give explanations or accounts, the rendering 'understanding' is, in general, more appropriate.[49] Second, both kinds of understanding, not just the Socratic kind, are concerned with truths. Alcibiades is claiming not just an ineffable familiarity with Socrates, but the ability to tell the truth about Socrates. He wants to claim that through a lover's intimacy he can produce accounts (stories) that are more deeply and precisely true – that capture more of what is characteristic and practically relevant about Socrates, that explain more about what Socrates does and why – than any account that could be produced by a form-lover who denied himself the cognitive resources of the senses and emotions.

Finally, there is much about the lover's understanding that cannot be captured by either model of knowledge, but can be better conceived as a kind of 'knowing how'. The lover can be said to understand the beloved when, and only when, he knows how to treat him or her: how to speak, look, and move at various times and in various circumstances; how to give pleasure and how to receive it; how to deal with the loved one's complex network of intellectual, emotional, and bodily needs. This understanding requires acquaintance and yields the ability to tell truths; but it does not seem to be reducible to either.

Alcibiades suggests, then, that there is a kind of practical understanding that consists in the keen responsiveness of intellect, imagination, and feeling to the particulars of a situation. Of this wisdom the lover's understanding of the particular beloved is a central and particularly deep case – and not only a case among cases, but one whose resulting self-understanding might be fundamental to the flourishing of practical wisdom in other areas of life as well. The lover's understanding obviously has many components that are independent of the success of his or her specifically sexual projects. Alcibiades can tell the truth about Socrates' unique strangeness even though his aims were frustrated. And not just any successful lover would have had his intellectual and emotional grasp. (Indeed, in this case the frustration of sexual vanity is of considerable positive importance.) Aristotle will insist that such intimate personal knowledge arises in the relation of parent to child (cf. Ch. 12). But the speech suggests, as well, that with the failure of physical intimacy a certain *part* of practical understanding is lost to Alcibiades. There is a part of Socrates that remains dark to him, a dimension of intuitive

responsiveness to this particular person, an aptness of speech, movement, and gesture, that he can never develop, a kind of 'dialectic' that is missing.[50] Sexuality is a metaphor for personal intimacy; but it is also more than a metaphor, as the *Phaedrus*, with its connections between 'touching' and knowing, will insist.

It is, then, in his openness to such knowing that Alcibiades is revealed as no proper *erōmenos*. To receive the other, he must not be self-sufficient, closed against the world. He must put aside the vanity of his beauty and become, himself, in his own eyes, an object in the world: in the world of the other's activity, and in the larger world of happenings that affect his dealings with the other. Such an object will know more if it has a crack in it.

This gives us a key to our second puzzle: why Alcibiades should persistently speak of his soul, his inner life, as something of flesh and blood like the visible body. Alcibiades has no particular metaphysical view of the person; he makes it clear that he is uncertain about how to refer to what is 'inside' the flesh-and-blood body. What he knows is that this inner part of him is responding like a thing of flesh. He says he feels like a sufferer from snakebite – only he has been 'bitten by something more painful and the most painful way one can be bitten: I've been bitten and wounded in the heart or soul, or whatever one should call it, by the philosophical speeches of Socrates' (217E–218A). And he tries, without success, to treat Socrates' 'whatever' in the same manner, shooting words like lightning bolts in the hope that they will 'pierce' him (219B). Whatever is flesh or fleshlike is vulnerable. The mark of body is its ability to be pierced and bitten, to be prey to snakes, lightning flashes, lovers. Alcibiades, without a philosophical view of mind, gives an extraordinary defense of 'physicalism' for the souls of lovers:

> All and only body is vulnerable to happenings in the world.
> I am inwardly bitten, pierced.
> Therefore this whatever-you-call-it is bodily (or very like body).

It is an argument that appeals to subjective experience, indeed to subjective suffering, to deny a 'Platonic' view of the soul as a thing that is at one and the same time the seat of personality and immortal/invulnerable. The seat of my personality just got bitten by those speeches, so I know it is not 'pure', 'unaffected', 'unmoved'. It is obvious that such a line of argument shows us nothing about the souls of philosophers, for whom the Platonic account may, for all Alcibiades knows, be correct. (This shows us what the *Phaedo* did not make explicit: that the Platonic picture of the soul is not so much a scientific fact as an ethical ideal, something to be chosen and achieved.)

Both the lover's epistemic aim and his felt vulnerability are captured for us in the central image of Alcibiades' story: the lightning bolt. Images of revelation, appearing, and radiance have been seen before. Alcibiades appears before us 'all at once' (212C), just as, for him, Socrates 'is accustomed to appear all at once' (*exaiphnēs anaphainesthai*, 213C), just when he least thinks he is there, and reminds Alcibiades of the inner radiance of his virtues. But now Alcibiades has spoken of the words and gestures of love as things hurled at the other like bolts of

lightning. This image knits together, with extraordinary compression, his views about sexual ambition, knowledge, and risk. A lightning bolt strikes all at once, unpredictably, usually allowing no hope of defense or control. It is at one and the same time a brilliance that brings illumination and a force that has the power to wound and to kill. It is, one might say, corporeal light. In the heaven of the philosopher, the Form of the Good, like an intelligible sun, gives intelligibility to the objects of understanding, while remaining, itself unmoving and unchanging.[51] It affects the pure soul only by inspiring it to perform self-sufficient acts of pure reasoning. In the world of Alcibiades, the illumination of the loved one's body and mind strikes like a moving, darting, bodily light, a light that makes its impact by touching as well as by illuminating. (It is rather like what happens to the sun in certain later paintings of Turner. No more a pure, remote condition of sight, it becomes a force that does things in the world to objects such as boats, waves, a just man's eyes – all of which are seen, insofar as they are thus illuminated, to be the sorts of things to which happenings can happen. And the light strikes the beholder's eyes, as well, with a triumphant searing power that refutes, again and again, his belief in his own completeness.) The lover has such light in him to deploy or give, and it is this that he longs to receive, even though it killed the mother of Dionysus. If Socrates had carried a shield, its device would have been the sun of the *Republic*, visible image of the intelligible form – the sun to which, as Alcibiades tells us, he prayed after a night of sleepless thought at Potidaea (220C–D). Alcibiades, placing on his shield the thunderbolt, marks in his own way the sort of being he claims to be, the sort of understanding he desires.

Our reading has now put us in a position to move from the interpretation of the image *used* by Alcibiades to the interpretation of the image that Alcibiades *is*, as he presents himself before us. He makes his appearance 'crowned with a thick crown of ivy and violets' (212E1–2), making dress itself an image that tells the truth.[52] The crown of violets is, first of all, a sign of Aphrodite (cf. *H. Hom.* 5.18, Solon 11.4). This hardly surprises us, except for the strange fact (of which we shall speak more later) that this aggressively masculine figure sees himself as a female divinity. It is also, further, a crown worn by the Muses. As he begins his truth-telling through images, Alcibiades, then, presents himself as a poet, and an inspiring god of poets (Plato?).

But the violet crown stands for something else as well: for the city of Athens herself. In a fragment from Pindar (only one of the poems that use this apparently well-known epithet) she is addressed:

> O glistening and violet-crowned and famous in song,
> Bulwark of Hellas, glorious Athens,
> Fortunate city.

The crown of violets is the delicate, growing sign of the flourishing of this strange and fragile democracy, now, in the time of Alcibiades, in its greatest danger. By so crowning himself, Alcibiades seems to indicate that his own attentiveness to the particular, to unique persons rather than repeatable properties, intuitions

rather than the rules, is the fruit of this city's education. This education values the original and the daring, relies on the ability of gifted leaders to 'improvise what is required' (Thuc. 1.138, cf. Ch. 10, § 111) and, instead of commanding humble subservience to law, asks free men to 'choose, in their nobility of character' (Thuc. 11.41) a life of virtue and service. Doing away, as it does, with rules, it depends on each man's capacity for practical wisdom and the understanding of the lover. Thucydides' Pericles enjoins the citizens to 'look at the city's power day by day and become her lovers' (*erastas autēs*, 11.43). *Erōs*, not law or fear, guides action. But this reliance on *erōs* puts democracy, like Alcibiades, very much at the mercy of fortune and the irrational passions.[53] The violet crown is worn by a gifted drunk, who will soon commit imaginative crimes.

The ivy is the sign of Dionysus, god of wine, god of irrational inspiration (cf. Ch. 3).[54] (Ivy represents the bodily fertility of the inspired lover, who is, and sees himself, as one of the growing things of the natural world, mutable and green.) Agathon appealed to Dionysus to judge the argument between him and Socrates (175E); Alcibiades' arrival answers his request. Dionysus, male in form yet of softly female bearing, exemplifies the sexual contractions of Alcibiades' aspirations. He embodies, too, another apparent contradiction: he is the patron god of both tragic and comic poetry. This is appropriate, since the speech of Alcibiades is both tragic and comic – tragic in its depiction of frustration and its foreshadowing of ruin, comic in the knowing self-humor of the story-teller, who exposes his vanity and illusions with Aristophanic delight. It is already beginning to be evident to us why Socrates should, at the dialogue's end, argue that comedy and tragedy can be the work of a single man. The Aristophanic view of love is of a piece both with the tragic account of *erōs* and with the vision of Alcibiades in its emphasis on the bodily and contingent nature of human erotic aspiration, the vulnerability of practical wisdom to the world. (Socrates charged Aristophanes with being 'exclusively taken up with Dionysus and Aphrodite' (177E).) Tragedy and comedy cherish the same values, value the same dangers. Both, furthermore, are linked through Dionysus to the fragile fortunes of Athenian democracy; both are in danger at the dramatic date, dead, along with Alcibiades, soon after.[55]

Now however, we see a further dimension to the *rapprochement*. Alcibiades is appealing, gripping, and, ultimately, tragic in part *because* he is also the comic poet of his own disaster. If he had told a melodramatic tale of anguish and loss, stripped of the wit, the self-awareness, and the laughter that characterize his actual speech, his story would be less tragic, because we would have less reason to care about him. A self-critical perception of one's cracks and holes, which issues naturally in comic poetry, is an important part of what we value in Alcibiades and want to salvage in ourselves. So it seems not accidental that Dionysus, god of tragic loss, should stand for both.

There is one more feature of Dionysus to which the ivy crown particularly directs us: he is the god who dies. He undergoes, each year, a ritual death and a rebirth, a cutting back and a resurgence, like the plant, like desire itself. Among

the gods he alone is not self-sufficient, he alone can be acted on by the world. He is the god who would be no use for teaching young citizens the 'god's eye' point of view. And yet, miraculously, despite his fragility, he restores himself and burgeons. This suggests that an unstable city, an unstable passion, might grow and flourish in a way truly appropriate to a god – a thought that has no place in the theology of the ideal city.

V

We now see a positive case for Alcibiades. But the speech is also, at the same time, Plato's indictment. He has invented a priestess whose job it is to save people from plagues; he has suggested that personal *erōs*, unregenerate, is this plague. We want now to discover in detail the reasons for this condemnation. What makes *erōs* intolerable? What gives rise to this overwhelming need to get above it and away from it?

There are, it must be said, problems for Alcibiades. First there is the problem of what happens to him and what his curiosity finds. His attempt to know the other encounters an obstacle in the stone of Socratic virtue. It is not without reason that Alcibiades compares Socratic virtues to statues of the gods. For, as we have seen, Socrates, in his ascent towards the form, has become, himself, very like a form – hard, indivisible, unchanging. His virtue, in search of science and of assimilation of the good itself, turns away from the responsive intercourse with particular earthly goods that is Alcibiades' knowledge.

It is not only Socrates' dissociation from his body. It is not only that he sleeps all night with the naked Alcibiades without arousal. There is, along with this remoteness, a deeper impenetrability of spirit. Words launched 'like bolts' have no effect. Socrates might conceivably have abstained from sexual relations while remaining attentive to the lover in his particularity. He might also have had a sexual relationship with Alcibiades while remaining inwardly aloof. But Socrates refuses in every way to be affected. He is stone; and he also turns others to stone. Alcibiades is to his sight just one more of the beautifuls, a piece of the form, a pure thing like a jewel.

So the first problem for Alcibiades is that his own openness is denied. He is a victim of *hubris*, pierced, mocked, dishonored[56] (219C, 222B, D). This might have led Alcibiades to philosophy if he had been able to make Diotima's prudent judgments of similarity. But since he remains determined to care for Socrates' individuality, he remains harmed by Socrates' denial. This is, of course, just a story, and the story of a unique problem. It is the story of an especially vain man, a man whose love of honor and reputation is recognized even by him to be an obstacle to goodness of life. There are, furthermore, not many stones like Socrates, his *erōmenos*. But, there are, on the other hand, many varieties of stone. If there is, by luck, responsiveness on both sides now, still there may be change, estrangement bringing painful loss of knowledge. As even Diotima concedes

before proposing the method of ascent that will try to remedy the problem, souls, with their thoughts, feelings, and desires, are no more stable than bodies. 'Our understandings come into being and pass away, and we are never the same even in our understandings, but every single understanding suffers this' (207E–208A). Even if there is rare stability in understanding and response, there will surely still be death to put an end to knowledge.

So happenings plague the lover; and we might begin to wonder how contingent these happenings are. But let us suppose, for a moment, that Alcibiades is involved in a mutually passionate love, in which both parties are lovers, each trying to explore the world that the openness of the other makes available. We want to know whether Diotima has reason to see personal *erōs* as, in its nature, a plague, or whether her criticisms work only against the unhappy cases, and speak only to those who either fear or are enmeshed in such experiences. Let us, then, imagine Alcibiades happy in love. Is he, then, in love, truly happy or good? The dialogue makes us wonder. No present fortune is guarantee of its own stability (cf. 200B–E). Therefore, as the dialogue indicates, fears, jealousies, and the threat of loss will be an intimate part of even the best experiences of loving. The playfully threatening banter between Socrates and Alcibiades, the mock violence that points to the real violence to come, are not necessarily to be read against the background of their estrangement. In the best of times such dangerous emotions could be summoned by the fear of the other's separateness. The attribution of value to an unstable external object brings internal instability of activity. There is a strong possibility that Alcibiades *wants* Socrates to be a statue – a thing that can be held, carried, or, when necessary, smashed. There is a possibility that this sort of intense love cannot tolerate, and wishes to end, autonomous movement. The sentimentalized lover of Greek erotic paintings greets the boy by affectionately touching him on face and genitals, indicating in this tender gesture respect and awe for his whole person.[57] The gesture of Alcibiades – the violent smashing of holy faces and genitals – may be, the dialogue suggests, a truer expression of unregenerate *erōs*.

There is also the equally troublesome possibility that it is precisely the stoniness of the other that attracts. The remote, round thing, gleaming like a form, undivided, lures with the promise of secret richness. It's nothing to open something that has a crack. But the perfect thing – if you could ever open that up, then you would be blessed and of unlimited power. Alcibiades loves the stone beauty that he finds: only that temperance is worthy of his pride, because only that cleverly eludes him. So, in yet another way, *erōs*, reaching for power, reaches towards its own immobility. When the light of Socrates 'appears all at once' for Alcibiades, it is the sort of light that, radiantly poured round the aspiring body, may seal or freeze it in, like a coat of ice. That is its beauty.

Furthermore, this happy lover, in loving a particular, loves a standing ground of conflict. For we have seen how Socrates' conception of all value as a homogeneous 'sea' defuses the most troublesome conflicts of value and also removes motives for akratic action. None of his choices is more troublesome than

the choice between n measures of value and $n+5$ measures. Alcibiades (like Haemon), loving an irreplaceable and incommensurable object – and loving at the same time other distinct things such as honor and military excellence – may be confronted by the world with less tractable choices (cf. Ch. 3, Ch. 4, Ch. 5 §v, Ch. 7, p. 221).

All this leads us to ask most seriously whether personal *erōs* can have, after all, any place in a life that is to be shaped and ruled by practical reason. We tried to think of a life in which *erōs* would play its part along with other component goods – intellectual, political, social. But the nature of personal erotic passion may be such as to be always unstable, both internally and in relation to the lover's whole plan. It fills one part of a life with unstable and vulnerable activity; this, according to the *Republic*, would be sufficient to disqualify it from goodness. And it also threatens, when given a part, to overwhelm the whole. Aristophanes said that the erotic needs of his mythical creatures made them indifferent to eating, drinking, and 'all other pursuits'. We see Alcibiades' jealous passions making him indifferent to truth and goodness. Practical reason shapes a world of value. But the lover, as a lover, ascribes enormous importance to another world outside of his own and autonomous from it. It is not clear that the integrity of his own world can survive this, that he can continue in such circumstances to feel that he is a maker of a world at all.[58] To feel so great a commitment to and power from what is external to your practical reason can feel like slavery, or madness. Alcibiades compares himself to someone who is gripped by something and out of his senses (215C5, 215D5, 218B2–3). His soul is in a turmoil (215E6). He is angry at himself for his slavish condition (215E6). 'I had no resource', he concludes, 'and I went around in slavery to this man, such slavery as has never been before' (219E; cf. 217A1–2). The past is still actual (215D8, 217E6–7). To be a slave is to be without autonomy, unable to live by the plans of your own reason, perhaps unable even to form a plan. But not to do this is not to be fully human. It is no wonder that, as we look on the man who will live, to the end, a disorderly, buffeted life, inconstant and wasteful of his excellent nature, we are tempted to say, with Socrates: 'I shudder at his madness and passion for love' (213D6).

We now begin to understand Plato's strategy in constructing this dramatic confrontation. Through Aristophanes, he raises certain doubts in our minds concerning the erotic projects to which we are most attached. And yet the speech of Aristophanes still praises *erōs* as most necessary, and necessary for the success of practical reason itself. He then shows us, through Socrates and Diotima, how, despite our needy and mortal natures, we can transcend the merely personal in *erōs* and ascend, through desire itself, to the good. But we are not yet persuaded that we can accept this vision of self-sufficiency and this model of practical understanding, since, with Vlastos, we feel that they omit something. What they omit is now movingly displayed to us in the person and the story of Alcibiades. We realize, through him, the deep importance unique passion has for ordinary human beings; we see its irreplaceable contribution to understanding. But the story brings a further problem: it shows us clearly that we cannot simply add the

love of Alcibiades to the ascent of Diotima; indeed, that we cannot have this love and the kind of stable rationality that she revealed to us. Socrates was serious when he spoke of two mutually exclusive varieties of vision.

And now, all at once, *exaiphnēs*, there dawns on us the full light of Plato's design, his comic tragedy of choice and practical wisdom. We see two kinds of value, two kinds of knowledge; and we see that we must choose. One sort of understanding blocks out the other. The pure light of the eternal form eclipses, or is eclipsed by, the flickering lightning of the opened and unstably moving body. You think, says Plato, that you can have this love and goodness too, this knowledge of and by flesh and good-knowledge too. Well, says Plato, you can't. You have to blind yourself to something, give up some beauty. 'The sight of reason begins to see clearly when the sight of the eyes begins to grow dim' – whether from age or because you are learning to be good.

But what, then, becomes of us, the audience, when we are confronted with the illumination of this true tragedy and forced to see everything? We are, Alcibiades tells us, the jury (219c). And we are also the accused. As we watch the trial of Socrates for the contemptuous overweening (*huperēphanias*, 219c5) of reason, which is at the same time the trial of Alcibiades for the contemptuous overweening of the body, we see what neither of them can fully see – the overweening of both. And we see that it is the way we must go if we are to follow either one or the other. But so much light can turn to stone. You have to refuse to see something, apparently, if you are going to act. I can choose to follow Socrates, ascending to the vision of the beautiful. But I cannot take the first step on that ladder as long as I *see* Alcibiades. I can follow Socrates only if, like Socrates, I am *persuaded* of the truth of Diotima's account; and Alcibiades robs me of this conviction. He makes me feel that in embarking on the ascent I am sacrificing a beauty; so I can no longer view the ascent as embracing the whole of beauty. The minute I think 'sacrifice' and 'denial', the ascent is no longer what it seemed, nor am I, in it, self-sufficient. I can, on the other hand, follow Alcibiades, making my soul a body. I can live in *erōs*, devoted to its violence and its sudden light. But once I have listened to Diotima, I see the loss of light that this course, too, entails – the loss of rational planning, the loss, we might say, of the chance to make a world. And then, if I am a rational being, with a rational being's deep need for order and for understanding, I feel that I *must* be false to *erōs*, for the world's sake.[59]

The *Symposium* now seems to us a harsh and alarming book. Its relation to the *Republic* and *Phaedo* is more ambiguous than we originally thought; for it does make a case for that conception of value, but it shows us also, all too clearly, how much that conception requires us to give up. It starkly confronts us with a choice, and at the same time it makes us see so clearly that we cannot choose anything. We see now that philosophy is not fully human; but we are terrified of humanity and what it leads to. It is *our* tragedy: it floods us with light and takes away action. As Socrates and Alcibiades compete for our souls, we become, like their object Agathon, beings without character, without choice. Agathon could stand their

blandishments, because he had no soul to begin with. We did have souls, and we feel they are being turned to statues.

So they go their ways – Socrates, sleepless, to the city for an ordinary day of dialectic, Alcibiades to disorder and to violence. The confusion of the body conceals the soul of Alcibiades from our sight. He becomes from now on an anonymous member of the band of drunken revellers; we do not even know when he departs. The ambitions of the soul conceal the body of Socrates from his awareness. Just as drink did not make him drunk, cold did not make him freeze, and the naked body of Alcibiades did not arouse him, so now sleeplessness does not make him stop philosophizing. He goes about his business with all the equanimity of a rational stone. Meanwhile, the comic and tragic poets sleep together, tucked in by the cool hand of philosophy (223D). *Those* two – philosophy and poetry – cannot live together or know each other's truths, that's for sure. Not unless literature gives up its attachment to the particular and the vulnerable and makes itself an instrument of Diotima's persuasion. But that would be to leave its own truths behind.

Between one telling of the story and another, or perhaps during the second telling itself – and, for us (in us?) during the time we take to read and experience this work – Alcibiades has died. With him dies a hope that *erōs* and philosophy could live together in the city and so save it from disaster. This was, perhaps, Apollodorus's hope, his companion's hope. It was also ours. Plutarch tells us that the night before his death Alcibiades dreamed that he was dressed in women's clothes. A courtesan was holding his head and painting his face with makeup. In the soul of this proudly aggressive man, it is a dream that expresses the wish for unmixed passivity: the wish to lose the need for practical reason, to become a being who could live entirely in the flux of *erōs* and so avoid tragedy. But at the same time it is a wish to be no longer an erotic being; for what does not reach out to order the world does not love, and the self-sufficiency of the passive object is as unerotic as the self-sufficiency of the god. It is, we might say, a wish not to live in the world. After the arrow had killed him, the courtesan Timandra, 'Honor-the-Man', wrapped his bitten body and his soul of flesh in her own clothes and buried him sumptuously in the earth.

When Alcibiades finished speaking, they burst out laughing at the frankness of his speech, because it looked as though he was still in love with Socrates (222C). He stood there, perhaps, with ivy in his hair, crowned with violets.[60]