THE SPACE BETWEEN:

ALCIBIADES AND EROS IN PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

by

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For M. L. Dula
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. 6

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 7

I. THE SYMPOSIUM: GENRE AND FORM ................................................................. 13
   As Satyr Play .................................................................................................................... 13
   As Critique of Encomia ................................................................................................ 16
   As Philosophic Dialectic: the Public vs. the Private Self ......................................... 19
   Function of the Framing Narrative ............................................................................. 22

II. THE ASCENT PASSAGE IN THE SYMPOSIUM ......................................................... 28
   The Steps and Stages of the Scala Amoris ................................................................. 28
   What Does Union with the Forms Mean For the Love of Individuals? ............... 31

III. KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION AS AN ACTIVITY .................................................. 37

IV. READING THE SPEECH OF ALCIBIADES ................................................................. 43
   What He Says and How He Says It ........................................................................... 43
   In Terms of the Ascent: Where is Alcibiades on the Scala Amoris? ....................... 50

CONCLUSION ......................................................................................................................... 53

WORKS CITED .................................................................................................................... 56
ABSTRACT

In evaluating Alcibiades' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, modern commentators often either conflate the historical figure and the fictive character, or else fail to make a distinction between Alcibiades the narrator and Alcibiades the eager young man whose adolescent encounters with Socrates which the more mature adult describes. The resulting scholarship tends to cast Alcibiades as a foil for Socrates and to reduce Plato's creation to a philosophic cautionary tale. Such reductions are misleadingly simplistic and require revision.

By taking care to let neither history nor reputation supersede the textual evidence the *Symposium* provides, we can make a compelling case for a more moderate assessment of Alcibiades' philosophical progress. In doing so, we find that he is not lacking in understanding but rather that his understanding is incomplete. As such, Alcibiades occupies the vaguely defined space of intermediacy and intermediaries—the μεταξὺ with which so much of the *Symposium* is concerned.
INTRODUCTION

μὴ τοίνυν ἀνάγκαζε ὃ μὴ καλὸν ἐστὶν αἰσχρὸν εἶναι,
μηδὲ ὃ μὴ ἀγαθὸν, κακὸν.

Then don't compel what is not beautiful to be ugly,
nor what is not good to be bad.

Diotima, *Symposium* 202b

Read uncharitably, Alcibiades' drunken encomium of Socrates in the latter portion of Plato's *Symposium* amounts to little more than an extended backhanded compliment from a would-be lover still stinging from the humiliation of rejection. Such a reading would be in keeping with the traditional understanding of the *scala amoris* (the so-called ‘ladder of love’) as the work's philosophical climax. However, since Nussbaum (1986) inspired new debate on interpreting the *Symposium* as an organic whole by suggesting that Alcibiades' speech is no mere literary fancy but constitutes a serious rebuttal to Diotima, subsequent readings have needed to account for how this passage relates to the composition overall. Unfortunately, these have largely reduced Plato's fictive Alcibiades to a philosophic cautionary tale, casting him as a sort of anti-Socrates.

Kahn (1996) argues that Plato's theory of Forms, of which the ascent passage in the *Symposium* provides a partial account, should be regarded not simply as an exposition of his metaphysics but rather as containing practical guidelines for attaining a moral life.1 When coupled with the use of Diotima's speech as a measure for successful living, Kahn's view—whether or not his reading is explicitly accepted—appears to underlie some of the

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1 "I want to emphasize the practical and normative aspect of the theory as a moral ideal…that makes a life worth living, rather than as a logical solution to some set of strictly philosophical problems" (Kahn 1996: 332).
harshest assessments regarding the degree to which Alcibiades' philosophical endeavors are successful, and what (if anything) his presence contributes to the philosophical tenor of the symposiasts' discourse. Gill convincingly argues from Alcibiades' own speech that he shunned a virtuous life even after Socrates successfully persuades him of its merits (1990: 81-82). Even Nussbaum, who effectively psychologizes Alcibiades through the lens of some of his more notorious and celebrated career highlights, roughly concludes, "His story is, in the end, a story of waste and loss, of the failure of practical reason to shape a life" (1986: 166).

We may see in the ascent passage both a characterization of what it is like to contemplate the world with a philosopher's mind and a path to achieving such contemplation. We may further allow that union with the Forms represents mortal man's most significant achievement toward realizing immortality and becoming one with the divine. But even if we accept Kahn's position that Diotima's speech is a series of steps aimed towards achieving a "moral ideal" against which the success of men's lives may be judged, the text simply does not support the unqualified claim that Alcibiades "does not understand – and resists coming to understand the intellectual and moral basis of Socrates' 'oddity'" (Gill 1990: 80-81).

By taking into account his historical importance, but also taking care to let neither history nor reputation supersede the textual evidence the Symposium provides, we can make a compelling case for a more moderate assessment of the fictive Alcibiades' philosophical progress than those currently offered. We begin and end with him, but just as Diotima urges Socrates to move from the contemplation of the specific to the general,
so must we consider several issues which pertain to the Symposium as a whole. Some of these are literary, some philosophical; each adds a dimension to our understanding of the character. The argument occasionally draws on Plato's other works for support, and is delivered in four steps.

I. THE SYMPOSIUM: GENRE AND FORM

Scholars assign the Symposium to a surprising array of genres given that it is first and foremost a philosophical dialogue. Nevertheless, an exploration of the variety of possibilities the Symposium presents—particularly in Plato's use of the framing narrative—considerably adds to our understanding of the text's philosophical content. Additionally, it helps bring to light the theoretical underpinnings of the scholarship on the text.

II. THE ASCENT PASSAGE IN THE SYMPOSIUM

The arrangement of Diotima's speech is sufficiently complex to warrant a review of the steps and stages of the ascent passage itself. The would-be philosopher's climb begins by recognizing the beauty of an individual. As he progresses through the stages, his considerations become ever more general (and generalizing), and the individual drops out of the narrative.

This prompts us to ask an interesting question: whatever happened to the individual who got the lover started in the first place? Are we to understand that this individual, too, proceeds up this ladder towards philosophical enlightenment, or does the lover's commitment to a philosophical life entail leaving him behind? If the latter, what does this suggest about Plato's notion of love?
Vlastos (1981) has forcefully argued for an 'exclusive' reading of the ascent. On this view, individuals are loved only inasmuch as they are instantiations of the Form. Plato does not allow for, and tries to excise, irreplaceable individuals; since the Form is single, complete, and unchanging in quality, there is no qualitative difference in objects of like kind which reflect that Form. That being the case, all instances of the same kind are interchangeable, including people. There is no room in the ascent passage for the love of whole, imperfect individuals.

Price (1991) has offered the most coherent argument for an 'inclusive' reading of the passage. In his opinion, Plato does not require the philosopher to give up personal attachments altogether, but to reduce their intensity and broaden them in number. As the lover climbs the ladder, he will find more individuals worthy of his attention rather than none, since all beautiful bodies and souls are qualitatively the same.

What do these interpretations mean for Alcibiades? On Plato's view, is he excessively attached to a particular individual? If so, what type of knowledge may Alcibiades claim to have? May he lay claim to any? These questions lead us to reflect upon what Plato considered knowledge to be, and how one may obtain it.

III. KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION AS AN ACTIVITY

The most salient feature of Plato's work on knowledge acquisition is that it is an active pursuit. The learner may not passively receive knowledge (and, therefore, wisdom). He must be a willing and eager participant in the process. As we will have seen in our

\[^2\] In this treatment, wisdom will be used interchangeably with knowledge. Knowledge should be considered in its philosophical sense—that is, not as justified true belief, or \( \text{δικαίωσις} \), but as true understanding of how things are in reality—\( \text{εἰδήσης} \)—as well as an ability to give a reasoned account of this reality.
discussion about the Platonic dialogue in chapter I, this participation takes place in the context of philosophical dialectic. Furthermore, our review in chapter II of the arguments in Socrates' conversation with Diotima will have brought to our attention the fundamental importance attached to the lover taking the initiative in order to begin his ascent toward the Forms. This puts in place the final criterion needed to evaluate the philosophical, rather than social, propriety of the young Alcibiades' actions, as they are described by the man himself at the symposium.

IV. READING THE SPEECH OF ALCIBIADES

Finally, we return to Alcibiades, and his speech about the love of one particular individual for another. The Symposium is rife with intratextual references and "structural and dramatic considerations take precedence over verisimilitude" (Gregory and Levin 1998: 406n.16). As a result, Alcibiades provides what is arguably the capstone account of the tension between erotic desire and dispassionate love, despite the fact that his late arrival to the gathering precludes his having more than a cursory awareness of the content of the other symposiasts' speeches. When all the evidence is brought to bear against Alcibiades' encomium of Socrates, it becomes clear that Alcibiades is not lacking in understanding but rather that his understanding is incomplete. As such, he occupies the vaguely defined space of intermediacy and intermediaries—the μεταξύ with which so much of the Symposium is concerned. Much of the challenge in making his position apparent stems from the difficulty in divorcing the ubiquitously-mentioned unfulfilled potential of the historical Alcibiades from Plato's description of the philosophical failures
and achievements of his character by the same name—a character who, according to Scott (2000), was left behind in Socrates' own quest for philosophical understanding.
I. THE SYMPOSIUM: GENRE AND FORM

For we have no common name to specify the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and the Socratic conversations...

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447b

Early in his *Poetics*, Aristotle makes a typology of arts and argues that on the whole they constitute modes of imitation (μίμησις). He begins to distinguish them from one another by either the means or manner of this imitation, and attempts to list exemplars of different types of art by coupling them to those characteristic means or manners. But while he is able to give names, and therefore defining features, to such creative acts as composing epic poetry or lyre-playing, Aristotle gets stumped when he comes to that art which imitates with bare language (τοῖς λόγοις ψιλοῖς) unadorned by meter—i.e., prose.

Included in this art form are the Socratic logoi. Although even Aristotle was unable to typify this body of work, modern scholars have persevered undaunted in trying to assign the *Symposium* to a particular genre. Whether or not a proper assignation can be made, some attempts to do so have yielded rather interesting observations about the text.

As Satyr Play

Agathon's symposium is rather tamer than it might have been. Socrates tells Aristodemus that the evening before had been the occasion of Agathon's victory

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3 Perhaps the most fanciful of these is Gold (1980), who attempts to read the *Symposium* as a novel. As Plato draws on and experiments with a wide variety of literary forms and sources, even creating a form of his own, it is not surprising that we find in his own writing a blending of characteristics from what we would now consider distinct genres.

4 See Hunter (2004: 3-15) for an interesting and accessible yet heavily annotated discussion about general rules for symposia and how the conduct at Agathon's symposium compares.
celebration (174a6-7), a very lively affair on account of which many at the banquet admit
that they could not endure another night of heavy drinking (176a4-e5). Eryximachus, a
doctor, gently rebukes the crowd with a few remarks on the medical grounds for
moderate consumption, and proposes that they send away the flute-girl and spend the
night in quiet conversation (176e). Dionysus, though already invoked (175e9), will not
have his usual place in the proceedings.

This is not to say that time is passed altogether seriously; the symposiasts do
interject friendly jesting between their speeches. Their relative sobriety is brightly
coun tered by Alcibiades' noisy arrival (212c6ff.). Wreathed in ribbons and ivy,
accompanied by a mirthful crowd, and bringing his own flute-girl to the party, he asks if
the others will graciously accept an already exceedingly drunken man as their fellow-
drinker (ἀνδρες, χαίρετε μεθύοντα ἀνδρα πάνυ σφόδρα δέξεσθε συμπότην…; 212e3-4). Dionysus, it appears, was merely running late.5

The dialogue and the speech which follows will be dealt with in a later chapter,
but Plato's portrayal of Alcibiades as a Dionysiac figure who compares Socrates to both
Silenus and Marsyas has led several scholars to read Alcibiades' speech as a satyric
drama.6 Socrates himself teasingly refers to the encomium as such (τὸ σατυρικόν σου δράμα τούτο καὶ σιληνικόν, 222d3-4). During the classical period, it was customary for
each poet competing at the Dionysia to compose a satyr play for performance after his

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5 The episode recalls the drunken entrance of Herakles into a scene of mourning in Euripides' Alcestis, the
hypothesis of which terms the play σατυρικότερον. I am grateful to Marilyn Skinner and Bella Vivante
for their helpful remarks on this point.

6 For further discussion on the satyric and Dionysiac elements in the Symposium, see Sider (1980), Belfiore
tragic trilogy. Only Euripides’ *Cyclops* survives complete, but without the trilogy to which it was appended, so it is difficult to define with certainty the satyr play’s generic boundaries. The available evidence suggests that the themes were taken from myth and sometimes revisited those treated in the preceding trilogy to somewhat humorous effect, but satyric dramas—possessed of a register and meter akin to tragedy—cannot simply be reduced to comedic foils for the tragedies which dominated the Dionysia (*OCD*: *satyric drama*). Although satyr plays were removed from dramatic competitions in the mid 4th-cc. BCE, there is evidence that they continued to be produced independently as late as the 2nd-cc. CE. In the *Ars Poetica*, Horace enjoins the satyric playwright to bring out the lighter elements of the tragic trilogy (in Greek, *φαύλον*) while retaining a certain amount of dignity appropriate to the gods and heroes who take the stage (the gravity typical of tragedy is rendered by the Greek *σπουδαίον*). Likening tragedy to a decorous Roman matron, Horace is quite clear that the satyrs, in spite of their nature, must not drop to the level of crass comedy (220-250).

Sheffield (2001) persuasively argues that Plato exploits this seriocomic admixture to underscore Socrates’ complex nature. Comparing a fellow symposiast to something non-human was a common sympotic verbal game (Hunter 2004: 5-6), and by likening Socrates to a satyr Alcibiades plays it deftly. On the surface, the comparison appears to be a droll insult. The satyr is crude, salacious, and not a handsome creature. The same

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7 The suggestion has been made since antiquity that because the tragedies themselves had nothing to do with the god for whom the festival was named, satyr plays began to be performed along with the tragedies in order to bring a bit of Dionysus to the Dionysia. Presumably the *satyrika* had a performance life of their own before this development.  
8 The majority of Sophocles’ *Trackers* is also extant, again without its trilogy, and provides an additional source of information regarding the genre's features.
could be said of Socrates. He often neglects his personal appearance (cf. Aristodemus' remark at 174a3-4), is reputed to have a great love for handsome boys (Socrates himself replies to Aristodemus that he is trying to make himself handsome because he is going to the house of a handsome man, 174a8-9), and the remark that he resembles satyrs in appearance is a commonplace (Alcibiades says not even Socrates could deny the resemblance, 215b4-6). However, satyrs also possess nobler traits. They are semi-divine companions to a god, known for a wisdom superior to that of humans, and both Silenus and Marsyas were famed for their ability to play beautiful music. To his admirers, Socrates embodies all of this and more. He is both of this world and beyond it, but does not himself feel the tension of these opposing roles. Surely these aspects of the comparison must be understood as complimentary.

Sheffield's reading proves helpful to our current task in several ways. To begin with, she firmly establishes grounds for 'hearing' Alcibiades' tone as reproachful but not abusive, generally non-threatening, and at times even jocular. Furthermore, such a skillful rendering of Socrates' character and behavior suggests that Alcibiades understands that character in some part. If we allow for that type of understanding, we have opened the door to the possibility that Alcibiades might also understand the philosophical and moral bases of that character.

As Critique of Encomia

As the speeches which comprise most of the Symposium are encomia, we must also consider what the text suggests about Plato's attitude towards praise. That the philosopher thought of encomiastic discourse as a powerful force in civic life is clear. The Phaedrus
shows some concern about the proper use of praise in public and political spheres (260b-c), and in the *Republic* Socrates boldly asserts that well-composed eulogies of good men constitute the most effective means of educating people (492a-c). It is presumably for this reason that Plato exempts encomia, along with hymns to the gods, from his otherwise sweeping ban on poetry in the ideal city (607a).

Sophistic rhetorical techniques shaped the form and content of public encomia in the 5th- and 4th-centuries BCE, and this is partially reflected in the speeches given by Plato's symposiasts. Eryximachus calls on his companions to give the finest speech they are able (δοκεῖ γάρ μοι χρῆναι ἐκαστὸν ἴμων λόγον εἶπεῖν ἔπαινον Ἐρωτός ἐπὶ δεξία ὡς ἀν δύνηται κάλλιστον, 177d2-3), just as public speakers strive to present their declamations in a polished and literary style. Moreover, by constraining the speeches to a single subject—the praise of Eros (εἶπεῖν ἔπαινον Ἐρωτός)—to be treated by each person in turn, Eryximachus creates a mildly agonistic atmosphere in that each successive speaker has the increasingly difficult task of producing something original with diminishing source material. Socrates acknowledges this point immediately: if the first symposiasts speak well, those reclining in the final positions will find their subject exhausted (καὶ τοι ὅπε ἔξ ἱσοῦ γίγνεται ἴμιν τοῖς ὑστάτοις κατακειμένοις ἀλλ' ἐὰν οἱ πρόσθεν ἰκανῶς καὶ καλῶς εἰπωσιν, ἐξορκέσει ἴμιν, 177e3-5). Having done so, he nevertheless exhorts Phaedrus to begin, and with this concession the semi-private sympotic setting is turned into a venue for semi-public display.

Socrates is the last symposiast to perform and his encomium on love is of quite another sort than those delivered by his companions. He explicitly prepares his listeners
for this shift with an ironic complaint and denial that goes on for 39 lines (198b1-199b5).

Socrates says that the example set by the others has made it clear to him that he does not know how to give a praise speech since he stupidly assumed that in so doing one ought to tell the truth (ἔγινε μὴν γὰρ ὑπ’ ἀβελτερίας ὁμιλήν δεῖν τὰληθὴ λέγειν περὶ ἐκάστου τοῦ ἐγκωμιαζόμενον, 198d3-4). Socrates 'apologizes' that he must speak truthfully because he knows no other way and implores the guests not to make a laughing-stock out of him by comparing his speech to the others which are so different in kind (199a2-b4).

Socrates' insistence on this point emphasizes that philosophical discourse is aimed at uncovering truths about things, while praise speech may manipulate the listener to believe falsities.

Nightingale (1993) contends that Plato intends to illustrate the danger that false eulogies may pose to the polis by putting another unusual encomium into the mouth of a controversial public figure: Alcibiades. One's view on Alcibiades overall greatly influences to what extent his speech may be considered to deviate from the norms of panegyric, and Nightingale's view is unabashedly negative (123-124):

In creating Alcibiades' encomium, Plato chose to portray an infamous and ignoble man struggling—and failing—to praise a philosopher. The pleonectic Alcibiades is the last person to understand the ironic Socrates, and his lack of understanding cannot but compromise his praise. Alcibiades misinterprets Socrates, and this misinterpretation must alert the reader not to construe the encomium as proper praise of Socrates. Alcibiades' eulogy is, in part, designed to be a caveat against the ignorant conferral of praise.

This is precisely the type of interpretation the current project seeks to refute, driven as it is by the author's stance on Alcibiades' character. The text of the Symposium offers little to justify the use of such strongly moralizing language, which leads to the worry that such
judgments are grounded in some other source. I would suggest that Nightingale, among many other scholars, may have gone too far in conflating the historical Alcibiades with his fictive counterpart. The result: an assessment of the Platonic character that is not supported by the text.

Nonetheless, Nightingale's discussion about Plato's use of Socratic irony in this context is excellent and provides compelling evidence for her overarching point. When Socrates' effusive praise of his fellow symposiasts is juxtaposed with their traditional encomia, we are urged to contemplate the rhetoric behind the public discourse of praise (Nightingale 1993: 112). As Nightingale does so well to note, "Socrates' ironic praise is, of course, a kind of rhetoric, but it is a rhetoric that clamours for a co-operative dialectical quest" (1993: 123). Again, part of the task in evaluating Alcibiades' philosophical progress is to establish whether or not he ever came to recognize this feature of Socratic speech.

As Philosophic Dialectic: the Public vs. the Private Self

Plato's extensive use and development of the dialogue form for describing philosophical inquiry also reflects one of his philosophy's underlying principles. Platonic dialogues show philosophy in action; the exchange, refutation, and revision of ideas through conversation is what philosophers do. Although the dialogues qua texts are as immutable as the dogmatic treatises against which they are a reaction, their form emphasizes that active participation in dialectic is required for philosophical endeavors. Plato denies that knowledge can be acquired passively—a theme which we revisit later—and highlights the fundamental importance of the philosophical efforts made by the private individual.
Gribble (1999) draws a number of illuminating parallels between Thucydides' and Plato's use of self-presentation through speech as a means of characterizing Alcibiades (245-259). As we have already seen, the boundaries between public and private are continually transgressed in the sympotic setting because the symposiasts' performance pieces reintroduce elements of the public sphere through the use of formal speech (cf. Nightingale above). Although some of the license Alcibiades takes in his speaking may be more permissible in the less reserved sympotic setting, Gribble notes that Alcibiades also reverts to public modes of address in his repeated use of legal terminology (1999: 249, citing 219c5, 215b7-8, 213d7, and possibly 213a2). Despite his apparent lack of restraint in revealing details of his private life, Alcibiades carefully manages his self-presentation. The Alcibiades of the Symposium is cut from the same self-centered cloth as the Alcibiades of Thucydides 6.16-19. Both characters make speeches ostensibly devoted to other topics substantially about themselves. The Symposium's Alcibiades emerges from his encomium on Socrates "as ambitious, beautiful, and successful, but at the same time possessed of sensitive intellectual qualities which make him susceptible to the force of philosophy, 'when it takes hold of a soul of good natural qualities' like his own (218a6)" (Gribble 1999: 248).

However much Alcibiades' self-presentation by the two authors reveals about Alcibiades' character, Gribble denies that the textual similarities mean that either author has reduced or referred to Alcibiades as a type—i.e., the stock character who rejects philosophy—and on this point we are in agreement (1999: 248-249). Where our opinions diverge is the point at which Gribble fails to ascribe to Plato the same capacity for
authorial intent which he gives to historical writers. Gribble acutely observes (1999: 245, my emphasis):

Most surviving presentations of Alcibiades are of an official and public character: the orator appears before the assembled citizen body to present a *version of Alcibiades*. These public depictions concentrate on the significance of Alcibiades for the city. *Where private details are presented, these are stylized and included to support the public picture.*

While Gribble successfully avoids reducing Alcibiades to a literary stereotype, his interpretive discussion of the *Symposium* appears to fall into the trap common to Nightingale and others. Gribble comments on the fictive character as though he were a real person capable of exercising thought and action independent of the writer who created him. There is no need to address here any specific points of Gribble's analysis, but when making our own critical evaluations of the *Symposium*'s Alcibiades we would do well to keep in mind Gribble's point that "presentations of Alcibiades" constitute authorial *versions* of Alcibiades. That being the case, we must adhere closely to the text if we are to determine to what end Plato has chosen private details to support the picture that *he* wants to paint.

Alcibiades' narrative in its unique, self-revealing nature, which we may view as reflective of the historical character's own proclivity for testing limits, pushes not only the boundaries of public and private but also of dialectic as Plato typically presents it. Although it is not presented in the style of direct exchange between Socrates and interlocutor, Alcibiades' speech—as we shall discuss in more detail shortly—nevertheless constitutes an elenctic engagement of the philosophical claims Socrates puts into the mouth of Diotima. Socrates' speech, too, constitutes an unusual variant of the Platonic
dialogue. The indirect report of a conversation which occurred many years before the main action of the *Symposium* has replaced the customary direct speech. In fact, to varying degrees, the entire work is rendered in this way.

**Function of the Framing Narrative**

The sympotic speeches which occupy the bulk of the *Symposium*'s pages are framed by an introductory narrative which takes place a number of years after the symposium described. Plato employs framing narratives in other works as well, choosing to impart to his reader the report of a conversation rather than dramatizing the conversation directly.\(^9\)

The framing narrative of the *Symposium* is peculiar in that it lays out in dizzying detail a particularly complex path of transmission for that report. That path is as follows.

The dialogue opens with Apollodorus' response to an unnamed companion's request for an account of the speeches given in praise of love at a drinking party attended by several of Athens' elite a very long time ago (πάνω πάλαι, 173a7). Apollodorus tells his interlocutor that he recently entertained the same request from his friend Glaucon, who had heard a badly garbled version from a man, who had gotten it from a certain Phoenix, who had in turn heard it from Aristodemus, who was actually there (172a-173b). This ancient game of telephone had left Glaucon under the impression that the symposium in question had occurred in the not-so-distant past and that, as a companion of Socrates, Apollodorus may have even been in attendance himself. Apollodorus sets the record straight by pointing out that the party's host, the tragedian Agathon, has not

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\(^9\) The *Protagoras* is among these. Johnson (1998) suggests that the *Protagoras*' framing narrative "helps to draw attention to the importance of Alcibiades (whose presence might otherwise seem incidental) and to the attraction of the virtue of wisdom over that of physical beauty, and hence to the question of the nature of wisdom and its attraction" (586-587). Unfortunately, an exploration of the relevance of this dialogue to Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* must be left for another time.
resided in Athens for several years, while he (Aristodemus) has only made it his business to know every word and move Socrates makes (πεποίημαι ἐκάστης ἡμέρας εἰδέναι ὅτι ἔν λέγην ἦ πράττη, 172c5-6) for the last three. Far from being a recent event, Apollodorus explains, the symposium took place while he and Glaucon were still children (παίδων ὄντων ἡμῶν ἐτί, 173a5).

The companion fares rather better in his first attempt to obtain the tale than did Glaucon. Apollodorus has gotten the story directly from Aristodemus, the same attendee who had relayed it to Phoenix, and so is two degrees less removed from the report than Glaucon initially was. However, despite the fact that Apollodorus fastidiously cross-checked some of Aristodemus' details with Socrates (173b4-6), the companion is still only receiving a third-hand account of the speeches at a considerable temporal remove from their original delivery. Furthermore, it is an account which Apollodorus admits is less complete than the one which he received at some unspecified point in the past. Just as Aristodemus was understandably unable to recall precisely the entirety of every speech he heard that evening, so Apollodorus is unable to recall everything Aristodemus told him (πάντων μὲν οὖν ἃ ἔκαστος εἶπεν, οὔτε πάνυ ὁ Ἄριστοδήμος ἐμέμνητο οὔτε ἄν ἔγγο ἃ ἐκεῖνος ἔλεγε πάντα· 178a1-3). An interlocutor intent on a near-transcriptional recital—as Glaucon seems to be—will be sorely disappointed.

Fortunately, within these less-than-ideal confines are two men who would gladly be ideal narrators if they could. As Socratic devotees, Aristodemus and Apollodorus have a vested interest in obtaining and reporting this information accurately. To this end, they both only pass along what is well-remembered (cf. Apollodorus at 178a3-5 and what he
says of Aristodemus at 180c1-3). Apollodorus goes one step further by permitting himself editorial license: he will choose the content of his account based not only on the strength of his memories, but also on his own judgment regarding what seemed to him most worth mentioning (ἀ δὲ μάλιστα καὶ ὠν ἐδοξέ μοι ὁξιομνημόνευτον, τούτων ὑμῖν ἔρω ἐκάστου τὸν λόγον, 178a3-5). The third-hand account is also thrice filtered.

The most obvious feature of the frame is the spatio-temporal distance it interposes between the reader and the main action of the dialogue. We are dropped into the same labyrinthine narrative in which Apollodorus' companion finds himself, and each detail that emphasizes his (and our) remove from the symposium seems to invite us to question Plato's intent in making our experience of that evening's events so indirect. The complexity of the frame makes the usual explanations unsatisfying: surely the author need not have gone to such pains to suggest the account is fictional; surely he does not believe his readers so forgetful that they would need to be reminded of temporal distance with such frequency. Furthermore, such rationales fail to suggest any functional link between the frame and the philosophical program of the dialogue. As a result, they also fail to elucidate how the structure of the Symposium operates holistically.

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10 N. B. In the LSJ, the root verb μνημονεύω has a primary meaning of 'remember, call to mind, recollect' in the active voice; the meaning 'to call to another's mind, mention, say' is secondary. In composing his narrative program, Apollodorus makes both value judgments implied by the root: he decides for himself what is worth mentioning, and in so doing decides for his listener what is worth remembering. The listener is stripped of the opportunity to decide for himself what is or is not significant. Cf. Momidae (1988), who states with reference to the oral cultures of indigenous American peoples that what is retained through transmission in the oral tradition is precisely that which is worth remembering. Because Plato's Athens had a system of writing, it is all too easy to forget that the ancient world at this point was not, by and large, literate; the society was still very oral. This fascinating point of comparison was brought to my attention by Bella Vivante.
Plato's cast of historical characters raises the usual bevy of historical questions. Is the *Symposium* based on an actual event? If so, how did Plato come upon the details of the proceedings? As Socrates' student, would he not have had access to a more reliable account? If he did, why would he relate one that repeatedly calls into doubt its own authority? Johnson (1998) elegantly argues that the themes introduced in the framing narrative mirror the major philosophical concerns in the remainder of the text. By introducing details that both assert and call into question the accuracy of Apollodorus’ narrative, Plato encourages the reader to abandon the passivity inherent in reading about philosophy and to take the first step toward doing it (Johnson 1998: 594). On this view, the static drama of the dialogue is merely another form of Aristotelian μίμησις and, in short, is no substitute for the dynamic and continual process of philosophical dialectic. Johnson is careful to point out that Plato does not intend this assertion to undermine the authority of his own text, but to stimulate "reflection on the nature of the relationship between report, event, and Ideal [i.e., Form] in the doing of philosophy—on the nature, that is, of authority, and what truth [in the perceptible world] or Truth [in the idealized world of the Forms] a given authority is able to represent" (1998: 592, emphasis in the original). Johnson contends that Plato urges the reader to question the limitations on any text's claim to authority and the problem inherent in developing a dogmatic 'canon' of

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11 *Contra* Halperin (1992, relying on Bacon 1959), who nevertheless rightly points out that the narrators in the framing dialogues seem more like members of the Socratic cult of personality than serious philosophers. Apollodorus' selectivity in the speeches he passes on to his companion (cf. n.7 above) hardly seems an adequate rebuttal to Halperin's charge that the narrators merely regurgitate "uncritically" the philosophical ideas advanced by others (1992: 119).
Socratic philosophy. "Whatever its advantages, there is nothing sacred or perfect about the dialogue form of writing" (1998: 593n.21).

After the fashion of Socrates, Apollodorus pointedly remarks on the worthlessness of the kind of life he used to live (and which Glaucon and his present companion currently lead) and the virtues of a philosophic one (towards which neither Glaucon nor this companion have any apparent inclination, 173a1-3 and 173c5-d3). He tempers his jabs at his latest audience with mock self-effacement, e.g., by embracing being characterized as not truly fortunate (κακοδαίμονα, 173d1), and by ironically dismissing his pronounced point of view through the rhetorical suggestion that his elevation of philosophical discourse at the expense of activities which are more traditionally valued clearly mark him as a raving lunatic (δὴ λόγος εἰς δῆ τι οὕτω διανοούμενος καὶ ςερί ἐμμαυτοῦ καὶ σερὶ ὑμῶν μαίνομαι καὶ παραπαίω; 173e1-3). The companion responds by repeatedly urging Apollodorus to stay on topic and relay the speeches given by the symposiasts. Although he avoids being drawn into a dialectic with Apollodorus about his life's priorities, he has not escaped the subject entirely. Since the ascent passage is among the speeches about to be relayed, Apollodorus' companion, like so many of Socrates' interlocutors, will hear an argument for the virtues of philosophic living whether he wants it or not.

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12 In the Phaedrus, Socrates invokes the authority of the Egyptian god Ammon, whom the Greeks equated with Zeus, to condemn the usefulness of writing (274c5-275e5). According to Socrates, reliance on writing makes the memory less keen, and may at best present images of reality. In this last respect, he compares writing to painting. Thanks are due to Marilyn Skinner for reminding me of this passage.

13 Given the symptic setting of the account to come, it is interesting to note that the verb μαίνομαι was used to denote Bacchic frenzy as early as Homer and into the 2nd-cent. CE. For this usage in the 5th-cent. BCE, the LSJ cites S. Ant. 1152 and OC 1537, and Hdt. 4.79.
Strangely, this argument is even further removed from the action of the framing dialogue. While the symposiasts' speeches are given directly, just as the framing narrative is (though it, too, contains Apollodorus' report of his exchange with Glaucon), "the conversation between the symposiasts is mostly in indirect discourse, continually reminding the reader that these are the words of Aristodemus," not the symposiasts themselves (Johnson 1998: 582-583). The occasional intrusion of Apollodorus' voice recalls that the account which we are hearing is ultimately his, not Aristodemus'. But Socrates' report of his conversation with Diotima, which occurred years before even the symposium, is in third person narrative, making the transmission of that particular account even more indirect than the others.

The implications of Johnson's work for interpreting Alcibiades' speech are twofold. Firstly, it provides a theoretical framework with which we may more clearly define the importance of dialectic in the ascent passage. This point is critical to any appraisal of Alcibiades' comprehension of the philosophical precepts that motivate Socrates' behavior. More fundamentally, the issues he raises pertain to Plato's theories on how one can acquire knowledge, a necessary prerequisite to true understanding.
II. THE ASCENT PASSAGE IN THE SYMPOSIUM

The Steps and Stages of the Scala Amoris

This leads us to the characterization of the lover in the ascent passage of the Symposium.

For clarity, Socrates' definition of Eros, and his recollection of Diotima's account of erotic love and its role in attaining union with the Forms is summarized below:

1. Love is the desire for something which the lover lacks.
2. When we say we love what we already have, we mean that we want the things which we possess to be ours in perpetuity.
3. Per Agathon's speech, the gods' quarrels are settled by a love of beautiful things.
4. Therefore, Love (Eros) lacks beauty.
5. Good things are always beautiful.
6. Therefore, Eros also lacks good things.

Socrates questions Agathon regarding the latter's speech.

7. It does not necessarily follow from 3-6 that Eros is ugly and bad; Eros may be something in between.
8. Eros cannot be a god because all gods are beautiful and happy, the latter being defined as possession of good and beautiful things. Eros is needy, whereas the gods need nothing.
9. It does not necessarily follow from 8 that Eros is a mortal; Eros may be something between a god and a mortal: a daimon. Having been born of Poverty and Resource, Eros' parentage reflects his intermediate position between dualities—mortal and immortal, lack and possession, wisdom and ignorance.
10. Since he lacks these and all other goods, Eros is a lover of these things.

Socrates recounts his conversation with Diotima. Eros is not a god.

11. Diotima recapitulates: per 1-8, love is the desire to possess the good (and therefore beautiful) forever.
12. Its goal is generation in beauty (meant here as both within and in the presence of) as a means of achieving immortality, real or vicarious.
13. Therefore, love does not want beauty so much as it wants this generation in beauty. This is evident from animals' desire for sex and willingness to suffer hardship or death for their young (i.e., the products of this reproduction). This is also evident in human beings' love of honor and fame, since obtaining these constitutes achieving immortality in the memories of others.
Spiritual pederasty and the lover's ascent to the Form. The lesser mysteries of love.
14. All people are pregnant in both body and soul and so all desire the generation of
11-13. Those who are more pregnant in soul than in body will become the lovers
of beauties that encourage them to generate wisdom and other virtues.
15. In the presence of a beautiful body, desire will excite such a lover. If the beautiful
body is accompanied by a beautiful soul, the lover will be all the more drawn to
this combination.
16. This desire (Love) will incite the lover to give birth to beautiful ideas about virtue
which he will try to impart to his beloved.

The higher mysteries of love.
17. If the lover loves correctly, he will realize that all beautiful bodies are equally
worthy objects of desire and contemplation.
18. Therefore, the lover comes to understand that wild gaping after a single beautiful
body is something of little importance (σμικρόν τί, 210c5).
19. The lover realizes that the beauty of souls is more valuable (τιμιότερον, 210b7)
than the beauty of bodies.
20. Further, potential beauty of soul is more valuable than actual beauty of body.
21. Therefore, the lover is moved to give birth to ideas that make young men better.

22. As a result, the lover comes to appreciate the beauty of laws and activities.
23. The lover realizes that, as with bodies to bodies and souls to souls, the beauty of
laws and customs are equal in kind, and to privilege any one law or custom is
folly.

24. The lover turns his attention to contemplating the beauty in various types of
knowledge.
25. Having learned to consider beauty in terms of generalizations rather than
specifics, the lover contemplates all instances of beauty and gives birth to ever-
more beautiful and magnificent thoughts (the Greek μεγαλοπρέπεις, 210d5, may
also be rendered as things befitting a great man).

26. Finally, the lover reaches the goal of his loving: he is suddenly able to perceive
the Forms and to contemplate Beauty itself, not just its physical instantiations.

Diotima introduces the ascent by explaining that some men are pregnant in body and so
are more inclined to physical procreation, while others are pregnant in soul (οί μὲν οὖν
ἐγκύμωνες, ἔφη, κατὰ τὰ σώματα...οί δὲ κατὰ τὴν ψυχήν, 208e1-2...208e5-209a1).

If we import the idea from the Phaedrus that Eros is the inspiration for all impulses
towards creativity, then we are led to Price's suggestion that in order to even be capable of beginning the ascent, the lover must be predisposed towards pregnancy in soul,\textsuperscript{14} and as a result be more inclined to seek out a beautiful boy in the presence of whom the lover can give birth to mental offspring rather than a female partner who can bear more literal progeny (Price 1989: 41). His erotic attraction to a beautiful boy serves as a catalyst for the lover's eventual attainment of true knowledge.

Simply put, physical attraction need not entail the beginnings of philosophical revelation. Diotima subtly but repeatedly reinforces the notion that the lover must be a willing and active agent in the ascent. Initially, the lover must consciously devote himself to his beloved and be open to him as a source of inspiration. Furthermore, at each successive stage of the ascent, it is incumbent upon the lover to continue his contemplative efforts and to turn his attention to objects which are more worthy of his contemplation than his previous objects of contemplation had been. Eros, if the one leading leads rightly (ἐὰν ὁ ἰγνωτάς ἢγνωτας ὁ ἤγνωμενος, 210a6-7), serves as midwife, facilitating an evolution in the lover's understanding of the relationships between the various instantiations of Beauty, which ultimately leads to knowledge of true Beauty itself (210a). It must be noted that the impetus for continuing the ascent is unclear. Price correctly argues that the motivation for continuing the ascent is problematic because each stage brings its own rewards which would appear complete in themselves to a person at that stage of understanding. It is only after the lover proceeds to the next stage of the

\textsuperscript{14} See Pender (1992) for an illuminating discussion of male and female pregnancy types in the Symposium, and Plato's manipulation of the analogy between physical and spiritual pregnancy. This may have implications for Price. Diotima has already said that all people are pregnant both physically and spiritually (206c), and so we must be given to understand that all people are by nature predisposed toward spiritual pregnancy but to varying degrees (209a).
ascent that he is able to appreciate the improvement in his vantage point (41-42). Regardless, it is the combination of a predisposition towards pregnancy in soul, the inspiring presence of a beautiful body, and the willful attention of the lover which is necessary for the ascent to begin.

**What Does Union with the Forms Mean For the Love of Individuals?**

As we have seen, the objects of the lover's desire become ever more generalized as he makes his way up the *scala amoris*. As soon as he makes the transition from the 'lesser mysteries' in steps 14-16 to the 'highest mysteries' which culminate in union with the Form, he begins to think of attachments to a single instantiation of beauty as something small. Indeed, by the time he reaches step 22, the lover has changed the focal point of his contemplation to the abstractions of laws and activities, but these contemplations are still explicitly aimed at the improvement of young men. However, this tie between the abstract and the personal is not explicitly maintained in steps 24-25, and we may begin to wonder what connection the contemplation of various forms of knowledge has with young men, or men of any age. Our concern deepens when the lover suddenly perceives the Form itself and we find that the ultimate goal of his loving is something whose very perfection depends on being divorced from the constraints of mortality and mutability, and specifically the mortality and mutability of the human form.

In his landmark article, Vlastos (1981) searches the Platonic corpus for evidence of a parallel to the Aristotelian concept of love that involves loving an individual for that
According to Vlastos' argument, Aristotle's 'imperfect' form of 'utility-love' is evident in the *Lysis* when Socrates tells Lysis that one is loved if and only if one is useful, while the 'perfect' form which is contingent neither on the beloved's usefulness or ability to please the lover is not explicitly denied or embraced (1981: 6-11). But when the definition of love in the *Lysis* is mapped onto the *Republic*, we see the contingencies placed on the value of individuals taken to the extreme. Although Plato conceptualizes φιλία as the binding force of the *polis*, he takes every measure to exclude personal freedom and individuation from his ideal city since he sees these as the seeds of political discord. Vlastos concludes (1981: 19):

> the constraint on personal freedom at its deepest level—the freedom to feel whatever it be one wants to feel, whose suppression would justify that of so many other kinds of freedom—becomes not only compatible with what Plato understands by φιλία, but its indispensable ideal condition. He could not have reached this result if he had thought of love as wishing another person's good for just that person's sake, looking upon the loved one's individual being as something precious in and of itself.

So much for Aristotle.

The upshot of Vlastos' analysis when extended to the *Symposium* is that Plato's love does not allow for the love of integrated, whole individuals, but only for persons insofar as they reflect the Forms, i.e., to the extent that they are good and beautiful (1981: 30-34). This type of love has the advantage of stability, for the contingencies it places on individual worth make it immune to the vicissitudes of our changing feelings, but it also

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15 His critical point of comparison to Aristotle is the discussion in *Nicomachean Ethics* VII-VIII about φιλία, the most perfect form of which involves wishing the beloved well and trying to secure this well-being for the beloved for no other reason than the fact that the beloved would benefit from having it. As Vlastos points out, this type of love does not preclude the beloved from being useful or pleasurable to the lover, but the lover's concern for the object of his affection is not contingent on whether or not the beloved is useful or pleasing.
seems to deny our collective experience. Human beings are not perfect, and yet we love them anyway (Vlastos 1981: 31):

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 'exclusive view' of the ascent passage is as poignantly rendered as it is potentially damning of Platonic philosophy as an ideal for living. If correct, Plato has not only raised the bar for human excellence impossibly high, but he has made his philosopher distinctly inhuman. Is there a way to salvage a more intuitive 'inclusive view' from the evidence, one which allows us to value the individual qualities of a particular person?

Nussbaum (1986) thinks not, but she argues that Plato is not unaware of the appeal of retaining attachments to particular individuals. On her reading, he presents us with a choice between two paths, each of which has its own value, though it is clear that in Plato's estimation, philosophical contemplation leads to the best possible life (Nussbaum 1986: 190-192, 198). 16 Nussbaum provocatively suggests that Plato introduces Alcibiades as a means of showing us the alternative: a dynamic, intense passion for a single individual—in his case, Socrates—and the difficulties such an attachment presents for defining our lives with practical reason. The philosopher who attains union with the Forms is in touch with truth, she argues, but Alcibiades, too, has a

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16 In this we are in total agreement, although Plato does not necessarily mean that the philosopher must be celibate. In the *Phaedrus* 256b-c, Plato admits that a philosophically-inclined erastes-eromenos pair may occasionally allow themselves sexual gratification without their relationship necessarily devolving into a purely carnal exchange. However, he also explicitly states that the bond between two individuals joined by a sexual union will be weaker than the bond forged between a non-sexual pair of philosophical lovers. See also my comment below on the passage which immediately precedes this one in the context of Alcibiades' attempted seduction of Socrates.
claim to knowledge, though of a very different sort: the sensual understanding of a
beloved in all his peculiarities, in all of the things that make him him. For Nussbaum,
sexual intimacy is a form of knowing someone, but for us an important question remains:
did the young Alcibiades, whose actions form the basis for so much of her analysis,
understand this? Probably not, though the older Alcibiades, who is telling his own story,
may have. The implications of Nussbaum's reading are particularly significant for
Platonic epistemology. It would appear that Alcibiades' speech is a response to Diotima
not merely in terms of how we know someone, but more fundamentally of how we know
what we know. To rephrase, Plato may be putting on trial two very different theories of
knowledge. Diotima is an advocate for knowledge gained via dialectic, whereas
Alcibiades stands for knowledge obtained through experience. As we shall see later,
Socrates—if not Plato—appears to deny the validity of claims to knowledge based on this
criterion. Whether or not this denial is valid speaks directly to our assessment of
Alcibiades' level of philosophical understanding.

Price doubts that Nussbaum is reading Plato correctly but concedes that "if she is
misinterpreting him, the dilemma is not Platonic but may be real enough" (1991: 285).
Price denies that in ascending the ladder, the lover callously drops the young man whose
beauty first inspired him to philosophy; instead, the lover comes to understand through
his appreciation of beauty in things other than an individual body how he may properly
appreciate the beauty instantiated in his beloved. In spite of Vlastos' and Nussbaum's
objections, Price holds that the process of philosophical ascent does not necessitate that

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17 The formulation of this point is wholly indebted to Bella Vivante's suggestion.
we come to regard the individual whom we love as interchangeable with other individuals who possess the same good qualities which initially drew us to them. As we have repeatedly seen, for Plato philosophy is not a solitary pursuit. Although the intensity of the lover's attraction to the beloved's beautiful body is diminished, the beloved's value as part of the philosophical conversation is maintained: "even if the beloved becomes a drop in the ocean qua object of contemplation, he may remain a major investment qua recipient of mentality" (Price 1991: 289). Plato's oeuvre certainly supports this contention. Without a doubt, "Socrates is weird" (Nussbaum 1986: 184), but he certainly is not antisocial. If Plato means for us to see him as the quintessential philosophic lover in action, then dialectic proves to be among that lover's central occupations.

While Price does much to bring the ascent passage back to the realm of human experience, particularly in his defense of the understanding which may exist between individuals in a non-sexual relationship (as Alcibiades and Socrates seem to be), something yet seems wanting. The individual beloved is not abandoned, but neither is he irreplaceable; there are always other fine young men with whom to converse. The higher mysteries may not fully eclipse the lesser ones, but the latter do become pale next to the brilliance of the Form. This much Diotima makes clear. Whether or not it was a concern for Plato's contemporaries, this notion of a loved one as an irreplaceable, unrepeatable whole is certainly central to our current conceptualization of love, and for modern readers Price cannot redeem the ascent on this point. But our task is not to evaluate Alcibiades in light of our cultural norms, or even those of late 5th-cent. Athens. It is to establish to what extent Alcibiades demonstrates philosophical understanding on Diotima's terms. Now
that we have explored some of the potential bases for Alcibiades' claims to knowledge, we must examine whether or not Alcibiades' actions justify these claims within the Platonic framework of how knowledge may be acquired.
III. KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION AS AN ACTIVITY

Socrates repeatedly emphasizes that learning is an active pursuit by the learner, and that acquisition of knowledge (and its consequence, virtue) cannot be accomplished passively. When Socrates initially arrives at Agathon's in the opening dialogue of the Symposium, Agathon calls out for his friend to sit next to him so that he may benefit from his wisdom even by touching him (ἴνα καὶ τοῦ σοφοῦ ἀπτόμενός σου ἀπολαύσω, 175c8-d1). Socrates' coming has been delayed by what Aristodemus calls one of his habitual trances, and Agathon jests that if Socrates had not had some sort of revelation, he would even now remain outdoors, lost in contemplation. The use of the middle-passive participle is telling: Agathon's teasing suggests that by touching Socrates he might be able to gain some of Socrates' newfound wisdom for himself, as if through a kind of intellectual osmosis. Socrates responds in all seriousness that it would be nice if the transmission of wisdom were so easy (175d2-7):

εὖ ἂν ἐχοι, φῶναι, ὦ Ἀγάθων, εἰ, τοιοῦτον εἶη ἦ σοφία ὡστ' ἐκ τοῦ πλησερέου εἰς τὸ κενωτέρον βεῖν ἡμῶν, ἐὰν ἀπτώμεθα ἄλλην, ὥσπερ τὸ ἐν ταῖς κύλιξιν ὑδρῷ τὸ διὰ τοῦ ἐρίου βεῖν ἐκ τῆς πλησερέας εἰς τὴν κενωτέραν.

"It would be well," he said, "Agathon, if wisdom were like this, so that it would flow out from the fuller one of us into the emptier one, if by chance we touched one another, just as water in kylixes is inclined to flow through the woolen fillet from the fuller cup into the emptier one."

The optative εἶη lends a contrafactual force to the sentiment. While Socrates agrees that it would be a wonderful thing if wisdom could seep from one person into another like water
between drinking cups, it is clear to the reader that he does not believe wisdom can be acquired in this way.

If the exchange denies that we are empty vessels waiting to be filled, then it also leaves open the question of how wisdom is acquired. For a brief response to this query, we may turn to the *Theaetetus*. Socrates compares the requirements for mental acuity to those of physical acuity. Theaetetus agrees that the body requires exercise to build strength and be healthy. Socrates asks if the same is true of the soul (153b9-c1):

> ἢ δ’ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἔξις οὐχ ὑπὸ μαθήσεως μὲν καὶ μελέτης, κινήσεων οὔτων, κτάται τε μαθήματα καὶ σώζεται καὶ γίγνεται βελτίων, ὑπὸ δ’ ἱσχίας, ἀμελητησίας τε καὶ ἀμαθίας οὕσης, οὕτε τι μανθάνει ἢ τε ἢ μάθη ἐπιλαμβάνεται;

But is it not the case that this orderly arrangement in the soul both acquires knowledge and is preserved and becomes better by learning and by practice, which are movements, while by rest, accompanied by both want of practice and being ignorant, it does not learn anything and also forgets the things which it has learned?

Learning and practice are defined as actions, and activity is equated with health. Further, obtaining knowledge is insufficient to guarantee its retention; one must continually and actively perform mental maintenance as well. In *Symposium* 207d-208b Diotima makes a similar claim in asserting that everything about mortal man is constantly passing away and being renewed, including knowledge and memory. She says that μελετᾶν (208a4), which can suggest something like our modern notion of studying, is necessary to replace this constant loss of knowledge. μελετᾶν shares a root with μελέτη (care, attention, practice or exercise) and ἀμελητησία (lack of practice or attention)—both present in the
Theaetetus passage above—which Socrates uses to indicate the health-inducing 'exercise' of the soul (the agent of mental activity) and deleterious 'inactivity,' respectively.\textsuperscript{18}

What, then, are these learning exercises that are so important to the health of the soul? Although Diotima later makes it clear that philosophical contemplation is the mechanism for ascending towards true wisdom and understanding, we are left to wonder how one first learns to engage in such contemplation and whether or not they are doing it properly. Price (1989) suggests Diotima provides an answer: dialectic (41, 53).\textsuperscript{19} In repeatedly characterizing the fruits of contemplation in the initial stages of the ascent as verbal offspring on increasingly sophisticated philosophical themes, Diotima imparts to verbal communication both a philosophical means and end. By persistently—almost obsessively—seeking to engage others in dialectic and refutation, Socrates creates the environment necessary for philosophical realization. In the Theaetetus he compares his efforts to those of a traditional midwife (150b7-9):

\begin{quote}
διαφέρει δὲ τῷ τε ἄνδρω ἀλλὰ μὴ γυναικας μαίευσθαι καὶ τῷ τάς ψυχάς αὐτῶν τικτούσας ἐπισκοπεῖν ἀλλὰ μὴ τά σώματα.
\end{quote}

But it is different in this way, that I serve as a midwife for men, but not for women, and in that I watch over their souls as they beget things, but not their bodies.

Socrates draws another significant distinction between himself and the women who aid in conventional childbirth; his task requires the ability to tell the 'pregnant' father whether his 'offspring' are real or merely shadows of reality (πότερον εἴδωλον καὶ ψεύδος

\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Meletus, one of Socrates' accusers in the Apology, who does not live up to his name. In Socrates' cross-examination, Meletus shows himself to be ignorant of the very charges he has brought against the philosopher. This verbal echo was pointed out to me by Bella Vivante in a personal communication.

\textsuperscript{19} The middle books of the Republic also prescribe dialectic as a means of training the guardians of the polis. I am grateful to Julia Annas for pointing out that mele/th, in its meaning of practice or working at something, is an important theme of Alcibiades Major.
The conventional midwife, he announces proudly, has no equivalent task.

Theaetetus is pregnant in his soul and Socrates claims to know this since, after all, who is better than a midwife at recognizing pregnancy? It is interesting to note that here Socrates' claim to ignorance breaks down on account of his own analogy. Artemis, though childless herself, has childbirth under her purview, but she did not deem it fit to entrust aiding in delivery to sterile women (στερίφασι, 149b10). Socrates gives an account of this prohibition, explaining that the goddess believed human nature too feeble to acquire a skill that related to something of which it had no prior knowledge (οτι ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη φύσις ἀσθενεστέρα ἦ λαβεῖν τέχνην ὃν ἦν ἦ ἀπειρος, 149c1-2). Such reasoning is intuitive enough to this point; however, from here Socrates goes on to say that he himself has no claim to wisdom because he, like a midwife, is beyond being able to conceive.

Having drawn so close a parallel between himself and a conventional midwife, who herself was once a mother, and having taken the time to point out that such a task is forbidden to women who have not conceived themselves because of their lack of personal experience in child-bearing, we are led to suspect that Socrates' repeated and familiar insistence that he is barren with respect to wisdom is an instance of Socratic irony. Given his contention that his vocation is both more important and more difficult than traditional midwifery (150b), we can hardly be expected to believe that his daimon would commit the office to the uninitiated.20

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20 Cf. also Symposium 196e in which Agathon contends that one cannot teach what one does not know.
The defining feature of Socratic irony is its complexity: "what is said both is and isn't meant" (Vlastos 1987: 86). Socrates may be considered barren in that he, like a midwife, is unable to conceive ideas; indeed, as a midwife his task is not conception but to aid in the bearing of ideas by another—to conceive and bear his own would interfere with his ability to perform the midwife's function. This does not mean that he has never had ideas, which would eliminate the possibility that he has wisdom. Furthermore, Socrates habitually and "wilfully prevaricates" (Vlastos 1987: 81) in his "disavowal of knowledge and teaching" (Vlastos 1981: 86) in that he merely means that he does not claim to have knowledge in the conventional sense, which implies certainty. However, when knowledge (i.e., wisdom) is defined as justified true belief, "justified through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument" (Vlastos 1981: 86), Socrates makes positive claims of knowledge regarding a variety of things. Certainly his assertion that he is able to differentiate between true things and things which are simulacra of the truth implies that he knows what true things are when he sees and hears them. As we have seen in our discussion about Diotima's speech, only the lover who has completed the ascent and accessed the Forms would be able to draw such distinctions between reality and images of reality.

Socrates' use of the midwife analogy also highlights a point that is important for our understanding of Alcibiades. As Theatetus' teacher, Socrates is merely a facilitator in his philosophical development. The greatest part of the effort is put forth by the student—the pains of contemplation, conception and realization. Although Socrates assists in the
delivery, the success of the endeavor still depends on Theaetetus' willing and active involvement (148d, 151d).
IV. READING THE SPEECH OF ALCIBIADES

What He Says and How He Says It

Much ink has been spilled on the reasons for Socrates' rejection of Alcibiades' attempts to seduce him, with explanations ranging from Socrates' acceptance of the idea that acknowledging bodily desires is a hindrance to philosophical activities (as explicitly stated in the *Phaedrus*) to Nussbaum's provocative suggestion that Socrates' unwillingness to engage a loved one in this way is indicative of the sacrifice of personal relationships in pursuit of the Forms (Nussbaum 1986: 190-192). Alcibiades' response to and characterization of this rejection will shed some light on his level of philosophical understanding when compared to the lover in the ascent.

Alcibiades' disorderly entrance immediately follows Socrates' concluding remarks, with the result that he alone of the symposiasts has not been privy to their accounts. Nonetheless, there are significant parallels between Alcibiades' encomium of Socrates and Diotima's speech. This is not a novel occurrence; in many respects Diotima's account begins as a response to and synthesis of selected elements from the speeches of Aristophanes, Agathon and Pausanias. Agathon's assertion in 195a that all gods are happy provides the crux of the argument which Diotima uses in convincing Socrates that Eros is not a god but something else (202c), whereas Diotima's contention that Love is neither delicate (203c-203d) nor aimed at reuniting the lover with a lost other half (205e) constitutes direct opposition to these positions as set forth by Agathon (195d) and Aristophanes (190e-193d). Additionally, the terms of Pausanias' elevation of the
Greek institution of educative pederasty as the embodiment of Heavenly (Ὄυρανίαν) Love, aimed at the welfare of individuals and the state, almost wholly anticipates what Diotima refers to as Eros' lesser mysteries, as well as the supposition that possession by Eros somehow leads to civil harmony and justice (for Diotima this comes from true understanding, for Pausanias it is from the love of virtue which is a necessary outgrowth of a properly conducted erastes-eromenos relationship). This type of virtuous devotion is set in piqued opposition to the carnal, Πόνδημον variety, which purposes only to gratify sexual urges (and in which, as its name makes pejoratively clear, anyone can engage). It cannot be denied that Pausanias is personally motivated in denigrating purely sexual unions, particularly heterosexual ones, as belonging to the common rabble (οἱ φαῦλοι, 181b2); his life-long affair with Agathon stands in direct opposition to Athenian cultural norms, which dictate that homosexual encounters are acceptable only in specific contexts and never as a hindrance to marriage. To wed and to raise a family were both familial and political obligations, and undoubtedly their relationship elicited a great deal of ridicule and public censure. Nevertheless, Pausanias' postulates on the permanence of Beauty (183d-183e), that Love impels us to virtue (185b-185c), that there is a proper way to love which makes concern for the betterment of the beloved primary (181a), and that

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21 The use of mystery cult terminology in Plato also occurs in the Meno (76e). See Morgan (1990) for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, including in the Symposium (thanks are due once again to Julia Annas for directing my attention to this text).

22 Pausanias, like Alcibiades, may be seen as a living social transgression. The authoritative work on homoeroticism in the Greek world continues to be Dover (1978).
'baser' types of people are unable to stretch their conception of Love beyond that of attraction to beautiful bodies (181b, 182a-d) are all mirrored in Diotima's speech.²³

What part does Alcibiades' narrative have in this discussion, and how does this shape our interpretation of his character? Let us begin by reviewing the staging of the scene. Alcibiades is so inebriated that he must be helped into the room. He sits on Agathon's couch, intending to crown him with ribbons (Apollodorus has reported earlier that the symposium followed shortly upon Agathon's first victory for one of his tragedies). Once Agathon points out that Socrates is also seated there, Alcibiades marvels that Socrates always ends up near the best-looking man in the room. This remark leads to a farcical exchange between Socrates, who begs the other symposiasts for protection from Alcibiades' violent jealousy, and Alcibiades. If taken seriously, Alcibiades comes off as a brute, but their exchange feels more like flirtatious banter. While it is true that Alcibiades says he will never reconcile with Socrates and threatens retribution for this or some other implied affront, this threat is immediately followed by Alcibiades making a wreath for Socrates. He coos emphatically over the philosopher's marvelous head (τὴν τούτου ταυτην τὴν θαυμαστὴν κεφαλήν, 213e2), and teases Socrates about the verbal sparring in which he constantly engages.

Eryximachus suggests that Alcibiades join in the speech-making. After a few more words suggesting that Socrates is actually the violently jealous one of the pair and will not tolerate Alcibiades praising anyone else in his presence, Alcibiades is persuaded

²³ Cf. Diotima on the Forms as eternal (211b); perception of the Forms as enabling knowledge of pure virtue, pure beauty, etc. (212a); contemplation of beautiful souls leading to the generation of ideas aimed at improving young men (210c); and the slavish small-mindedness of those lovers who focus on the beauty of a particular body (210d).
to give not an encomium on Love as the others have made, but rather a speech in praise of Socrates. In mock horror, Socrates asks Alcibiades to clarify his intentions: will he deliver a true encomium or use his speech as a vehicle for Socrates' further ridicule (τί ἐν νυμῷ ἔχεις; ἐπὶ τὰ γελοιότερά με ἐπαινέσσαι; 214e4-5)? Alcibiades replies simply that he will tell the truth, if Socrates will allow him the opportunity to do so (τὰληθῆ ἔρω..., ἐπὶ παρὰς, 214e6). To further reassure Socrates of his good intentions, Alcibiades also invites correction from the audience in the event he should make an error. He is, after all, drunk, and cannot be expected to make as orderly a speech as his companions (214d8-215a3), but his aim is not willful deception.

It has long been a convention of comedy to employ humorous situations to explore themes which have serious implications, and so it is unsurprising that Plato, the most literary of the Greek philosophers, would create a comedic backdrop for the continuation of the discussion on Love to lighten the mental load imposed on his readers by Diotima's abstractions. Nussbaum (1986: 185) sees in Alcibiades' claims that his account is accurate because it is based on knowledge by experience (παθῶντα γνῶναι, 222b7) an implicit understanding that Socrates' philosophy rejects this as a valid claim to truth. Diotima speaks of generalizations and Forms, Alcibiades of his love for a particular individual mediated by the use of images. Occupying, as they appear to do, opposite poles, is there no common ground between them?

The image Alcibiades initially invokes to describe Socrates is not at first glance a flattering one. Compared in appearance to a silenus and the satyr Marsyas, Socrates is implied to be physically unattractive, strangely seductive and to have a voracious sexual
appetite. The latter will be shown to be completely under Socrates’ control, however, and the fact that Alcibiades dwells on that point at such length suggests that he is merely taking advantage of an opportunity to tease Socrates about his proclivity for keeping company with pretty young men (216d). But this playful disparagement quickly gives way to a more serious, favorable characterization. Alcibiades points out that these crude silenus statues have inside them beautiful images of the gods (217a), and as Marsyas was able to captivate his audience by his flute-playing, so by speaking does Socrates bring his listeners under a spell which Alcibiades feels even now (\(\pi\sigma\chi\omega\ \\varepsilon\tau\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \upsilon\nu\nu\iota\), 215d8-e1).

Alcibiades’ expression of the feelings that Socrates’ presence elicits in him are deeply sensual: his heart races and he is brought to tears, it is as if he were in a religious frenzy.\(^{24}\) The comparison is striking in two ways: first, in its similarity to Socrates’ description in the *Phaedrus* of what a lover feels when in the presence of beauty, his mind beginning to stir with memories of the Forms—he trembles, is feverish, his whole soul is in upheaval (251a-e); second, in explicitly evoking imagery from a mystery religion. Diotima, too, called her account of Love a mystery into which Socrates must be initiated; this language is reiterated in the *Phaedrus*. The intensity of these emotions proves to be too much; although Socrates succeeds in persuading him that his attentions are best turned to the care of his soul, Alcibiades returns to his political career (216a-b).

What follows is an intermingling of praise for Socrates’ virtues, the allure these hold for Alcibiades, and the tale of his ill-fated attempt to seduce Socrates. Alcibiades

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\(^{24}\) It is, of course, a common topos of love poetry to describe erotic desire in terms of religious frenzy.
begins his report by saying he once caught a glimpse of the figures inside the 'silenus
statue' of the philosopher (216e7-217a2):

καὶ μοι ἔδοξεν οὕτω θεία καὶ χρυσά εἶναι καὶ πάγκαλα καὶ
θαυμαστὰ, ὥστε ποιητέου εἶναι ἐμβραχὺ ὅτι κελεύω Σωκράτης.

And it seemed to me that they were thus: godlike and golden and full
of all good things and marvelous, with the result that—in brief—whatever
Socrates would bid must be done.

Marsyas has ensnared him.

That Alcibiades realizes Socrates would be a desirable lover already places him
ahead of the pack in Diotima's hierarchy. Socrates does not have a beautiful body and yet
Alcibiades seems to intuit that he has beauty of soul. He is acutely aware, as would be
any young man of his age and familial standing, that it is the custom for older men to
pursue relationships with younger boys and that these relationships should somehow
morally and intellectually edify him. To this point he has judged correctly. He knows that
sex figures somewhere into the equation. What Alcibiades cannot anticipate is that
Socrates understands that sexual submission is neither requisite to his betterment nor a
means to it. To be fair, Socrates fails to clarify this point, which seems to be the primary
source of Alcibiades' complaint in 222b. Their relationship has all the trappings of the
standard erastes-eromenos affair, but Socrates is—from the young Alcibiades' point of
view—inexplicably disinterested in him sexually. He is confident that this is not due to a
lack of good looks on his part (217a). The boy Alcibiades—his mention of the constant
presence of an attendant (217a-b) suggests he was a teenager at this time, placing the
attempted seduction perhaps as much as fifteen years before the dramatic date of the
banquet—is confused and, desiring to make himself as good a man as possible (218d1-3), resolves to take the initiative.\textsuperscript{25}

Alcibiades’ predicament must surely be viewed as aggravated by the contradictory expectations for both the erastes and the eromenos in Athenian society. Pausanias admits that Athens’ customs with regard to educative pederasty are unusually complex (182a). He construes this positively, arguing that the system discourages the ill-intended, casual lover from ever making a start of things. In reality, the situation must have been a source of considerable stress, anxiety and conflict for the young man involved. As Pausanias explains and Dover (1978) has codified, the lover is encouraged to pursue the beloved ardently, being unashamed to behave in ways that would otherwise be socially condemned. Failure is shameful and conquest is noble. The beloved, on the other hand, must not give in to the lover's sexual urges, or else he risks ridicule from his peers, which is encouraged by their elders (who may themselves be pursuing a younger boy). The expectation is that the young man will submit himself eventually, but only for the 'right' reasons, and he should not derive any sexual gratification from the experience. All of this leads Pausanias to argue for a certain amount of temperance in finding fault with the boy, suggesting that if an eromenos submits sexually on account of a desire for virtue, even a negative outcome should not be considered shameful because the motive for submission was noble (184e6-185b5). This would seem only fair, but Pausanias' own attachment to Agathon might indicate that he is somewhat out of step with Athenian mores.\textsuperscript{26} Like the

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. the possible rendering of μεγαλοπρεπείς (210d5) in step 25 of the ascent as outlined above.
\textsuperscript{26} However, Aristophanes urges Eryximachus not to turn his speech into a comedy by using it to poke fun at Pausanias and Agathon, whose partnership the comic playwright gently defends by claiming that both
boy for whom Pausanias urges leniency, Alcibiades acted in all the wrong ways, but did so for all the right reasons.

**In Terms of the Ascent: Where is Alcibiades on the Scala Amoris?**

So it is that Alcibiades' actions have provided fodder for centuries of criticism. Did Plato intend Alcibiades' boldness to indicate philosophical ignorance? Perhaps not. Diotima says that for those who are pregnant in soul (209b1-3):

> ηθεος ὑν καὶ ἡκουσής τῆς ἡλικίας, τίκτειν τε καὶ γεννᾶν ἥδη ἐπιθυμή, ζητεῖ δὴ οἶμαι καὶ οὕτως περιϊοῦν τὸ καλὸν ἐν ὦν ἢ ἄν γεννήσειν.

while he is still a youth and when the fitting age comes, he now longs both to give birth and to beget [things]; then, in my opinion, this one as well when going about seeks a beautiful thing in which he might beget [them].

She does not specify the age appropriate for acting on this desire, but her comment that the unmarried young man has been pregnant in soul from the time of his youth (ἐκ νέου ἐγκύμων ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς, 209a8-b1) suggests this may include a youth that is at the same time of life as Alcibiades in the seduction episode. That the lover ought to be a lover as a youth is reiterated in 210a4-6: 27

> δεῖ γάρ, ἐφη, τὸν ὀρθῶς ἰόντα ἐπὶ τούτο τὸ πρᾶγμα ἀρχεσθαι μὲν νέον ὄντα ἰέναι ἐπὶ τὰ καλὰ σώματα...

For it is necessary, she said, that the one going about this matter rightly make a beginning while young to go for beautiful bodies...

That Alcibiades describes the failure of his attempted sexual conquest of Socrates in unequivocal terms of rejection and humiliation; and that he willingly admits to breaking

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27 I am indebted to Myrna Gabbe for drawing my attention to this passage in a personal communication.
with convention in attempting the seduction in the first place, audaciously adopting the role of the pursuing lover when Socrates fails to do so (217c), suggests acute self-awareness rather than ignorance. This reading is reinforced by Alcibiades’ contention that despite the rejection, his admiration for Socrates continued to grow (219d-7):

\[ \text{τὸ δὲ μετὰ τούτῳ τίνα οἶς θέεθε μὲ διάνοιαν ἔχειν, ἡγούμενον μὲν ἡττιμάσθαι, ἀγάμενον δὲ τὴν τούτου φύσιν τε καὶ σωφροσύνην καὶ ἀνδρείαν, ἐντευκνηκότα ἀνθρώπῳ τοιούτῳ σίω ἐγώ οὐκ ἂν ἔμην ποτ’ ἐντυχεῖν εἰς φρονήσιν καὶ εἰς καρτερίαν; } \]

Confessedly after this you all can imagine what thing I had in my mind, believing that I had suffered dishonor, yet wondering at the nature of this man, both at his temperance and his manliness, having met with such a sort of man in regards to prudence and patience I never used to imagine I would encounter?

Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, a beloved who finds himself matched with a virtuous lover will feel himself struck by awe and wonder, and desire a limited amount of physical intimacy (255b-256a). What is clear is that Alcibiades is one of those individuals who is more pregnant in soul than he is in body, and one of the exceptional cases who has seized on the need for being proactive in attaining virtue and sees passivity as an obstacle to acquiring it. His mistake, however, is the result of youthful naivety. Famously handsome, well aware of this asset, convinced of the worthiness of Socrates as a lover and under the false impression that the philosopher’s interest in him was based on physical attraction, Alcibiades engages in a bold reversal of the pederastic roles and actively pursues the

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28 On account of this self-awareness, Nussbaum sees in Alcibiades a tragic figure, conscious of his flaws but ultimately unable to prevent them from defining his life (1986: 165-166, 194).

29 See also n.16.
relationship (217a1-4). The Greek makes it clear that his actions were the result of his lack of understanding about the nature of knowledge acquisition and his subsequent reduction of educative pederasty to a commercial transaction (ὡς ὑπάρχουν μοι χαρισαμένῳ Σωκράτει πάντ’ ἀκούσαι ὁσαπερ οὗτος ἤδει: 217a4-5). The use of ὡς with a participle confirms that Alcibiades' actions were motivated not by vice, but from well-intentioned misconceptions. After all, intuition and natural disposition are not the same as true understanding. However, there is no reason to believe that Alcibiades the man, who is relating this tale of Alcibiades the youth, has remained static in his development any more than we are led to believe that the young Socrates who spoke with Diotima now appears years later at the symposium unchanged. Alcibiades concludes his remarks by returning to the image of the silenus statue. Socrates' speeches, too, are like those statues which seem so utterly ridiculous on the outside (222a1-6):

διοιγομένους δὲ ἰδὼν ἄν τις καὶ ἑντὸς αὐτῶν γιγνόμενος πρῶτον μὲν νοῦν ἔχοντας ἐνδον μόνους εὑρήσει τῶν λόγων, ἐπείτα θειότατος καὶ πλείστα ἀγάλματ' ἀρετής ἐν αὐτοῖς ἔχοντας καὶ ἐπὶ πλείστον τείνοντας, μᾶλλον δὲ ἐπὶ πάν ὅσον προσήκει σκοπεῖν τῷ μέλλοντι καλῷ κάγαθῳ ἔσεσθαι.

but when someone sees them open and happens upon the inside of these very ones, at first he will discover that they alone of speeches have any sense within them, and then that they are the most godlike and have the greatest number of figures of virtue in them and stretch over the greatest extent—or rather, over everything, so much as it befits one intending to become noble and good to contemplate.

It would appear the man has grasped what the boy could not: the lesson is in the talking.
CONCLUSION

Alcibiades' absence during the delivery of Diotima's speech provides the reader with a ready arsenal for censuring the propriety of his words and actions. Indeed, Alcibiades himself admits that his eulogy has not been free of criticism (222a), but must we then accept Gill's characterization of the speech as "accusatory," and call it an encomium only in irony (1990: 79)?

There is, to be sure, an element of egoism in Alcibiades' attempt at seducing his philosopher 'erastes,' but even Nussbaum (1986: 189) allows that the speech reflects a tapering of youthful vanity and a continuity of affection for Socrates (in her view, that affection is aimed at achieving the practical knowledge of intimacy rather than any philosophical truth). Alcibiades speaks with great depth of feeling about his experience with Socrates, making no small issue of his own follies and shortcomings nor being spare in his praise, and provides with compelling realism the encomium—albeit an unconventional one—which Eryximachus solicited. Perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on what Alcibiades did do, and not enough on the fact that Alcibiades takes such pains to point out what Socrates did not.

The tumultuous biographical details of the historical Alcibiades need not reduce Plato's Alcibiades to a philosophic cautionary tale. His faults—though famed and legion—even within his own lifetime proved insufficient in both number and magnitude to overshadow the greatness of his promise, charisma, and political and martial achievements. His end was pitiable. But on the reading posited above, the argument that
Plato intended Alcibiades' inclusion in the *Symposium* purely as a lament for unrealized potential does not receive much support. While the usage of actual people as characters in fictional works will always carry with it a certain amount of historical and emotive baggage for the reader (and in Alcibiades' case, the baggage is admittedly heavy), the mere fact of their historicity is not just cause to disregard or trump textual evidence in analyzing the roles of their fictional counterparts.

At the very least, Plato's Alcibiades has an ὀρθὴ δόξα about Socrates and what he can learn from him. By neglecting to pursue him sexually, Socrates frees Alcibiades from the strain of accommodating conflicting expectations of coyness and sexual submission. But bound to convention, Alcibiades failed to understand—in his early dealings with Socrates at least—that it is precisely in the breach of convention that he might best obtain what the custom of educative pederasty ostensibly intends to provide: a worthy and caring companion who instructs and nurtures, motivated only by concern for the beloved's moral and intellectual development. Alcibiades' frankness in delivery lends levity to his speech, but there is an almost tangible undercurrent of self-deprecation on account of his failures and an equally sincere commendation of Socrates' restraint and apparent disinterest in bodily demands. In evaluating Alcibiades' philosophical development, we must bear in mind Diotima's reproach to Socrates (202a2-8):

Diotima: οὐκ ἦσθαι οὕτως ὅτι ἔστιν τι μεταξὺ σοφίας καὶ ἀμαθίας;
Socrates: τί τούτο;
Diotima: τὸ ὀρθὰ δοξάζειν καὶ ἄνευ τοῦ ἔχειν λόγον δούναι οὐκ οἴσθι, ἐφες; ὅτι οὔτε ἐπίστασθαι ἔστιν—ἀλογον γὰρ πρᾶγμα πώς ἂν εἰη ἐπιστήμη;—οὔτε ἀμαθία—τὸ γὰρ τοῦ ὅντος τυγχάνου

30 Here the voice of Socrates intrudes, reminding the reader that we are hearing Diotima's words as he reports them. For clarity, I have omitted "she said" from the English translation.
πῶς ἂν ἐίη ἀμαθία;

Diotima: Do you not know that there is something between wisdom [σοφία] and ignorance?
Socrates: What's this?
Diotima: Having a correct opinion without being able to give a reason.
Do you not know that this is neither knowledge—for how could knowledge be something groundless?—nor is it ignorance—for how could hitting upon what really is be ignorance?

In order to praise Socrates' virtues, Alcibiades must first be able to recognize that they are virtues—even if his understanding of their value lies μεταξὺ σοφίας καὶ ἀμαθίας.
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