

Plato's Symposium and Bakhtin's theory of the dialogical character of novelistic discourse

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In the strict sense, perhaps, there were no novels in Plato's Athens or during the Middle Ages or at least in the sense that we have come to know the novel as it may be thought to have begun with Cervantes or Richardson.¹ Yet in a broader sense this is perhaps too simple to be usefully true. Schlegel, for example, saw the Socratic dialogues as "the novels of their time". Nietzsche thought that in the Platonic dialogue which had assimilated all the older poetic genres "Plato ... furnished for all posterity the pattern of a new art form, the novel, viewed as the Aesopian fable raised to its highest power".² Bakhtin adopted a more cautious approach. He tended to see the later dialogues as monological (wrongly in our view, though this is too large a subject to take up here) but the dialogues as a whole, together with other serio-comical literature, he regarded as "the authentic predecessors of the novel".³ Nietzsche's view is essentially correct, even if it produces a typically lopsided view of Plato and even if it furnishes no criteria for determining what a novel may be. Bakhtin's assessment, by contrast, though it may arguably get the dialogues a little out of focus, nonetheless provides the criteria for determining that the *Symposium*, rather than the earlier dialogues or even the *Symposium's* companion pieces, the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus* (and rather than its being simply a biographical chronotope (or time-space con-

¹ Cf. Emerson and Holquist, 1986, xxx–xxxI. Cf. also Reed, 1981; Orr, 1991; and for an account of the genealogies of the genre see Branham, 2002, 161–5.

² *The Birth of Tragedy*, 14.

³ Bakhtin, *Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel* in Emerson and Holquist, 1986, 22, 1986, 22 (hereafter *EN*) (*Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Moscow, 1975).

figuration)),⁴ is demonstrably a novel in the Bakhtinian sense. If it is characteristic of the novel as a genre that it be essentially dialogical and that, if dialogical, it also be aware of itself as dialogical and aware also of its difference from other kinds of voice (e.g., epic, drama, lyric etc.),⁵ then the *Symposium* in the strict sense is the first novel in history. True it is that the earlier and even contemporary dialogues set the scene for the emergence of the novel in the strictest sense, especially the *Republic* with its critique of the arts through the first-hand narrative of Socrates.⁶ But it is only in the *Symposium* that the arts and sciences of their day (i.e., in the *personae* of the early speakers, from Phaedrus to Agathon, namely as orator, sophist, doctor, comic poet, theological tragedian) speak for themselves as individual players in a larger chemistry of presence and absence by which art and philosophy come together in the new form of the novel, which is specifically conscious of itself as a new genre among genres.⁷

Let us take up this claim and bring it into sharper focus, first, against the background of Bakhtin's analysis of discourse in the novel⁸ and, then, in relation to the *Symposium* with a necessarily brief contrast to the earlier as well as roughly contemporary middle dialogues. For the purposes of this article, we shall assume 1) that the *Symposium* is a middle, not an early dialogue, as has occasionally been supposed⁹ (though we cannot demonstrate

⁴ Cf. Emerson and Holquist, 1986, 130–1, *Forms of Time and Chronotype in the Novel*, and also see below.

⁵ On the broader question of Plato's incorporation of specific genres of poetry and rhetoric into his dialogues see Nightingale, 1995 (in Branham also, 2002); and on argument and the dialogue form in particular see Frede, 1992.

⁶ Especially *Republic*, bks 2, 3, and 10.

⁷ Craig, 1985, 158–73 argues for a very different and much more general position re the tragicomic novel and for Plato's commitment to realism (which is simply mistaken or too ambiguous to be helpful). Ortega y Gasset, however, realized that something much more specific and new was taking place in the *Symposium*, though he restricts this to the *tragic-comic synthesis* at the end of the *Symp.* (*Hudson Review* 10, 1957, 40).

⁸ Apart from *EN* (note 3 above), see also *Discourse in the Novel* (hereafter *DN*), from *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981, and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (DP)* (*Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, Moscow, 1963) in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson, Minneapolis, 1984. On Bakhtin generally see G. S. Morson, 1981; 1986; (and with C. Emerson) 1990, 60, note 23 on Bakhtin's favourable view of the Socratic dialogues as opposed to what he regards as Plato's later monologization of dialogue (but see also Bakhtin's qualification of this view in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* cited by Morson-Emerson, 1990, 476 n 23).

⁹ Hackforth, 1950, 43–5; Morrison, 1964, 42–55; but see O'Brien, in Gerber, 1984, 185–206; Rowe, 1998, 185.

that this is the case here), and 2) that the order of the early and middle dialogues is roughly, as scholars like Guthrie and others suppose (on the basis of all the evidence, including literary, philosophical, external, cross-referencing, and stylometric evidence, such as that provided by Brandwood and others).¹⁰ On this understanding, a rough chronological sketch would put the *Symposium* a) after the *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias* and b) in the middle group of the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*, though probably before the latter two. Rough sketches are, of course, just that: rough. Almost all chronological evidence can be contested. It is difficult, among other problems, to know what to do with the *Cratylus*, for example, though for our purposes here, it doesn't really matter whether it is before, after, or contemporary with the *Symposium*.¹¹ And where are we to situate notoriously difficult dialogues such as the *Alcibiades I*, even if we are to discount a widely prevalent view since Schleiermacher that it is pseudo-Platonic?¹² All in all, however, given the necessary limitations of any chronological schema and problems of authenticity, among others, we shall assume an ordering of fairly general acceptance which places the *Apology*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Hippias Major* and *Minor*, and *Ion* in the earliest period, then the *Protagoras*, *Meno*, *Euthydemus*, *Gorgias*, *Menexenus* in a second grouping, and the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus* in the middle period, and perhaps in the above order. At any rate, we shall assume here for many good reasons that even if the *Republic* is the last of these dialogues, the *Phaedrus* is written after the *Symposium*.¹³

For Bakhtin, Socrates serves already “as an image employed for the purposes of experiment” and in this “experimental guesswork ... the image of the speaking person and his discourse become the object of creative artistic imagination”. This process of “experimenting by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons” becomes particularly important when one is striving to liberate oneself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification or to expose the limitations of both image and discourse, for by objectifying that discourse one gets “a feel for its

¹⁰ See Guthrie, IV, 1975, 39–66; Brandwood, 1991.

¹¹ On the *Cratylus* see also Guthrie V, 1978, 1–30.

¹² See Schleiermacher, 1836, repr. 1973, 328–36; for both sides of the issue see Heidel, 1896, repr. 1976; Friedländer, 1923; 1964 (vol. 2), 348–49; Thesleff, 1982, 214–17; Anas, 1985, 111–138.

¹³ On this see Guthrie IV, 1975, 324 ff.; Rowe, 1986; Brandwood, 1991.

boundaries".¹⁴ By contrast with some forms of rhetoric, whose words become things and die as discourse, or whose double-voicedness is just diversity of voices and not real dialogue pervaded by the speech of the other (*heteroglossia*), real novelistic discourse essentially involves the other's voice:

"Rhetoric is often limited to purely verbal victories over the word; when this happens the word itself is diminished and becomes shallow ... words grow sickly, lose semantic depth and flexibility, the capacity to expand and renew their meanings in new living contexts; they essentially die as discourse, for the signifying word lives beyond itself, that is, it lives by means of directing its purposiveness outwards Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other. The utterance so conceived is a considerably more complex and dynamic organism than it appears when construed simply as a thing that articulates the intention of the person uttering it, which is to see the utterance as a direct, single-voiced vehicle of expression".¹⁵

Successful novelistic discourse, on Bakhtin's account, is essentially multi-voiced (polyglossial) and dialogical (heteroglossial). In Dostoevsky's writings, for instance:

"there is nothing merely thing-like, no mere matter, no object (*niet nichego veshnogo, niet predmeta, objekta*); there are only subjects. Therefore there is no word-judgement, no word about an object, no second-hand referential word; there is only the word as address, the word dialogically contacting another word, a word about a word addressed to a word (*slovo, dialogicheski soprikasaysheesya s drugim slovom, slovo o slove, obrashennoe k slovu*)".¹⁶

The very first sentence of the *Symposium* is a perfect, self-aware example of "a word about a word addressed to a word", in so far as the work opens upon one side of a conversation already initiated and therefore requires the voice

¹⁴ *DN*, 347–8.

¹⁵ *DN*, 353–4.

¹⁶ *DP*, 237; cf. *DN*, 349.

of another: “I believe I’m not without practice in relation to the matters you are asking about ...” (172a). But Bakhtin tends to see the classical period and its relation to epic both with remarkable insight and yet with less depth perception than does Plato himself. Building on the work of Erwin Rohde,¹⁷ Bakhtin pays detailed attention to what he calls “the authentic predecessors of the novel” especially in serio-comical literature, such as the plotted mimes of Sophron, the bucolic poems, the fable, early memoir literature (e.g., the *Epidēmiae* of Ion of Chios, the *Homilae* of Critias), the Socratic dialogues (as a genre), Roman satire, *Symposia* literature, Menippean satire and dialogues of the Lucianic type. Here, rather than in the so-called “Greek novel” as such, Bakhtin locates the important beginnings of a decisive shift towards the formation of the novel and its essential dialogical nature:

“The authentic spirit of the novel as a developing genre is present in them to an incomparably greater degree than in the so-called Greek novels ... the serio-comical genres ... anticipate the more essential historical aspects in the development of the novel in modern times, even though they lack that sturdy skeleton of plot and composition that we have grown accustomed to demand from the novel as a genre These serio-comical genres (especially the Socratic dialogues, and Menippean satire (including the *Satyricon* of Petronius)) were the first authentic and essential step in the evolution of the novel as the genre of becoming”.¹⁸

What, on Bakhtin’s account, are these “essential historical aspects” and how do they differ from epic and other genres? For Bakhtin, the emergence of the novel is the emergence of an historical struggle of genres, because the novel “parodies other genres ... precisely in their role as genres” and “exposes the conventionality of their forms and their languages”. In what becomes, therefore, the novelization of other genres, these genres:

“become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally ... the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with

¹⁷ Rohde, *Der Griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer*, 1876 (Hildesheim, 1960).

¹⁸ EN, 22.

unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)".¹⁹

So the novel is the most fluid of genres whose roots are ultimately to be found in folklore,²⁰ whereas a genre like epic has a frozen, canonized, already completed quality to it in so far as it describes a national epic past based upon tradition, rather than personal experience, and memory, rather than knowledge, and separated from contemporary reality by an "absolute" distance. The novel by contrast a) is three-dimensional, b) possesses a multi-voiced consciousness or polyglossia, c) permits the image or voice to be examined, laughed at, poked, or taken seriously from every angle and in every tense, and d) consequently brings the literary image into a zone of maximal contact with the present in all its indeterminacy, indecision, and open endedness. Here epic distance disintegrates and the possibility of "an authentically objective portrayal of the past as the past" emerges:

"... every great and serious contemporaneity requires an authentic profile of the past, an authentic other language from another time".²¹

But this sense of the past arises out of a non-canonized view of the present as an uncompleted process:

"The temporal model of the world changes radically: it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not yet been spoken

... Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness".²²

This absence of internal conclusiveness has, for Bakhtin, the following consequences: first, it creates a sharp increase in demands for an *external* and *formal* completedness, especially in regard to plot; second, whereas in distanced images we have the whole event, the novel speculates in the unknown

¹⁹ EN, 7.

²⁰ EN, 21 ff.

²¹ EN, 30.

²² EN, 30.

so that, on the one hand, the boundaries separating fiction and non-fiction, literature and non-literature start to shift and become blurred, while, on the other hand, there is both a new authorial *surplus* knowledge (the author has a surplus of knowledge which the hero does not know or see – to be exploited in a host of different ways) and each figure or mask has “a happy surplus” of its own.²³ the epic or tragic hero is nothing outside his destiny, which is both his strength and limitation, whereas one of “the basic internal themes of the novel is precisely the theme of the hero’s inadequacy to his fate or his situation”. The hero may be greater than his fate, but if he coincides absolutely with it, then he becomes a generic secondary character. So the inconclusive present inevitably tends to the future or to the “more” in all its different forms: “There always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness”; and in the absence of wholeness a crucial tension develops between the external and the internal man, so that “the subjectivity of the individual becomes an object of experimentation and representation”.²⁴

Finally, does the novel then subordinate other genres to itself in taking them over and transforming them? Bakhtin argues against this view (by contrast with Nietzsche, as we have seen above).²⁵ The novel, in his view,

“is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such indeed is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality. Therefore the novelization of other genres does not imply their subjection to an alien generic canon; on the contrary, novelization implies their liberation from all that serves as a brake on their unique development, from all that would change them along with the novel into some sort of stylization of forms that have outlived themselves.”²⁶

Bakhtin’s analysis, we suggest, permits us to sharpen our view of the *Symposium*. We are arguing that the *Symposium* is demonstrably the first novel in human history, not in the sense that novelistic elements cannot be found in all of the earlier dialogues or in earlier literature, but rather in the strict sense

²³ EN, 36.

²⁴ EN, 37.

²⁵ Note 2 above.

²⁶ EN, 39.

that it is the first work of its kind to be demonstrably aware of itself as a new dialogical genre among genres and to dramatize and give individual voices to those genres in a philosophical struggle to see beyond the incomplete and sometimes fractured images represented. This is a claim that can only be fully substantiated in a much broader and more detailed context.²⁷ Here we have space only to point out a few overlooked features of the *Symposium* which fit Bakhtin's notion of novelization in striking ways. True it is that many novelistic elements can be found in the earlier and contemporary dialogues. The *Republic* and *Phaedo*, for instance, tell highly complex biographical "stories". They are "biographical novels" of the sort Bakhtin juxtaposes to two other ancient chronotopes (or space-place coordinates) in *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*, namely, the "adventure novel of ordeal" (romance) and the "adventure novel of everyday life" (Apuleius and Petronius).²⁸ True it is also that in many of the earlier dialogues, aporetic and otherwise, the mise-en-scène of question and answer is already highly developed.²⁹ Nonetheless, the *Symposium* is the *only* dialogue (before the *Parmenides*, at any rate, which has a similar frame)³⁰ to possess a complex frame which foregrounds the very issue of genre and of generic representation itself.³¹ Since this point has never received adequate attention, we should make it as perfectly clear as we can here, however briefly.

First, the *Symposium* is polyglossial and heteroglossial even in its complex and subtle frame, since it calls itself into existence literally by calling itself into question, for it starts with an answer to a question already posed

²⁷ For detailed treatment of this and related topics see Corrigan, Glazov-Corrigan (*Plato's Dialectic at Play: Structure, Argument and Myth in the Symposium* – to appear from Penn State University Press, Fall, 2004).

²⁸ Emerson and Holquist, 1986, 84 ff., espec. 130–1.

²⁹ See, for example, for relatively straightforward question: *Crito* 43a, *Euthyphro* 2a, *Meno* 70a, *Protagoras* 309a, *Phaedo* 57a; narrative, *Charmides* 153a, *Republic* 327a; and (rather more like the *Symposium*, but in crucial aspects different) a statement *in medias res* provoking a question, *Gorgias* 447a.

³⁰ The importance of this feature (to our knowledge almost entirely overlooked) is beyond the scope of the present article.

³¹ For some limited indication of this see Rowe, 1998 and especially Nightingale, 1995. See generally on the modern interpretation and text of the dialogue Bury, 1932, and more recently, Allen, 1991; Anderson, 1993; Bonelli, 1991; Brisson, 1998; Dover, 1980; Menisier, 1996; Mitchell, 1993; Reale, 1993; Vicaire and Laborde, 1989. The history of the full reception of the *Symposium* is a vast topic in itself which would have to include reference, among many others, to Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Origen, Proclus, Augustine, the Italian Renaissance, especially Ficino, Erasmus, Rabelais etc. etc.

and, therefore, its very first words require the voice of the other as a dialogical key to understanding the discourse: “I believe I’m not unpractised in relation to the matters you are asking about ...”. Mutual reflexivity of discourse as dependent upon the question of the other is, therefore, part of the very frame of the work itself: the anonymous questioner is dependent upon Apollodorus (who actually tells the story) (172–174a) who is in turn dependent upon Aristodemus (who was actually there) (174a ff.); and this onion-skin form of narrative is in turn dependent upon the many other voices within the drama (from Phaedrus to Diotima – Socrates to Alcibiades), which together provoke the deeper question of which voice or voices to listen to above all and in what contextual understanding. To be in search of the question of the other, then, is a polyglossial leitmotif fundamental to understanding the dialogue as a whole.

Second, who or what is “the other”? The *Symposium* is a drama of many voices and many different characters, so vividly drawn as to be observable from many different angles. In a sense, each new voice adds another angle to all the voices of the drama. Yet, equally important, the *Symposium* is a drama of many different *genres*, each free and playful in its own way, and yet all of them brought together into what is essentially a new artistic and philosophical form, that is, an experimental form of dialogues and characters nestling within each other and not only this, but addressing, commenting, criticizing, reshaping, testing, and trying each other, as we shall see below. So the “other” is not only the many voices and characters, but the different genres which help to frame the work.

What are these genres? There is, first, the audio-video reportage of Apollodorus-Aristodemus, which is framed as an imitation of an imitation, that is, a more or less exact replication of an event long past, at which neither the teller, Apollodorus, nor the immediate listener were present. Apollodorus will tell what he *heard* from Aristodemus, and Aristodemus will tell what he *saw* with his own eyes (some details of which Apollodorus has checked with Socrates). Both the relative veracity of the account (cf. 173b) and the distance in time are emphasized: according to the alternative, unclear account transmitted through “someone else” from a certain Phoenix (172b), “it seems the one who is telling you told you nothing clear at all if you thought this get-together you’re asking about happened recently” (172c 1–3). There is then an “epic distance” between the events recounted and the present conversation (cf. 172b–c) and, at the same time, an immediate closeness for the

reader who enters the dialogue in the middle of a conversation already initiated and, as in every human life, is forced to discover a context for the flow of events from the past through the present and into the future. This basic generic layer, although framed within the closeness of immediate dialogue, is representative of the kind of mimetic art apparently criticized in the *Republic*.³² It purports faithfully to reproduce an actual event but at third hand. As in the case of epic, the tale is more or less frozen in an absolute past and the telling requires no creativity beyond the use of memory itself. So in this first genre, which remains essential to the survival of the tale and thus to the very fabric of the *Symposium*, Apollodorus supplies a first example of how a so-called factual "truth" should be reported: he must not change anything (unlike the apparently "hybristic" Homer and Socrates);³³ he must be utterly devoted to his subject matter; and he must pay particular attention to the chronology of events (a point emphasized by Apollodorus' contempt for another narrator, Phoenix, who had nothing "clear" to tell).³⁴ In this genre, however, the question of "truth" does not even appear. Mimetic art of this epic, mnemonic kind is concerned only with chronological "clarity".³⁵

Second, there is a further generic layer (in Aristodemus' prologue) which undermines the first and is more closely related to the immediacy of the dialogue into which the reader is first introduced. This is the conversation between Socrates and Aristodemus on the way to Agathon's house which casts the reader not into events of epic distance but rather into *the problems of every-day life*: that is, ordinary and not so ordinary people, dinner invitations and the lack of them, the eternal flow, as it were, of the play upon words etc.. This conversation turns upon the disruption or hybristic destruction of epic distance (first in Homer himself and then in the very character of Socrates: "'follow me then' said Socrates, 'and we will destroy the proverb by changing it ...'" (174b 3–4)).³⁶ This genre, then, suggests, by contrast with the first

³² The proper significance of this is too big a question to be developed here, though it is plainly of major, if entirely overlooked significance. For treatment see Corrigan, Glazov-Corrigan, note 27 above.

³³ Cf. *Symposium*, 174 b–d and see note 36 below.

³⁴ Cf. *Symposium*, 172 b; 173 a–b.

³⁵ The relation between "clarity" and "truth" in the *Symposium* and other dialogues, especially the *Republic* and *Gorgias*, is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say for our purposes here, the question of truth only emerges explicitly in the elenchus of Agathon at *Symposium*, 199 cff. (espec. 201 c–d).

³⁶ This is a feature emphasized in different ways, in Agathon's early words to Socrates: "You're outrageous (*hybristês*)" (175 e) and in Alcibiades' speech (e.g., 215 b 7).

narrative genre, that all reality is infinitely plastic, that is, that creativity of any sort destroys and transforms its supposed original material so that one cannot get behind the transformations to get a clear, unambiguous picture of that original material. The “original material” in this case is folklore or the proverb which Socrates claims that both he and epic have corrupted and transformed to fit the changing circumstances of a changing world, both the epic world itself and the ordinary world of “inferior” people as Aristodemus takes himself to be.³⁷ It is not accidental surely that in the mutations of the proverb, the original form *never clearly appears*. We can only *conjecture* that Socrates’ version of the proverb “good men go to good men’s feasts of their own accord” is perhaps closer to the original than Homer’s version “good men go to inferior men’s feasts of their own accord”, but the “original” is already lost in the conversation.³⁸ There is, therefore, in this generic layer no original version or historical bedrock, but only infinite plasticity, from folklore through epic into the endless voice of the other that is present in all human conversation. The irony of this genre is that from the very beginning of the epic-mimetic accounts of Apollodorus-Aristodemus, the fundamental assumptions of the mimetic narrative are *contradicted* by the dialogical form, without the narrators ever being aware of the contradiction. This dialogue, then, moves away from the supposedly frozen epic or folkloric past into the present and future of everyday life as it attempts “to find a way”: “As we two go together further on our way, we’ll think out what we’ll say. So let’s go” (174 d 2–3). Even in this present conversation the voice of the other, that is, a quotation from Homer (*Iliad* 10, 224),³⁹ sounds clearly as an absent participator; and in this context, it is reasonable to suppose that just as the present conversation is a destruction and transformation of the voices of the past, so too were Homer’s words a transformation of folklore and historical elements whose forms are but the dimmest shadows of an irretrievable past.⁴⁰

Third, there are the “interludes” themselves so carefully crafted as to contrast, even destroy entire moods, as well as to foreground elements and absences in the speeches themselves. Two immediate examples are Aristo-

³⁷ See the emphasis upon inferiority (the *phaulos*) first broached at *Symposium* 174 a–c.

³⁸ For the difficulties of this passage already felt in antiquity see Renehan, 1990, 120.

³⁹ Plato actually misquotes *Iliad* 10, 224, which he quotes correctly at *Protagoras* 348 d, substituting *pro hodou*, “on the way,” from *Iliad* 4, 382, for “*pro ho tou enoêsen*”, “one sees the other.”

⁴⁰ *Symposium*, 174 b 3–d 4.

phanes' hiccups and the disruptive entry of Alcibiades. But, of course, even more immediate are the formal, rhetorical speeches which contain elements of myth, drama, lyric poetry, fable, and which represent certain generic faces, but which also catch something of the individualities irreducible to mere typology: the ardent beginner and would-be orator, but definitely individual Phaedrus; the sociologue and sophist, yet irreducible figure of an individual Pausanias; the urbane doctor who naturally looks at everything through the lense of medicine, but also the individual Eryximachus, somewhat prim, proper and definitely orderly, even in the midst of his somewhat procrustean illogicalities; and so on.⁴¹ Each speech provides a different vision of reality which interacts with all the other visions, and all together furnish a somewhat fragmented view of a principle which is both older and younger than anything else, i.e., the god Eros.⁴²

Each speech, from the basic narrative of Apollodorus-Aristodemus to the apparently most "fictional" dialogue of Socrates with Diotima, which culminates in the ascent beyond all recognizable "fact", both calls itself into question and is called into question by the speeches of the others. The sheer physical force of Alcibiades' entry, for instance, is a violent revelatory contrast to the "mystery" revelations of Diotima. And even at the end of the dialogue the same theme of dependence upon the voice or question of the others reoccurs in Socrates' compelling the two poets, Aristophanes and Agathon, to the conclusion, or answer, that the same person can write comedy and tragedy, a conclusion whose question, premises, and preliminary arguments have been lost by the lateness of the hour and Aristodemus' sleepiness.⁴³

In this context, Socrates' speech casts the previous monological encomia, replete with their implicit light and shadow, i.e., potential insights, illogicalities, hidden pitfalls, smug self-sufficiencies, into dialogical form, wherein the "author" freely adopts the role of disciple and recipient in relation to a higher, sacred, feminine teacher.⁴⁴ Certainly, the dialectical form is more authoritative than the earlier speeches, for not only does it open itself out for closer scrutiny but it also includes "reference" to all the earlier

⁴¹ *Symposium*, 178 a–197 e; on the early speeches and speakers see Rowe, 1998, introduction etc.

⁴² In this way the early speeches themselves seem to look forward already to the *Parmenides*' treatment of the one and the many (*Parm.* 152 a – 155 e; 140 e – 141 e).

⁴³ *Symposium*, 223 c–d.

⁴⁴ *Symposium*, 201 ff.

speeches within it (something factually impossible for it is in fact a collage of purported conversations which antedate the present event).⁴⁵ But the precise version of truth is not what we might expect, for it is the truth of a complex psychic image, illuminated by both argument and myth,⁴⁶ which stands in strong contrast to the apparently “factual” reportage of Apollodorus and Aristodemus as well as to the historical-legal “truth” of Alcibiades which is to follow (“... should I praise him, Eryximachus? Am I to lay into the fellow and punish him in front of you all? ... I’ll tell the truth but see if you will give me permission” (214e1–6)) and which constitutes yet a further genre. The Socrates-Diotima dialectic, more than any other genre in the *Symposium*, calls itself into question precisely by its very form, for its truth is not that of fact or of corroboration by testimony but of what appears to be least factual; and if important elements in the earlier speeches are “corrected” or “focused” in a new way in Diotima’s speech, as indeed they are,⁴⁷ this is also because those speeches have *more in them* than they are themselves conscious of, i.e., a surplus-value, in precise Bakhtinian terms, so that they can and do speak to each other as well as find a new integrated focus in a dialectic which *factually* has nothing to do with them (for the dialectic took place before they came into existence). Yet the dialectic can address them beforehand, as it were, not only because of its own “fictional” power but because such speeches say more than they actually mean.

Is then the art of the *Symposium* primarily a dialectical art which forcibly assimilates and subordinates all other generic forms to itself? In short, is it “an Aesopian fable ... raised to its highest power”, as Nietzsche claims?

Plato has often been taken to task for subordinating art to philosophy, or eliminating mimetic poetry from serious consideration, or again for canonizing Socrates at the expense of a Thrasymachus or a Gorgias.⁴⁸ Yet it is noteworthy that the *Symposium*, like the 7th *Letter*, includes everything from mimetic art to philosophy, and recognizes the necessity of such art as well as its limitations. The philosophical dimension of the work⁴⁹ is, of course, the

⁴⁵ Cf. *Symposium*, 207 a.

⁴⁶ Compare, for instance, *Symposium*, 201d–203a with 203b ff.

⁴⁷ Cf. “criticism” of Aristophanes (*Symp.* 205 d–e), Agathon (204 c), Phaedrus (207 a–b), etc. On this see further Corrigan, Glazov-Corrigan (note 27 above).

⁴⁸ Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, bk. 1 primarily, and Gorgias in the dialogue to which Plato gave his name.

⁴⁹ That is, undoubtedly, the Diotima-Socrates speech, but also and even more so, the *Symposium* as a whole.

most authoritative element, but like other elements it is only part of a larger whole which is itself a represented plastic image in which philosophy, art, and everyday life come together in a new artistic form, undoubtedly under the aegis of what Socrates calls "the philosophical muse" in the *Republic*.⁵⁰

Moreover, the spirit of the *Symposium* is decidedly opposed to canonization, for it calls the typical canonization of Socrates into question and annuls the transferral of the world into an absolute epic past of archetypal beginnings by bringing the dialogical problem into the present, where such transferral and canonization are parodied (in different ways in the figures of Apollodorus, Aristodemus, and Alcibiades)⁵¹ and therefore excluded. In his very first words, Socrates himself eliminates the possibility either of an absolute epic past or of a primordial first word, by pointing to the destructive creativity of Homer, in the first case, and, by suggesting the plasticity of dialogical language and leaving the folkloric proverb unsaid, in the second.⁵² So the claim to have access to a completed event by means of memory literally undermines itself in its very inception: the endless destructive transformation of dialogue, the disruption of thought, and the generosity of the good appear to be the only provisional landmarks in a world of coming-to-be. So in the multi-dimensional structure and plot of the *Symposium* (more like Joyce's *Ulysses* or even *Finnegans Wake* than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*) the present tense of immediate address unfolds into a mimetic past which carries as its first moment the radical incompleteness and interdependence of all speech, based upon *absence* of foundation in the past and, in the figure of Agathon, *absence* finally of the good in the future.⁵³ In just this sense, the dialogue is an enigma or experiment in search of itself and, and we may suggest, the image of Socrates "standing seeking" (an image of motionless movement or soul's self-motion which Plato will develop in the *Phaedrus*) is

⁵⁰ See particularly *Republic* 499d; *Phaedo* 61a.

⁵¹ I.e., in the case of Apollodorus and Aristodemus the almost slavish dedication of disciples to the doings of the great master (cf. 172c–173a; 223d) and exactly the opposite in the case of Alcibiades, an almost obsessive love-hate relation whose very language and force prefigures the trial and hence the death of Socrates.

⁵² *Symposium* 174a–d and see also note 38 above.

⁵³ In this sense, Agathon's generosity and liberality as a host and a master (of slaves) (cf. *Symposium* 174d–175b) is belied by the *lack* of foundation in him and in his speech. His speech is all beauty, but as he himself graciously admits to Socrates, there is no "truth" in it. The pun on his name Agathon, *Good*, which runs throughout the dialogue thus comes to thematize the *lack* of the good. On this important question and its consequences, see further Corrigan, Glazov-Corrigan (note 27 above).

in some measure an emblem of the dialogue itself in the figure of the hero, transformed by the beautiful, in search of the absent good.⁵⁴

If this is an image for Socrates himself, then, there is a radical incompleteness and non-canonical unconcludedness not only in this image but in the polyglossial/ heteroglossial nature of the dialogue as a whole, a nature pervaded both by a potential multi-dimensionality of plot and structure, character and genre, but also framed as it is at the intersection of the past with every-day reality and its problems of the present for the future.⁵⁵

However, quite apart from the multi-dimensional structure and plot, and the essentially polyglossial discourse, what is also striking about the *Symposium*, in relation to Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse, is precisely its transmutation of genre into character, its conscious shifting of the boundaries between fact and fiction, clarity and truth, and its recognition of a kind of extra-factual form of address (i.e., the ways in which the various speeches "address" and "comment upon" each other), which is intelligible in the prismatic context of the work as a whole, but has a disruptive accidentality to it in its immediate context. By this extra-factual form of address we refer to what we have mentioned above, namely, the way Diotima "comments upon" each of the earlier speeches and even how Alcibiades corroborates, tests, tries, and develops the Socrates-Diotima speech. The clash and corroboration of speeches as of genres consciously destroys the simple distinction between fact and fiction, for imitative "fact" plainly does not get to the heart of the matter and yet it still comprehends the whole of the *Symposium*, on the one hand, while apparent fiction (e.g., Diotima and the ascent to the beautiful), on the other hand, arguably gets closer to the deeper significance of so-called factual reality and yet is always just begging to be exploded by the raucous, physical entrance of Alcibiades and the revellers.

This clash, corroboration, and testing of speeches as of genres – such a phenomenon occurs nowhere in this distinctive fashion as part of the frame and content of a dialogue before the *Symposium*, neither in any of the earlier dialogues, nor in the *Protagoras* or *Gorgias*, though the groundwork for this more complex art-form is implicitly already in place in these and earlier dialogues for its later emergence; nor again, is it present as such in either the *Phaedo* or *Republic*, though in the latter work especially, we might argue,

⁵⁴ I.e., (in the light of note 53 above), the "truth" Socrates seeks is not to be found in the "good" host, Agathon, by his own admission!

⁵⁵ This intersection is first thematized at *Symp.* 174 a–e.

most of the elements for this new art form are already implicit in a more developed way, particularly in the generic-individual, genealogical typologies of bks 8–9 and even, perhaps (though this is a decidedly more complex question which would require detailed separated treatment), in the major interlocutors of the dialogue: the narrator/Socrates, Cephalus, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus, Glaukon, Adeimantus.⁵⁶ In other words, the *Symposium*, though certainly prefigured in other early and middle dialogues, is an entirely new form of artistic creativity at this point of what we know of Plato's writing life.

Two further points. First, Bakhtin is, above all, the theorist of the carnivalesque who likens Socrates to the ironic jester or clown. But he simultaneously emphasizes the serious purpose of laughter and his words in this context unconsciously, but exactly describe a part of Alcibiades' role in the *Symposium*. In the folkloric and popular-comic development of the novel:

“laughter destroyed epic distance: it began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out, expose the disparity between his surface and his centre, between his potential and his reality. A dynamic authenticity was introduced into the image of man, dynamics of inconsistency and tension between various factors of this image; man ceased to coincide with himself, and consequently men ceased to be exhausted entirely by the plots that contain them”.⁵⁷

Alcibiades devotes himself to turning the tables comically upon Socrates and thereby to displaying the disparity between his surface and his centre. On the one hand, this *bouleversement* is a defining image of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque in which death and life are seen not as polar opposites but as aspects of each other, that is, in the uncrowning of the old king (Socrates) in the disruptive bursting onto the scene of Alcibiades and the mock-crowning of the new king in the garlanded Alcibiades himself: “Under this ritual act of decrowning a king lies the very core of the carnival sense of the world.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, Socrates is indeed the one character who “exhausts” everyone else (even Aristodemus), but remains inexhaustible himself. So Socrates

⁵⁶ These figures are all introduced in *Republic* I–II.

⁵⁷ Bakhtin, *EN*, 35

⁵⁸ *DP*, 1984a, 124 and Branham, 2002, 180.

exhibits that surplus of character and discourse in the true hero which Bakhtin considers essential to the novelistic form. But in its transmutation of genre into character the *Symposium* also exhibits “that happy surplus” in each of its characters, and not just in the fact that millenia of readers and critics find Phaedrus, Pausanias, or Aristophanes or Alcibiades endlessly fascinating and endlessly new.

Second, as we have observed above, it is an essential feature of this polyglossial world that each character says more than he can mean, or ever could mean in a world of facts considered as merely objectified things or states of affairs. Apollodorus and Aristodemus recount a story which they plainly understand and take delight in, *yet could never have composed*. Each speaker says much more about language, reality, and himself than he means, so that we, the readers, get to glimpse the characters from many angles, as do the actual participants themselves, at least to judge from the “chance”, double-voiced remarks in the interludes and speeches. “Diotima” cannot comment upon the earlier speeches, except as it were by divine accident,⁵⁹ yet the “more” in those speeches, which they literally do not mean, is taken up and received, as we have suggested above, into the free play of the movement to the beautiful. Alcibiades cannot even hear Socrates’ speech (he only enters after it is finished), much less bear it (according to his own double-edged testimony about Socrates’ *logoi*),⁶⁰ yet his love of those speeches and of that wondrous head permits him to address it with new meanings. No voice in the *Symposium* is hermetically sealed off from the address of its neighbour. We overhear, as it were, not only the conversation of voices and genres, but free play and an address of ideas which is simply without parallel in any earlier or contemporary dialogue.

In sum then, if for Bakhtin the novel is to be distinguished by the following features:

- 1) by its polyglossial or heteroglossial character, that is, its dependence – in the spirit of mutuality – upon the voice of the other;
- 2) by dialogical self-consciousness of itself and other genres,
- 3) by the transmutation of the problematics of event and genre into character on an experimental and testing basis,
- 4) by the potential multi-dimensionality of structure and plot,

⁵⁹ For this phrase in Plato’s usage generally, see Ast (*Lexicon Platonicum*, Leipzig, 1835–8); Compare *Republic* 6, 493a; 492a; 592a 8–9.

⁶⁰ *Symposium* 215c ff.; 221d–222b.

- 5) by the radical intersection of the past with every-day reality and problems of the present for the future, and
- 6) by the unconcludedness and incompleteness of the literary image in that intersection.

If these are, in fact, the major distinguishing features of what is admittedly a fluid genre, then we may meaningfully claim that the *Symposium* is the only dialogue, of the early and contemporary middle works, to fit all six criteria. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that it is the world's first novel in this strict sense and that it is, at the same time, one of the most perfect, indeed sublime, examples of this complex and subtle genre.

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