

Rethinking the History of the Literary Symposium

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In the Spring of 1992 it was my pleasure and privilege to direct at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign a Greek seminar called "Plato and Later Symposiac Literature." Four Greek texts were read in common: Plato's *Symposium*, Xenophon's *Symposium*, Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* and Lucian's *Symposium or The Lapiths*; each member of the seminar was then responsible for the production of a study of a different text within the genre. These latter texts were assigned as follows: Joseph Leichter to Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*, Stephen Trzaskoma to Plutarch's *Table Talk*, Eleanor Hardin to Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, A. L. Dollmetsh Worley to Methodius' *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, John Houlihan to the Emperor Julian's *Symposium or Saturnalia* (popularly *Caesars*) and Jennifer MacDonald to Macrobius' *Saturnalia*; I concerned myself with the *Cena Cypriani* and related late classical texts. Timothy Johnson, who has just finished a dissertation on Horace's symposiac poetry, was unable to attend the seminar, but agreed to help us in our revisions with his knowledge of sympotic lyric and Homer. We present here the conclusions that we have reached about the definition of the genre, Plato's place within its history, and the relation of later texts to earlier models; it is, as it were, a potential introduction to a volume, *Collected Ancient Symposia*, that has not yet found its B. P. Reardon. My students have allowed me the general supervision and construction of this essay, along with the free use of the pronoun "I" and reference to my forthcoming book, *Ancient Menippean Satire*; I lean on their expertise not only for the specific authors which were their particular concern but also for their general literary acumen.

NOTE: We will use as a convenient shorthand the adjective "sympotic" to refer to the actual cultural institution which is the symposion, and "symposiac" to refer to the literary genre which is the symposium.¹

¹ This corresponds roughly to the use of the terms employed in O. Murray (ed.), *Symptica* (Oxford 1990) v, as borrowed from Plutarch, *Table Talk* 629d: *Symptica* is the preferred term for talk about the symposion, and *symposiaca* for talk suitable for a symposion.

Some Initial Considerations

That Plato's *Symposium* is to us *the* symposium obscures the fact that it is a very eccentric symposium, whether it is viewed in contrast to those literary symposia that follow it and take it as a model, or in contrast to those contemporary sympotic realities which form the historical background against which we may evaluate the text as a document of social history. Once this is stated, it is perhaps not so surprising; those other few Platonic dialogues which take their names not after characters within them offer strikingly anomalous examples of the things they affect to discuss: Surely the *Apology* is a strange apology, and the *Republic* a strange republic.² Plutarch, who in his *Table Talk* shows his theoretical understanding of the genre (his practice in the *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* is quite different), must constantly make excuses for Plato's divergence in his *Symposium* from sympotic and symposiac norms.³ But what is at issue here is more than whether there are to be flute-girls, symposiarchs and rules for seating: Rather, what most accounts for the difference between the *Symposium* and a symposium is the presence of Socrates. For Socrates is practically by definition an unsympotic character. If the norm for a symposium is egalitarianism, then Plato's hybriatic Socrates is out of place;⁴ if a symposium is a social microcosm, then Socrates can no more be constrained by its boundaries than he can be by those of Athens. And it is surely the case that the topic of the *Symposium* is not Love, but the nature of Socrates himself. A Socratic literary symposium is, if not exactly a contradiction in terms, at least a kind of oxymoron; and those who follow in Plato's footsteps must come to terms with a model whose central character violates the norms of the symposium.

What Alcibiades does to the end of Agathon's symposium later authors do to Plato's *Symposium* as a whole: They remove the straitjacket that was imposed in the name of philosophy, and allow dissentient voices to be heard. As this kind of multiplicity becomes the symposiac ideal, the person of Socrates undergoes some remarkable changes. The problem for the author is how to have a philosophical view endorsed without dragging the

² *Sophist* and *Statesman*, as continuations of *Theaetetus*, are dialogues that seek to define their key terms as character types (*Philosopher* was not written); *Laws* (and its *Addendum*) may be allowed to be unironic.

³ This matter will be discussed more fully below.

⁴ In a sense, this complete egalitarianism is social anarchy, or panarchy; the sympotic society is controlled by everyone and no one. It is now questioned whether equality was a sympotic reality in the Roman world of the patron-client relationship; and there are now suspicions that even in Greek sympotic gatherings some people were allowed a privileged position. J. D'Arms, "The Roman Convivium and the Idea of Equality," in Murray (above, note 1) 308-20, argues that Roman sympotic reality may be much illumined by jettisoning the idea of equality, but also allows that literary symposia may operate along egalitarian lines. The genre, then, obeys literary conventions at some remove from social reality: There are rules of equality, and the violations of these rules are important.

owner of that opinion into the levelling fray. The hero of a symposium is neither narrator nor host: Shall the hero be one in the discussion and bruised by it, or one outside of the discussion and superior to it? Xenophon's Socrates is much more sympotic: He participates in the rough and tumble, makes jokes and is embarrassed, and is much more interested in bodies than in souls.⁵ The question ultimately raised there is whether the ugly Socrates is truly *kalos*; the entertainers who vote say no, but Lycon, his future accuser, says yes, he is *kalos kagathos*. Other authors, not actually putting Socrates on stage, can be more polite in their treatment of the one with superior wisdom. In Plutarch's *Banquet*, he is heard only as a voice off, in the person of the holy man Arion. But as the texts become more motley, he becomes the jester figure (already implicit in Alcibiades' description of him), or the disruptive uninvited guest: The bald and ugly buffoon Satyrion in Lucian (*Symp.* 18) resembles Alcibiades' Socrates in name as well as appearance; further, Lucian's uninvited Cynic is a mildly Socratic version of the veridical Cynics of Athenaeus. In Julian's *Caesars*, Socrates lurks behind the Silenus who insults the emperors; in Martianus' *Marriage*, his drunken antics disrupt the boring speeches at the wedding feast. One may say that Plato's Alcibiades is the other half of Socrates' own self, and that the uninvited disrupter is himself a Socratic figure; Socrates may himself be present in a number of different guises in a single work; as we shall see, these various traditions reassemble themselves in the person of Evangelus in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, who inspires the conversations by his objections.

Rosen's analysis of the dynamics of the *Symposium* reveals a Socrates on trial for and convicted of *hybris*; in other words, the *Symposium* points outside of itself, to the death of Socrates, to gain its point and to show the true value of the arguments contained within it.⁶ But what Rosen sees as singular about this one symposium is in fact central to the nature of the whole symposiac genre. What is crucial to a literary symposium is the anticipated death of its main character.⁷ Xenophon's *Symposium* ends with Lycon, one of Socrates' future accusers, calling him a good *mensch*; Athenaeus sets his *Deipnosophists* just prior to the death of the acidulous Ulpian;⁸ Macrobius' *Saturnalia* antedates Praetextatus' death by only a few

⁵ A nice point made by M. Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words: Banquets and Table Talk in the Renaissance*, transl. J. Whitely and E. Hughes (Chicago 1991) 142.

⁶ S. Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*² (New Haven and London 1987) 21–22: "Both Agathon and Alcibiades present what one may call the private, or more serious version of the public charges against Socrates recorded in the *Apology*: Socrates is accused and condemned of *hybris*."

⁷ It may be best to say that in the symposium an ancient aspect of the symposium is brought to prominence; namely, that the convivial gathering is both a funeral ritual and a relief from the world of death; consider the surprised reaction of Patroclus when he discovers Nestor and Machaon swapping stories while drinking a healing potion in an impromptu symposium of wounded soldiers at *Iliad* 11. 618–803.

⁸ Athenaeus depicts his least likeable character, Ulpian, thus (385a): "nit-picky Ulpian, who reclined by himself, eating little and scrutinizing the speakers." The aloof attitude, in itself

years. Petronius' Trimalchio, Lucian's Lapiths, Methodius' martyr-to-be Thecla and even Julian himself, about to march to his death in Persia with great foreboding, may be allowed to participate in this tradition; we shall also suggest that the extraordinary Last Supper in John's extraordinary Gospel belongs here as well.

The unsympotic Socrates and the death-centeredness of the symposium are central to the proposed definition of the genre whose history we sketch below. There are three further, related points. First, the symposiac genre must violate sympotic norms in order to function as literature. As a cultural institution, the symposium seeks to create an atmosphere in which individual differences may be aired without fear of embarrassment or reprisal, in which no one person may be allowed an authoritative point of view or an absolute truth, and where all may vie for honor but not at another's expense.⁹ But, as a literary genre, the symposium will generate its plot from tension, conflict and the violation of rules, and will show some key participants trying to gain the upper hand in impolite ways.¹⁰ In this agon, death is never far away, for sympotic order is implicitly imposed on potential disorder, and violence and orgy are the all-too-real inverse of the convivial ideal.¹¹

Second, what better source of conflict than the rules of the ritual? As the *Table Talk* shows, the proper conduct of discussion at a symposium is in fact one of the most important topics of conversation at a symposium, and in all fictional symposia the impulse to reveal these rules which shape the action is very strong.¹² It is crucial that Socrates does not play by the rules

anti-sympotic behavior, identifies Ulpian unpleasantly as the Socratic hero of the *Deipnosophists*.

⁹ O. Murray, "The Greek Symposium in History," in E. Gabba (ed.), *Tria Corda: Scritti in Onore di Arnaldo Momigliano* (Como 1983) 260.

¹⁰ Xenophon is remarkable in making all of his guests enter equally into discussion, even the Syracusan impresario; so too Lucian, whose goal is to criticize all. Plutarch's Seven are only a subset of the guests at Periander's symposium; typically, some characters remain quiet and unsympotic. These include our narrators, who can themselves be abused for their aloofness; Petronius' Encolpius is a good example, but so is Athenaeus' narrator.

¹¹ Hippocleides' dancing at the betrothal feast (Hdt. 6. 128-29) is the most famous example of the fact that symposia preserved by historians are notable precisely for the violation of the sympotic rules of decorum.

¹² R. B. Branham, *Unruly Eloquence* (Cambridge, MA 1989) 110, puts it succinctly: The symposium is "a tradition in which social and literary practices intersect." Plutarch, in *Table Talk* (1. 1), has his characters conclude that, as far as philosophical conversation goes, the tone should not be contentious, the speakers should not go on interminably, nor should the conversation get insipid. The symposium should not become a rhetorical school, a gambling house, or a theater (1. 4). It should be noted that Plutarch raises all sorts of questions about conduct that are not strictly relevant to the question of proper conversation; for example, should wine be strained, and why is it that old men get drunk faster than young men? The laws of conversation are most important for the symposiac genre, for the symposium is more interested in recording ideas as they struggle against the restraints of politeness. Most instructive in this regard is one of Varro's *Menippeans*, the *Nescis quid uesper serus uehat*, which has a comic set of convivial laws, all of which are probably broken in the confusion at the end of the meal which the title portends. These include (cited from Astbury's 1985

of Plato's *Symposium*: Refusing to deliver an encomium, he tries to get Agathon into his elenctic clutches, and then tells his Diotima story; when drinking becomes the rule, he does not get drunk. It is a question of rhythm: Characters are to harmonize.¹³ Third, as a cultural institution, the symposium is aristocratic; sympotic social groups despised commoners, and it is not only such spectacular acts as the mutilation of the herms that make the violent and hybriatic nature of such groups the object of special legislative concern.¹⁴ But Plato deftly reverses this. It is Socrates who is hybriatic, and the Alcibiades who convicts him of this is not just another aristocrat but, as a man of wine and passion, functions as a representative of Athens at large.¹⁵ The popular and democratic voice that overrides the aristocratic and philosophical discussion will live on in many comic ways—the symposium is not sympathetic to philosophers and their abstractions, but will tend to have common sense laugh at squabbling pedants. To be sure, this is a trivialization of the drama of the Platonic *Symposium*, but the elements of the comic symposium are all in place in Plato.

Plato attempts to restrain a symposium, and consequently keeps under pressure a number of centrifugal forces: the catalogue of wise opinions; the presentation of philosophers; the equality of guests; the levelling mechanisms which make discourse possible. It is the explosion of this sealed system that first gives the *Symposium* its drama, and later gives the symposium genre its shape. Parodies will emphasize orgy and violence;¹⁶ imitations will stress heterogeneity rather than homogeneity; excerpters will concentrate on catalogues of wisdom, or of riddles; expanders will place increasingly large catalogues within increasingly fantastic frames; the

Teubner text; italics identify the editorial comments of Aulus Gellius, the source for these fragments): (336) *nec loquaces autem, inquit, conuiuus nec mutos legere oportet, quia eloquentia in foro et apud subsellia, silentium uero non in conuiuio, set in cubiculo esse debet.* (337) *sermones igitur id temporis habendos censet non super rebus anxii aut tortuosis, sed iucundos atque inuitabiles et cum quadam inlecebra et uoluptate utiles, ex quibus ingenium nostrum uenustius fiat et amoenius.* (339) *dominum autem, inquit, in conuiuio esse oportet non tam lautum quam sine sordibus, et* (340) *in conuiuio legi non omnia debent sed ea potissimum, quae simul sint βιωφελῆ et delectent, potius ut id quoque uideatur non defuisse quam superfluisse.* I discuss these fragments at some length in my forthcoming book, *Ancient Menippean Satire*.

¹³ The guests who drink too much and are quarrelsome, those who mindlessly chatter on and on and those who, pretending to some higher moral status, do not truly share in the sympotic activity, are all arrhythmic, unharmonious personalities. On the idea of arrhythmic personalities in symposia, see Ath. 445d, where Pontianus calls Ulpian an arrhythmic drinker, and Lucian *Symp.* 34, in which the narrator describes arrhythmic philosophers who cannot live in harmony with their own learning.

¹⁴ Murray (above, note 9) 268–69.

¹⁵ The madness of wine is seen as an inevitable popular component of symposia in *Laws* 1–2 and in need of tight control; see below, 219–20 and n. 22. As Plutarch says (*Table Talk* 1. 2), the symposium is a democratic institution. So too does Lycon function at the end of Xenophon's *Symposium*, Athens giving Socrates the back-handed compliment that he is beautiful and good, the perfect gentleman (*Symp.* 9. 1).

¹⁶ See Jeanneret (above, note 5) 151, on Lucian's *Lapiths*.

irreconcilability of the many contrasting forces which the social symposion tries to harmonize will make the genre a frequent ally of Menippean satire; its fragmentation into things like riddle books, lists, etc. marks its end.

These aspects of Plato's *Symposium* allow us to draw a line from it through the symposia of late antiquity; placing Plato within the tradition which he inspires has proven a useful way to read his text. Accordingly, what we wish to do in this paper is three-fold: first, to explain from a literary viewpoint the peculiarities of Plato's dialogue *Symposium*, and describe the general processes by which they are transmuted into the symposiac genre; second, to give an accounting of the symposiac genre by defining the characteristics of the general phases of its history and development; and, third, to offer brief accounts of specific late texts, pointing out the ways in which they belong to a complete understanding of the nature of Plato's own provocative work, ending substantially with Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, but allowing some space for consideration of the genre's sparse medieval progeny. In this essay we do not take up the question of the nature of those symposia known to us only in fragments, nor do we address sympotic poetry, the *deipnon*, the sympotic letter, or symposiac *problemata* as literary forms; but the interest recently shown in the phenomenon of the classical Greek symposium, abundantly attested by Slater's *Dining in a Classical Context* and Murray's *Sympotica*, allows us to attempt a brief *Symposiaca* and make a particular sense of a nearly 800-year Greco-Roman prose tradition that was not obvious to earlier literary historians, primarily Ullrich and Martin; a sense which those who restrict their literary interest in the genre to Plato would do well to consider.¹⁷ We are inspired by, but take exception to, the fascinating assessment offered by Jeanneret in his study of Renaissance symposia. Plutarch, Athenaeus and Macrobius are not "mausoleums."¹⁸ Traditions of the Renaissance do allow for fruitful readings and rereadings of the classical texts; we hope here to construct a stronger bridge to lead from ancient to more modern literature.

From Dialogue to Symposiac Genre

By its simplest definition, a literary symposium is a dialogue that takes place at some time in the course of that ancient ritual of dining, drinking and conversation known as the symposion. In other words, it is by form a dialogue; and if we assert that the symposium is a separate genre of literature, we need to define how this setting so influences the dialogue in its structure, and so affects its range of characters and topics, that dialogue is

¹⁷ J. Martin, *Symposion: Die Geschichte einer literarischen Form* (Paderborn 1931), largely superseding F. Ullrich, *Entstehung und Entwicklung der Literaturgattung des Symposion*, 2 parts (Würzburg 1908 and 1909).

¹⁸ Jeanneret (above, note 5) Ch. 6, "Classical Banquets," pp. 140-71; mausoleums, pp. 160-61.

no longer an adequate label for it. We must therefore begin with Plato and face the fact that if his *Symposium* had inspired no followers it would probably be classified as another of his middle dialogues, presenting well-known characters, themes and literary devices in a form which, while exceptional in his corpus, would prove no obstacle to its inclusion among the dialogues.¹⁹

Plato's *Symposium* primarily aligns itself with the middle Socrates who speaks of transcendent forms, a separable soul and the philosophical contemplation of ultimate reality in terms of sexual union—philosophy as erotics.²⁰ We note the similar literary devices: The *Symposium* is a dialogue reported long after the fact, as is the *Theaetetus*; the *Phaedrus* has a bad speech of Lysias' recalled and discussed, reminding us of the bad speeches in the *Symposium*, particularly Eryximachus'; the Socrates who is in love in some problematic way with Alcibiades recalls the early dialogue *Gorgias*; and while Socrates' story of Poros and Penia reflects a love of myth-making abundantly attested in the middle period (Er in *Republic* 10, the chariot of the soul in the *Phaedrus*), Aristophanes' tale of the origins of the human race seems a comic anticipation of the account in the late *Timaeus*. It is significant that the *Symposium* is retrospective and prospective, for in it we see in action a number of different personae of Socrates and different views of the nature of the symposium itself. When he questions Agathon (199c3–201c9), we see an elenctic Socrates who wants to be as he was in the early dialogues;²¹ but this questioning is impolite (the cardinal rule of conduct in a symposium or sympotic discussion is politeness) and violates the rules of this particular symposium (at *Symp.* 177a1–78a1 the guests agree to deliver encomia only, a genre which Socrates affects not to master), and so Socrates is compelled to proceed more along the lines of the middle Socrates, relating his mystical instruction at the hands of Diotima. The call for sober discussion without entertainment is reminiscent of Socrates' prescriptions for a properly educational symposium in the early *Protagoras* (347c–48a), in which we find both Agathon and Socrates; but the interruption of the proceedings by the drunken Alcibiades would anticipate the regulations of *Laws* 1–2, where

¹⁹ For example, Martin (above, note 17) 295–96 makes the reasonable observation that there are symposiac traditions prior to Plato, and only the later exaltation of Plato made him the founder of a new genre. Martin also notes that the symposium setting for this particular dialogue portrays the social life of Athens with a vividness and detail not paralleled in the other dialogues.

²⁰ See Chapter 2, "Socrates *contra* Socrates in Plato," in G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY 1991) 45–80.

²¹ The Socrates of the early dialogues, who takes all his interlocutors as equals and argues only to show that he and they are equally unaware of the truth, is by nature truly sympotic; the middle Socrates is not. The dialogic methods of the early Socrates are implicitly held up to ridicule in Plato in this brief interview with Agathon; they are explicitly mocked in Xenophon (*Symp.* 4. 56–59), when all the guests agree to reply Πάνο μὲν οὖν to all of Socrates' questions.

wine and madness are deemed necessary, but in need of firm control.²² As a final point, there are here, as always in Plato, enough layers of reporting and enough biased filters intervening between the focal point of the dialogue and its actual relation to satisfy Plato's general wary unwillingness to let any one presentation of a point of view pass for an absolute truth; Socratic wisdom must always be grasped darkly.²³

What then makes the *Symposium* unique? This dialogue is driven by a tension between sympotic reality and Socratic desire. In dismissing the flute-girl and refusing to drink deeply, the guests attempt to deny that they are at a symposium, and try to transcend the occasion and their physical surroundings. Plato conspires with them in this by omitting details of the dining. All this is done in the name of Philosophy, of course; as Rosen points out, all of the speakers, even the unworthy ones, may be allowed to have some partial glimpse of the truth, so that Socrates' speech stands as the summation and perfection of all that has gone before. The clear implication is that this symposium is superior to a real symposium because words and speeches stand in for food and drink. This proud attitude will have a long history; it will become commonplace for guests to arrive at a literary symposium with words and riddles and debate as their share (their *symbolon*) for the convivial potluck.²⁴ As symposiac texts become increasingly encyclopedic, the images of learning as eating, of compilation as satire, of books as digests, come increasingly to the fore.²⁵ It will be the

²² See M. Tecuşan, "Logos Symptikos: Patterns of the Irrational in Philosophical Drinking: Plato Outside the *Symposium*," in Murray (above, note 1) 238–60, esp. 257–60.

²³ The sequence of narration in Plato (Apollodorus tells to an unnamed friend the dialogue as he heard it from the guest Aristodemus, a version considered to be more accurate than that related to Glaucon by Phoenix, and checked in some details against Socrates himself) is laboriously followed by Methodius (Gregorion tells Eubulion, who had earlier heard an unsatisfactory version from an unnamed informant, about the banquet given by Arete as she heard it from the guest Theopatra).

²⁴ See Aulus Gellius 7. 13. 2–3 on the sympotic *quaestiunculae* (a trivializing diminutive for which he also gives the Greek equivalent, ἐνθυμημάτια) that guests would bring to banquets at the home of the philosopher Taurus, in Athens: *cum domum suam nos uocaret, ne omnino, ut dicitur, immunes et asymboli ueniremus, coniectabamus ad cenulam non cuppedias ciborum, sed argutias quaestionum. unusquisque igitur nostrum commentus paratusque ibat, quod quaereret, erat initium loquendi edundi finis.* Examples of these levelling riddles are given: Should we say that one who is dying dies while still alive or when dead? Do you stand up while seated or when already standing? The point is made that such questions stimulate the wit and the conversation; but it is not really polite for one guest to try to prove the superiority of his opinion.

²⁵ This is abundantly illustrated in Jeanneret, *A Feast of Words* (above, note 5); but it is worth noting that those who explicitly claim the superiority of words over food may be mocked. In Plutarch's *Banquet* (160c), when Solon delivers a rude and lengthy diatribe against the pleasures of food, in which the bowels are compared to Hell (the "pit" of the stomach), his unsympotic fervor is not commented on by our narrator or anyone else (160c), and we get the impression that his words were received with a shocked silence. Silence as an undercutting response to an improper speech in the symposium deserves further study. See also below, note 40.

primary joke in Athenaeus, where the Cynic guests must always wonder whether the food before them will ever be eaten, or only talked about. But the point to make is that Plato's *Symposium* desires to be unsympotic. Pellizer describes sympotic reality as a controlled exercise of the passions, a private agon (unlike the public one in which Agathon secured his victory) in which the public image can be put at risk in a sort of ritualized exhibitionism.²⁶ In Plato's *Symposium*, this agon is clearly present, both in the rivalry that animates the different encomia and in the tensions that surface between speakers; but control disappears, just as the other aspects of sympotic reality make their first appearance, at the end with the arrival of Alcibiades. Now we have a symposiarch who imports a flute-girl (though she does not play), orders deep drinking and sets about embarrassing Socrates and calling into question the value of his speech on Love.

Alcibiades makes his famous claim that there is a reality to Socrates that is hidden from view, and he implies that Socrates intentionally keeps it hidden. This is Socrates' erotic nature, and the references to the Sileni with the gods inside and to the mad-piping Marsyas do not only tell us of Socrates' enigmatic nature, but of his attempt to conceal himself, to be unsympotic. And when Alcibiades offers himself for ridicule, telling of his own impropriety in attempting to seduce the older man Socrates and how his advances were rejected, we see not only an embarrassed Socrates but also a Socrates convicted of *not* proceeding, as he had been instructed to by Diotima, from the physical body to transcendental love.²⁷ It may be too much to say that Alcibiades' revelations and talk of *hybris* give the lie to Socrates' abstractions, but Socrates' attempt to live in the abstract, both in philosophy and in the symposion, is disdainful of the world around him.

What distinguishes Plato's *Symposium* from his other dialogues is the way in which the social order of Athens, which differs so dramatically from the dialogic world of Socrates, intrudes at the end to force a re-evaluation of the character of Socrates. This is obviously not like the *Apology* with its verdicts, or the *Phaedo* with the jailer and his poison; in these, death comes to a Socrates whose opinions are fully endorsed, while in the *Symposium* death waits for a Socrates whose opinions are questioned. Socrates sits here beneath no plane tree, and is not in his usual element, before two or three eager listeners. Bathed and with shoes on, he is out of character; the lengthy delay before he enters suggests his unwillingness; the concluding long and paradoxical discussion of the nature of the writing of tragedy and comedy, which puts our narrator to sleep, makes the reader wonder just what has transpired here: Is the disjunction between Socrates and his

²⁶ E. Pellizer, "Outlines of a Morphology of Sympotic Entertainment," in Murray (above, note 1) 182-83.

²⁷ Rosen (above, note 6) 276-77, summarizing a long analysis of the Diotima passage: "It is by no means self-evident that Socrates himself begins unambiguously at the level of the body."

audience a comic or a serious thing?²⁸ The learning of the speakers has been set in a frame that calls for the re-evaluation of both the learning and the speakers, and society appears impatient with the wisdom of the wise.

This, then, is our genre in its first stage of development, the symposiac "mode" of the dialogue to use Alastair Fowler's terms.²⁹ The transition from Plato's *Symposium* to the symposiac genre is accomplished by a number of means. Creative imitation draws out selectively certain aspects of the work; recourse to actual sympotic convention augments Plato's material; and appeals to other literary traditions afford an intertextual richness that goes some way toward making up for the particular philosophical profundity which is Plato's genius, never seriously rivalled within the tradition. In the eyes of later authors, the characters of Plato's *Symposium* are too homophonous, the speeches themselves are objectionable as too long and too serious, and there is a need of variety (*poikilia*).³⁰ Variety is imported into the symposium partly by attention to the details of actual sympotic practice: the rituals of eating and drinking; entertainment, jesters and buffoons; variety of topics discussed; riddles and puzzles. But the theoretical justification for the modification of the master's practice is, of all people, Homer. The important discussion of this is the beginning of Book 5 of Athenaeus, in which the jurist Masurius comments on the ways in which Xenophon and Plato variously approximate the Homeric ideal. Epicurus suffers most in the analysis for never having made the attempt, but Homeric symposia are superior to philosophical symposia, to the partial exception of Xenophon's *Symposium*, by virtue of *poikilia*. This is in fact a remarkable literary sleight-of-hand. Despite the laborious reference to Homer at its beginning, Plato does not draw on Homeric feasting scenes to create his own *Symposium*.³¹ In effect, Plato is

²⁸ Too much attention is paid, I think, to the discussion of drama at the conclusion of the *Symposium*, where the best writer of tragedy is said also to be the best writer of comedy; and too much to the supposed five-act structure of the symposium, although D. Sider, "Plato's Symposium as Dionysiac Festival," *QUCC* 33 (1980) 41-56, has an interesting statement of the thesis. We are more impressed by the implicit equation of the guests and the chorus of drama: Socrates, as it were, steps out from the chorus to pronounce the truth, and like most of those in tragedy who say what is true, he is to pay with his life.

²⁹ A. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA 1982) Ch. 10, "Transformations of Genre," pp. 170-90.

³⁰ The importance of this term for Athenaeus is discussed by A. Lukinovich, "The Play of Reflections between Literary Form and the Sympotic Theme in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus," in Murray (above, note 1) 267-68. We are not dealing merely with a stylistic matter here: As a banquet is compounded of various courses, and would be unpalatable without variety, so too does the literary symposium require what the symposion does.

³¹ Socrates' ponderous complaint to Aristodemus (174b3-d3) of how Homer made the lesser Menelaus go unasked to the sacrifice and feast of Agamemnon in *Iliad* 2 has a surprising afterlife. Masurius wrestles with this in Athenaeus, and proposes a textual emendation as well (Ath. 5. 177c-78e). In Petronius' *Cena*, an Agamemnon goes to attend a symposion at which a Menelaus is present; Evangelus in Macrobius bids his host fear lest he take three Menelauses into his home (*Sat.* 1. 7. 10): *superuenire fabulis non euocatos haud equidem turpe*

acknowledged to be the founder of the genre, but appeal to the earlier and more authoritative Homer justifies the modification of the Platonic model. It is also curious that the long tradition of pre-Platonic, archaic sympotic literature, expressed in epigram and drinking song and tales of the sympotic gathering of the seven archaic wise men, is generally suppressed.³² Of course Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* is the exception; it could never have existed without this tradition. Plutarch's narrator claims to be writing in the archaic age, making this work an interesting example of historical fiction as well as a symposium. But though the work tries to leap over Plato, as it were, to the archaic traditions, we shall show that the actual structure of the *Banquet* is Platonic, and that the prior traditions do not exist to create rival forms of the literary symposium but only superficial modifications of the Platonic model.

Even Homeric *poikilia* is not sufficient to override the Platonic pattern of the symposium. Plato's death-centeredness is maintained, whether one speaks of the mortal heroes of the *Iliad* and the discussions found in the Embassy to Achilles, or of the feasting of the suitors on Ithaca.³³ The *Odyssey* is in fact more important to the later sympotic tradition, just as the *Odyssey* is more important generally in the history of later prose genres (romance, Menippean satire, the picaresque). It is fascinated with violations of the rules for proper feasting (the gluttony of the suitors, Polyphemus' cannibalism, the eating of the Cattle of the Sun) and in Telemachus' initiation into the right use of ritual conviviality (learning from Nestor, Menelaus and, ultimately, his own father). More importantly, however, Homeric realities become the counterpoint to philosophical debates. Thus, Lucian's *Symposium or Lapiths*, which is centered on a wedding feast, ends in bloodshed as philosophers fight like Penelope's suitors; the heavenly symposium which figures in Julian's *Symposium*, like the wedding feast on Olympus that Philology reaches at the end of her journey in Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, are pointedly unworthy sources of wisdom by virtue of the associations of their Homeric fantasies.

existimatur: uerum sponte intruere in conuiuium aliis praeparatum nec Homero sine nota uel in fratre memoratum est, et uide ne nimium arroganter tres tibi uelis Menelaos contigisse, cum illi tanto regi unus euenerit.

³² See B. Snell's fascinating collection, *Leben und Meinungen der Sieben Weisen*⁴ (Munich 1971); Martin (above, note 17) 291-92 does not deal with the significant difference between real model (pre-Platonic sympotic reality and sympotic production) and claimed model (Homer).

³³ The significance of sympotic feasting in the *Iliad* is taken up by Murray (above, note 9) 259-62; Masurius in Athenaeus (above, note 31) also speaks explicitly of the Embassy. W. J. Slater, "Sympotic Ethics in the *Odyssey*," in Murray (above, note 1) 213-20, speaks of Odysseus among the Phaeacians, but does not note how unsympotic such a story would be by contemporary sympotic standards. That symposia may be implicitly death-centered can be argued from Homer (above, note 7), but Plato fronts this concern in ways that cannot be extrapolated from Homer, except in the general way that epic and tragedy together assert that heroes must die.

Lucian's comic treatment of Homer's heaven helps to pave the way for this. Later symposia enjoy the relief from Plato's high sentence, allowing wrangling philosophers to be mocked for their arrogance, and exalting Odyssean piety and practical wisdom.

It is good to remember that philosophical debate is itself a violation of sympotic norms: Philosophers in their discourse are outside the pale of civilized human beings. This is a joke frequently encountered in Varro's *Menippeans* and throughout the Menippean tradition as well, in which the *philosophus gloriosus* is the recurring butt of humor.³⁴ This theme, and the key term *poikilia*, are both stressed at the very beginning of Lucian's *Symposium or Lapiths*: Ποικίλην, ὦ Λυκίνε, διατριβήν φασι γεγενῆσθαι ὑμῖν χθές ἐν Ἀρισταινέτου παρὰ τὸ δεῖπνον καὶ τινὰς λόγους φιλοσόφους εἰρησθαι καὶ ἔριν οὐ μικρὰν συστήναι ἐπ' αὐτοῖς . . . , "They say, Lycinus, that you had a truly sympotic gathering over dinner at Aristaeetus' house the other day, that philosophical words were spoken, and that no small contention arose because of them . . ." See how clearly Platonic *eros* has been replaced by *eris*; the "philosophical words" are themselves examples of objectionable behavior.³⁵ The discussion even takes place during dinner, and not after—no order is maintained. Wrangling eggheads have supplanted the philosophers. It is not important to Lucian that Plato's doctor Eryximachus stands out as one who cannot pass muster as a philosopher; he typifies the foolish wise man, and this theme is pounced on here with a vengeance.

The Three Phases of the Symposiac Genre

These considerations allow us to see the transition from Plato to later authors in a clearer light. To continue to use Fowler's terms, once we establish a genre out of the sympotic mode of Platonic dialogue, we can discern the three typical phases of the genre's life span. To the primary stage (primitive/simple/naive) we assign Xenophon's *Symposium*, which is concerned not to use Socrates to make philosophical points but to remember Socrates as a personality. Xenophon's Socrates displays a "complex irony" which is in welcome contrast to his moral didacticism in the *Memorabilia*.³⁶ He is present at a symposium that is concerned with bodies much more than minds: the dancers who entertain them, the beauty of Callias and Critobulus,

³⁴ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton 1957) 229–31.

³⁵ The term reappears as the adjective ποικίλα at section 34, where too we learn of the absence of rhythm in the conduct of the philosophers; see above, note 13. Branham (above, note 12) 104–23 has a nice discussion of Lucian's use of Platonic material in the *Lapiths*. See also Jeanneret (above, note 5) 150–52 for a brief treatment that makes the interesting point that the *disiecta membra* of the discussion, letters, fragments of poets, etc. suggest a text about to fly apart.

³⁶ For complex irony, see Vlastos (above, note 20) 30–32.

the ugliness of Socrates.³⁷ Philosophical issues are accordingly played out on the physical level, and it is left to Lycon to proclaim the paradox that Socrates is beautiful and good. In the person of Lycon, Socrates' death is before us here as it was in Plato, but Socrates' eccentricities and foibles are more sympathetically presented by Xenophon. Here we see Socrates the pander, the man who loses the beauty contest, the philosopher who is chided for not being able to educate his wife Xanthippe. His praise of the beauty and virtue of the young man Autolycus, Lycon's son, is sufficient to win the admiration of the boy's father; but his words and example are quickly countermanded by the Syracusan impresario, who stages a "live-sex-act" version of the myth of Dionysus and Ariadne that sends the married men galloping off to their wives, makes the unmarried men wish they were married, and leaves Socrates rather out of the picture, tagging along after the proud father and son. The central debate on the value of the characteristic on which each speaker prides himself is a series of praises of paradox, of money and of poverty.³⁸ Here Socrates preens himself on his abilities as pander. What we have is genuine dialogism, a multiplicity of surprising opinions, all sanctioned by the convivial table; Socrates does and does not belong.³⁹ Xenophon follows, but with an originality that should not be overlooked; he introduces a polyphonous strain of symposiac literature that pursues Plato's ends by a very different means. Xenophon competes very creditably on Plato's terms, achieving a pointed portrait of an exceptional wise man on the level playing field of the symposion.

Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Wise Men* also belongs to this primary stage; in it, Periander (often called one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece but pointedly not so labelled here) presides over a banquet which will reveal the superiority of his wisdom and piety to that of the Seven; instrumental in this exaltation of Periander is his protection of Arion, whose rescue from the pirates establishes him as an anti-Socrates, a wise man not delivered up to death at the hands of the mob. The story is worth some detail.

It becomes clear that Periander's brother Gorgus stands in the place of the uninvited guest.⁴⁰ He has a tale to tell, the tale of Arion and the dolphin (160e-62b); it has the climactic function of the Diotima story in Plato. Gorgus had seen to it that soldiers be stationed at various landfalls to be on

³⁷ Jeanneret (above, note 5) 142.

³⁸ This will prove inspirational to Julian in his imperial debate, as each emperor proclaims his guiding principles and justifies himself before the gods. Socrates is present at the proceedings only as Silenus, who mocks all their pretensions.

³⁹ Jeanneret (above, note 5) 144 speaks of Xenophon's open-ended text as "a foretaste of the Menippean satire."

⁴⁰ Gorgus' arrival (160d) stops the conversation. The name alludes clearly to the Gorgon; cf. Socrates in Plato (*Symp.* 198c), who says that the figures of Gorgias in Agathon's speech, like a Gorgon, almost turned him to stone and prevented his speech. Xenophon's *Symposium* begins with all the guests unable to speak because of the beauty of the boy Autolycus. Silence and a new beginning are used to set off important passages in a symposium.

the look-out for the pirates who had abducted Arion; and we discover that the soldiers have been successful and have just arrived at Corinth with the pirates. Periander at first does not believe it, but finally has the pirates put in prison without revealing to them Arion's escape. So far, we have the story in Herodotus 1. 23–24, but the conclusion is missing. We never hear of what happens to the pirates; but we do know what will happen because we know Herodotus. A story whose conclusion is known is already begun; and the one who was to be unjustly murdered will receive justice and vindication.

But this Arion is more than Herodotus' Arion. It is made more clear that he is θεοφιλής; his song is not only a hymn but a swan-song; he is a friend of Periander's. In these details our story is just like that which begins the *Corinthian Oration* (*Or.* 37) of Plutarch's contemporary Dio Chrysostom; Dio also makes the point that Solon was at Periander's court at the time of the Arion affair, being exiled from Athens and Peisistratus. Peisistratus is not mentioned in Plutarch's *Symposium*. But we have here further adumbrations of the untold story: Periander is a wise man in comparison to the tyrants, and we know that he will act in defense of the holy man Arion. In this light, the Seven Wise Men, who frequently have been seen as less than religious,⁴¹ to whom our religious narrator is something of a naive foil, and whose behavior has been less than exemplary (consider Solon's tasteless speech on the bowels as Hell, 159b–60c, which immediately precedes the arrival of Gorgus and the tale of Arion), are to come around to a religious point of view, and their concluding stories strike the religious theme, telling other dolphin stories and tales of divine interventions. Other types of wisdom are contrasted with theirs. Periander is the practical wise man; Arion is the holy man; the seven are much more in the realm of *philosophi gloriosi*. We have, in other words, a frame which makes for a re-evaluation of the nature of the seven.

We are fortunate to have two parodies of this primary phase of the literary symposium in the death-centered *Cena Trimalchionis* and in Lucian's bloody *Lapiths*. We leave the *Cena* for later, but the *Lapiths* may be dealt with briefly here. Lucian is a moralist, and the philosophers who gather for the wedding feast are shown up as hypocrites as they steal food, vie for honors, and try to seduce the groom.⁴² The Odyssean battle which

⁴¹ Near the beginning, word is brought of a monstrous birth, of a foal with a human head (149c–e). The narrator Diocles (functioning as Plutarch's porte-parole) says it calls for purification and atonement, but Thales disagrees, and says only that the young men who keep the horses should find other work or get themselves wives. The narrator is proved right, of course; this parallels the story of the one-horned ram at *Pericles* 6, where Plutarch says that Anaxagoras' clever explanation from natural science does not eliminate the possibility of a concurrent theological explanation; the one addresses cause, the other purpose.

⁴² There is no attempt at moderation. The narrator Lycinus, though present, tries to keep himself to himself. He observes the boorish behavior of his companions, but never steps in himself to do anything about it.

terminates the work only points the moral that wisdom is not worth acquiring if your life is going to be out of synch with it. All of the impolitenesses exhibited are part of a thoroughgoing parody of the Platonic symposium, to the significant exception of having no one person singled out for approval of any sort; while this is consonant with Lucian's general anti-philosophical stance, it is also a very sympotic attitude: All are certainly equal at this symposium, Epicureans and Stoics, Aristotelians and Platonists alike. It is the opposite of a symposion: There is only orgy and violence, and a failure to impose order on the different voices contained within it.⁴³

To Fowler's secondary phase (artificial/sophisticated/sentimental) we assign that great gallimaufry which is the *Deipnosophists* of Athenaeus; a symposium composed of the stuffings of many another symposium, and organized, like a menu, course by course from appetizer to dessert. It is food as philology, and not really at a great conceptual remove from Trimalchio's banquet, where each astonishing dish must be explained, where every event is a riddle, where nothing seems to be what it really is. The ritual must be explained by mock scholars: As Trimalchio says (39. 4), *oportet etiam inter cenandum philologiam nosse*. It is preceded by Plutarch's *Table Talk*, also an assemblage of materials from various symposia, on a variety of issues round and about the general theme of how to conduct a symposion. This is the structural equivalent of a collection of nothing but programmatic verse satires. Though it lacks a plot it anticipates that later agglutinative tendency which affects all late prose genres—the process by which systematic learning becomes the content of an imaginative work.⁴⁴ We see this in Menippean satires as they increasingly follow the lead of Varro's scholastic *Menippeans*, thus creating the fantastic and ironic encyclopedia of Martianus Capella; we see it also in romance, not only in the almost euphuistic use of digressions on natural history in Achilles Tatius, but also in the *Clementine Recognitions*, in which the romance form is largely a vehicle for sermons. We note again that imitation is creative: We are in the realm of the intellectual game of the philological satura, half-way between Xenophon's polyphony and later fantasy.

For Fowler's third and final phase, characterized by literary nostalgia and the elevation of various generic elements to a quasi-allegorical status, we have Methodius' *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, which sets out deliberately to emulate and rival Plato's *Symposium*. Not only is the elaborate chain of sources for the relation of these carefully arranged speeches preserved, but so is the theme of transcendent love, the use of the female voice for

⁴³ Further on *Lapiths*, above, note 35.

⁴⁴ G. Matino, "Strutture Retoriche e Colloquiali nelle 'Quaestiones Conviviales'," in G. D'Ippolito and I. Gallo (edd.), *Strutture Formali dei "Moralia" di Plutarco* (Naples 1991) 295–313, points out that while there is no obvious scheme of composition in the *Table Talk* (to the exception of Book 9, which is limited to a single symposion) the rhetorical tension between Attic and koine speech throughout the work indicates a unity of intent, and that the discussions are not just an aggregation of random observations (esp. 296).

instruction on the nature of love and the appetite for the good, and the impending martyrdom of the main speaker, Thecla, which leads us to look beyond the speeches for ultimate wisdom. Many other things conspire toward this: The symposium's setting is a walled garden beneath a chaste-tree; the symposiarch of this sober discourse, Arete, hopes to lead the guests on to the milleniarist's fields of immortality; a concluding dialogue between the teller of the tale and his auditor underlines the point that those who listen must do more than listen to achieve their salvation. The pagan counterpoint to this is Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, a stately presentation of Vergilian wisdom expounded over three days in three different houses, in response to the blasphemous objections of Evangelus to Vergil's literary authority. One wishes that the various lacunae hide some passages in which Macrobius would have asserted the value of these bookish pursuits relative to the larger world, but this is probably a vain hope; it is a book that seeks to exalt another book, not to denigrate its own efforts in doing so. It is important that the introduction speaks of the following work as a digest of learning for his son.⁴⁵ It is a return to Platonic homophony and a rejection of the reinterpretations to which the Platonic model had been subjected; it is also possible that Roman rituals of dining influenced this literary decision. Macrobius is at any rate little interested in that *satura* which is a heady mixture of all the possibilities of the dinner table, or in humor at the expense of those who know.

We have not yet made room for Julian in this scheme, nor for the *Cena Cypriani*. To do so, we need to point out a crucial aspect of the history of the symposium genre, and this is the extent to which it intersects the history of Menippean satire. Northrop Frye takes Athenaeus and Macrobius as authors of Menippean satires, for he makes much of the encyclopedic hunger of the Menippean genre, and its desire to contain the world within a book.⁴⁶ But I think that it is easy to keep these in the fold of the symposium: There is no fantasy, no narrator on a fantastic quest, little sense of the narrator's self-parody. Menippean satire has the fantastic device of the journey to the other world in search of absolute truth, the mordant theme that truth is not to be found at the ends of the earth, and the self-parodic laugh at the authors and narrators who attempted the impossible only to come up with their hands empty. As I argue in *Ancient Menippean Satire*, its inspiration is Plato's Myth of Er; in the hands of Varro and Petronius it becomes a parody of verse satire and its preachers. The symposium is not

⁴⁵ Macrobius, *Sat. praef. 3: nec indigesta tamquam in aceruum connessimus digna memoratu: sed uariarum rerum disparilitas, auctoribus diuersa, confusa temporibus, ita in quoddam digesta corpus est, ut quae indistincte atque promiscue ad subsidium memoriae adnotaueramus, in ordinem instar membrorum cohaerentia conuenirent.* The conventions of such educational statements are treated in F. J. LeMoine, "Parental Gifts: Father-Son Dedications and Dialogues in Roman Didactic Literature," *JCS* 16 (1991) 337-66.

⁴⁶ Frye (above, note 34) 310-11, where the writings of Macrobius and Athenaeus are said to be "a species, or rather sub-species, of the [Menippean] form."

in essence fantastic and does not laugh at its narrator; it speaks of the value of knowledge in the real world and not beyond it; but, like Menippean satire, it does make fun of philosophers and all who affect a specialist's knowledge of everyday phenomena.

Because of the sympotic reality of *problemata*, there is a tradition of recording, without the sympotic setting, the opinions of the wise on various problems ("What is wisest, most just, most useful?"). Plutarch shows how sets of questions and answers attributed to the Seven Wise Men could be given a symposium treatment, and how these views could be denigrated in comparison to a higher truth; in his *Table Talk* he also shows how problems can be stripped of their setting. It is the question of how the setting affects the learning that is at issue. A work like the *Placita Philosophorum* can be read as if it were excerpts from a banquet of the learned; a hagiographic work like *Secundus the Silent Philosopher* shows such digested learning fully endorsed. The sympotic setting implies that all opinions are equally valid, but the symposiac tradition asserts that some one person has a superior truth. In Plato, this person is Socrates, and the price exacted for superior wisdom is very loudly hinted at. In other words, there may be many opinions, in the name of *poikilia*; but there is also one opinion, and symposiac literature finds itself much exercised about who gets to hold it, because there is little literary interest in having many opinions endorsed as equally valid, but quite a bit of interest in having all opinions (or all but one) overthrown. Consequently, both symposium and Menippean satire enjoy the use of frames that question the validity of the learning contained within them.

To make his thematic overlap between Menippean satire and symposium all the more confusing, Menippean satire, out of its general desire to parody other forms of literature, may include a symposium within itself without actually becoming a symposium. This is obviously the case with the *Cena Trimalchionis*; this Menippean satire contains within itself a parodied symposium; the narrator and main characters of the whole are largely quiet here, observing and then passing on. Varro is a complex case. His 150 *Menippean Satires* are not compelled by the overarching title to be generically identical, but there are certainly many parodied symposia contained within them. Unfortunately, we cannot tell if their point is to parody the Platonic form (as in Petronius or Lucian) or whether the symposium is itself emblematic of a place in which the seeker of truth will not find it, which is the habit later in the history of the Menippean genre. The *Nescis quid uesper serus uehat*, which contains a series of polite sympotic rules certainly dramatically violated as the title implies, may have worked to parody the symposiarch/author/narrator who pronounced them and so be Menippean;⁴⁷ but Lucian's *Lapiths* shows that the symposium can just be parodied without any further generic complications. When we read

⁴⁷ See above, note 12.

Martianus Capella, we see that the fantastic journey of Books 1 and 2 takes Philology to a wedding feast, the setting for the last seven books; this is a symposium contained within a Menippean satire, and the discourses of the Liberal Arts are presented as sympotic exercises that do not possess the Truth discovered earlier in the text, when Philology glimpsed the Unknown Father. This delays the marriage, and participates in the usual symposiac fun at the expense of intellectuals. Julian is the unusual case: His Menippean satire, his journey to heaven, is almost coterminous with the symposium contained within it, in which the equality of the emperors who vie for divine honors is shown to be largely an equality of error. In other words, in adapting Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* Julian had to find a way to have many aspirants to Olympus present themselves at once and be found wanting: The symposium is used for this reason, and because a symposium levels its guests. Julian stands outside, and it is his own impending death that gives added meaning to the distance that he keeps from his comic predecessors.

To this extent, we can assign Julian to the second phase of the history of the symposium genre. The *Cena Cypriani*, on the other hand, is of the final phase, for it attempts to relate a banquet almost entirely through the medium of riddles; specifically, cryptically expressed Biblical trivia. Isaac brings firewood and the reader must remember why it is appropriate for him to do so. This *Cena* has no conversations, and lasts for two days; but the discovery of the theft of one of the host's cups ultimately results in the death of one of the guests, both reminding us of Lucian's *Lapiths* and violently asserting the significance of death to the constitution of the genre and justifying its insertion here. Rather like the late *Aenigmata Symp[h]osii*, the *Cena* takes one aspect of the symposium and expands on it alone; it does this with gusto, and with a nod toward other generic requirements, but once the genre loses its ability to synthesize its constituent elements it is effectively dead.

A New View of the Late Symposia

Much of what informed the previous discussion was distilled from our reading of later texts: our understanding of their conventions and themes, our view of their interrelations and history. What we do here is present profitable ways to read these texts, to draw them into the ambit of Plato and show how they can illumine each other. We do not desire to be exhaustive, but to point a direction.

Cena Trimalchionis

Petronius is read as a document of first-century social history, whose literary affiliations are almost entirely to the Roman satiric tradition. For the *Cena*, the pertinent satiric theme is of course the dinners of the

nouveaux riches; Horace's *Cena Nasidieni* (*Sat.* 2. 8) is the obvious parallel. But Petronius is clearly more than tastelessness, debacle and escape; Trimalchio strains the satiric straitjacket by being ultimately a likable character, at least more likable than the hypocrites who eat his food and laugh behind his back. I have discussed elsewhere the *Satyricon* as a whole as an example of Menippean satire; but this literary setting has particular pertinence for the understanding of the *Cena*. Our narrators are wandering scholars, full of book opinions and uncomprehending of what they see; in the *Cena* they walk into another book, a parody of Plato's *Symposium*. The death of the hero could not be more clearly anticipated, from the painting of his apotheosis seen by the guests as they enter to the mock funeral which terminates the evening's festivities. As a fictional character, Trimalchio has no life to the reader outside of the text; we do not know how his life will continue after the dinner, as we do know in the case of Socrates, and so we have to be told. Trimalchio's inability to serve food without a lecture directly anticipates the *Deipnosophists*; the emergence of the superiority of our gauche hero from the cacophony of undirected voices is in the tradition of Xenophon.

What is most fascinating is that Trimalchio is not just a nouveau riche but another Socrates. The grotesque physical appearance is one connection; the inappropriate dancing for which Fortunata taxes him (*Sat.* 52. 9–53. 1) reminds us of the laughter aroused by Xenophon's Socrates, who claims that he wants to learn how to dance, perhaps to improve his figure (*Symp.* 2. 16–20).⁴⁸ Just as Alcibiades tells us of the inner and the outer Socrates, so do we hear (endlessly) of the old and the new Trimalchio, and how he tries to hide his servile nature behind a show of wealth and mock-senatorial trappings. But he is paradoxically wise, in contrast to the narrator, who will go on to other adventures; Trimalchio is toying with these people. A large part of this game-playing consists of his appallingly enigmatic choice of foods, a clear anticipation of the gustatory/philological humor of Athenaeus, and an extension of the general sympotic love of riddles.⁴⁹ The *Cena* must not be separated from the history of Plato's *Symposium*.

Table Talk

Plutarch's project here is ostensibly to relate verbatim actual conversations to his friend Sossius Senecio but, with nine books and a total of ninety-five disputations, many having been put on paper after an interval of several

⁴⁸ Xen. *Symp.* 2. 17–19; see too the contortions of Philip the jester at 2. 22. Consider also the buffoon Satyrion in Lucian (*Symp.* 18) who also resembles Socrates; he is ugly and bald, and dances in a contorted fashion.

⁴⁹ C. P. Jones, "Dinner Theater," in W. J. Slater (ed.), *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor 1991) 185–98, discusses dinner theater and its transformation into theater-dinner, as he calls it, in terms of the Roman patron's obligations of providing for his guests; this social explanation does not eliminate its literary resonances, particularly its relation to Athenaeus.

years (if they ever actually took place), and almost all of them filled with erudition of the most impressive sort, we are obviously dealing with a highly literary undertaking, rather like an edited collection of letters. The list of alleged exemplars which Plutarch gives in his introduction is headed by Plato; he is followed by Xenophon, Aristotle, Speusippus, Epicurus and several more of the "greatest philosophers" who wrote symposia.⁵⁰ The *Table Talks* are particularly valuable because of their self-referential nature; what we have is a series of talks which are themselves mini-symposia, some of which are about what should happen at symposia. Plutarch blurs the line between artificially constructed symposia and actual drinking parties not only by referring to the symposia of Xenophon and Plato as if they actually happened, but by literarily rendering actual entertainments.

This anticipates the elaborate construction of the *Deipnosophists*, being more ethical and concerned with rules than philological and concerned with courses. But it also gives us the opportunity to check Plutarch's view of the nature of Plato's *Symposium*: We have already seen his partial attempt to distance himself from Plato's practice while keeping to the theme of the wise man's impending death. It becomes clear that each discussion is so arranged that the last speech has a place of honor and commands assent; we can tell what the rules are supposed to be, and these symposia are homophonic according to the practice of Plato, and do not indulge in the dialogic complications of ambiguity. We can deduce that Plato's *Symposium* follows sympotic rules for seating according to friendliness rather than honor (1. 2); it is exempted from the rule that there ought to be music and flute-girls (7. 7) because of the extraordinary nature of the guests; it generates the rule that people may come if invited by other guests and not the host (7. 6). But the symposiarch must not be drunk (1. 4); and Plutarch is hard put to explain Alcibiades' behavior in what must still be the model symposion/symposium. Plutarch tries sleight-of-hand: We learn that insults must be designed to increase friendship (2. 1); Alcibiades and Aristophanes are equated as good-natured, comic speakers who liven things up a bit (7. 7). In every reference to rules, where we see Alcibiades as a disruptive sympotic element, Plutarch would only see good-natured banter, inspired by his rivalry with Agathon for Socrates' love.

Yet Plutarch, regardless of his idealization of Alcibiades, fundamentally understood what was happening in the *Symposium*.⁵¹ Consider the following (1. 1 in Goodwin's translation):

⁵⁰ S.-T. Teodorsson, *A Commentary on Plutarch's Table Talks*, vols. I and II (Göteborg 1989) on this passage states that "Plut. adduces the large number of famous authors of convivial works in his first prooemium in order to warrant his project." It is more likely that the list is intended, not to justify, but to locate Plutarch's ambitions within the tradition.

⁵¹ I think this is borne out nicely in the *Banquet*, where Thales is perfectly correct in his appraisal of seating arrangements and Alexidemus' rudeness, but still appears a pompous fool while doing so. Cf. esp. 149f, where Thales says in a voice "louder than usual": "Where is the place at table to which the man objected?"

You see that even Plato in his *Symposium*, where he disputes of the chief end, the chief good, and is altogether on subjects theological, doth not lay down strong and close demonstrations; he doth not prepare himself for the contest (as he is wont) like a wrestler, that he may take the faster hold of his adversary and be sure of giving him the trip; but he draws men on by more soft and pliable attacks, by pleasant fictions and pat examples.

Instead of forcing a single opinion on the reader, Plato employs several "soft and pliable attacks," the most important of which is Alcibiades. Alcibiades undercuts Socrates and the *Symposium* as a whole. He does so, not because Plato wants the reader to think that Socrates is wrong or that the *Symposium* is trash-literature but, paradoxically, to increase Socrates' authority without appearing to do so, by singling him out as the object of this intrusion. Plato's *Symposium* is not an ideal symposium, despite Plutarch's special pleading; yet Plutarch seems to be aware of the mechanics by which Plato tries to impress Socrates on his readers.

The Deipnosophists

Athenaeus is at some distance from his material, and this preserves the narrative frame's illusion of sympotic objectivity. But here the symposium is seen in a different way, not as one person's reported narrative or even a firsthand account. Athenaeus' narrator exerts an enormous amount of control over the organization of his work. Unlike most sympotic works (Plutarch's *Table Talk* seems to be an exception), his is not recounted in chronological sequence.⁵² Its narrative frame, the situation which sets up the narrative, seems to be—because of the lamentable state of the first two and a half books—a conversation at a dinner between Athenaeus and his young friend Timocrates, who asks to know all about the dinners held at the house of a wealthy Roman, Larensis (which is a situation comparable to that in the narrative frame of Lucian's *Lapiths*). What Athenaeus has done in order to tell his friend about these banquets is to take the conversations the 23 wise guests had at these banquets (whenever they were held), edit them, and reshape them so that the subject matter of the discussions of the wise men corresponds to the courses of a banquet—from hors d'oeuvres to sympotic wreaths and hard drinking. Practically everything they eat is discussed. Sympotic literature itself becomes a topic, as do the characters of various philosophers, prostitutes and other historical figures (not to mention sympotic activities: music, singing, riddles and the like). This creates an odd and often ridiculous aping effect: A character talks about citron, in literature or history, and the characters eat citron as if they have never tasted it before (85c); they wash their hands, and discuss washing hands (408b).

⁵² For example, it is mentioned at 361e that it is the Parilia (April 21st), but later on (372d–) the banqueters think they are eating cucumbers in January.

The equation of food and learning, which aligns the later symposium genre with Menippean satire, here reaches fantastic heights as the narrator himself becomes a cook, preparing, ordering and serving various ingredients. This parallel becomes clear when the actual cook from the banquets appears in the text. On each of three separate occasions, the cook presents an inventive dish which has transformed the natural and casual into the artificial and structured: a pig roasted on one side and steamed on the other (375d ff.), the dish made of roses (403d ff.) and the *myma*, a dish of mashed up ingredients (685e ff.). On each occasion, the cook must enlighten the puzzled diners, who are ravenous for information. The similarity between the skills of narrator and cook can also be observed when the cook first appears with the amazing shoat and his *sophia* (376c) as well as his *techne* (381f) is admired. Moreover, the cook, like the narrator, seems to have much control over the guests. Like the narrator, he is allowed to joke with them and mock them gently. He knows the riddle of the dishes he has invented; he alone knows how they were created, and only he can provide the answers. Athenaeus' narrator has been cast in the role of the chef of his work, since he has taken bits of Greek literary art, sympotic conversation and repartee and transformed them into one banquet.⁵³ This is quite a departure from the narrative technique of other symposia.

The Banquet of the Ten Virgins

Methodius writes in the last half of the third century. We have already assigned him to the third phase of the genre's history; the later Julian seems more comfortable in the second; we give the authors chronologically here, but it is important to see just how much in flux the genre is in late antiquity. There is no ordered march toward its demise. Methodius is the only Christian author to attempt a symposium along classical lines; we shall return in the conclusion to why this is so. But what is most remarkable is how thoroughly the job of emulation of Plato has been accomplished. Not only are the distancing effects of the narrative frame expressly modeled on the *Symposium*, but so are its themes of spiritual love and transcendence. Thecla's virginity, like Socrates' homosexuality, is a means of access to the realms of higher truth; but unlike Plato, who uses Alcibiades' entrance to force a re-evaluation of the wisdom of Socrates and so draw him down to earth, Methodius concludes with a brief Platonic dialogue between the narrator of the work and his/her audience (we must be uncertain, because

⁵³ At 6. 222a and 223d-e Athenaeus compares himself in terms of his invention (the *Banquet*) with comic poets, while the cook (or cooks), when they appear, bring as their *symbolai* the quotes from comic poets dealing with cooks. The cook also prides himself on the novelty of his work, quoting *Nubes* 961. So, too, when at the end of a book (10. 459b-c) Athenaeus makes a transition to the topic of drinking-cups, which will be the subject of Pausanias' discourse on the following morning, he justifies this transition on the basis of "novelty," by quoting Metagenes' comedy *Philothule*.

Eubulion, the listener, is supposed to be a woman, but the occasional masculine adjective forces us to see her as Methodius' own voice) which forces the narrator of the symposium to admit that we who listen cannot hope to achieve transcendence by speech and by ear, but by hard work and struggle, the spiritual agon.

Methodius is not as homophonic as he seems. The *Banquet* accomodates exercises in many genres: sermons, exegesis, a Socratic dialogue, a hymn. The symposion setting allows ten speakers to espouse ten good opinions: Even Theophila's Praise of Marriage (the second speech) can be incorporated into a system in which virginity is the supreme good. Yet there is an agon: What was depicted as a contest among speakers in Plato for the most fitting praise of love has been here transferred to the agon of spiritual perfection; the language of the theater has been completely replaced by Pauline language of struggle and race and contest, victory and crown.⁵⁴ As the rich meal concludes at the end of the prelude, the hostess Arete proposes a contest of speeches in praise of virginity and promises a crown of wisdom to the winner. At the end it is Arete who crowns all the contestants,⁵⁵ but gives a larger crown to the martyr-to-be Thecla, the Socrates-figure who outshone all the rest.

Methodius proceeds largely by inverting Plato point by point. It is a banquet of women; it holds female virginity as a universal model; its author, the auditor of the dialogue, presents himself as a woman, and takes the gender of Plato's Diotima seriously.⁵⁶ Socrates' mediating Eros is here replaced by a mediating Christ. Man is halfway between mortality and

⁵⁴ In her exegesis (8. 12) of the passage in the Apocalypse in which the woman clothed with the sun fights the dragon, she uses and extends Pauline battle language in encouraging her virgins:

Do not then lose heart at the deceits and the slanders of the Beast, but equip yourselves sturdily for battle, arming yourselves with the helmet of salvation, your breastplate and your greaves. For if you attack with great advantage and with stout heart you will cause him untold consternation; and when he sees you arrayed in battle against him by Him who is his superior, he will certainly not stand his ground. Straightway will the hydra-headed, many-faced Beast retreat and let you carry off the prize for the seven contests. (Musurillo's translation, *ACW* 27, p. 130)

In the interlude at the end of Thecla's speech, Eubulion characterizes her thus: "And so outstanding did she frequently show herself as she engaged in those first great contests [ἄθλοις] of the martyrs, possessing a zeal equal to her generosity, and a physical strength equal to the maturity of her counsels." We are here at a great remove from the agon in solving riddles in Plutarch's *Banquet* or the beauty contest in Xenophon (*Symp.* 5. 7).

⁵⁵ Julian has equal crowns awarded to all contestants, even though Marcus is better than all the rest, and Constantine much worse.

⁵⁶ D. M. Halperin, "Why is Diotima a Woman? Platonic *Erōs* and the Figuration of Gender," in D. M. Halperin, J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (edd.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton 1990) 257-308, argues that Diotima's teaching is a male construct of what the feminine should be; Methodius (through the female voice of Eubulion) presents a male view of what female virginity should be, but claims it as universal.

immortality; Christ is Adam's clay recast and Christ/Adam participates in death and resurrection.⁵⁷ The theanthropic Christ, by his two-fold nature in one Person, leads all from earth to heaven. As Archvirgin he leads the choir of virgins. In the mediating time of the Millennium, of which this banquet is a foretaste, virginity will be the only natural state. The reality of the world to which we may aspire and which we may actually reach excels the world described by Diotima to Socrates. What is well ordered in Methodius is not merely a sign of dull dislike of disorder but part of a conscious attempt to out-Plato Plato and present a superior world-view; there is no latecomer, uninvited guest, change of plan, or interruption. But we note the nearness of the work to allegory and fantasy; the walled garden, the chastetree, the fields of the millennium. We may deplore a lack of social reality in a genre so intimately tied to social reality, but it is emphatic in trying to describe an unearthly world beyond, much as Socrates labors to do.

The Caesars

The problem of generic definition of this work has already been raised. I have discussed it elsewhere as a Menippean satire; yet symposium may still be the better envelope for it. It may be claimed that Xenophon and Plato use Socrates' unusual behavior at a symposium, and the consequences of that behavior, as a metaphor for the way he was perceived and treated by society at large: His inner beauty was misunderstood or ignored, and his superficial eccentricity and apparent arrogance were ridiculed and condemned. The point to make here is that the philhellenic philosopher and emperor Julian could not help but see himself in this Socrates, for he too was mocked for his manner and appearance (he indulges in a bit of self-parody on this score in the *Misopogon*), while his efforts to promote his Neoplatonist philosophy met with little success: "Without luck and unblest he struggled against the current for a lost cause, a cause which he himself could not avoid recognizing as lost."⁵⁸ Moreover, Julian was probably writing his *Symposium* in December of 362,⁵⁹ when his ill-fated Persian expedition was only a few months away; thoughts of possible martyrdom to the cause for which he was fighting could not have been far from his mind, and they undoubtedly influenced what he wrote. Indeed, Julian could hardly have written a symposium without considering the meaning that this circumstance would give to his choice of genre.

To some extent, then, Julian's own character can be considered the topic of his *Caesars*, just as Socrates' can be considered the topic of Plato's *Symposium*. Socrates provides one view of his habits and character in his

⁵⁷ See Thalia's speech (3. 1-8).

⁵⁸ T. Mommsen, *Römische Kaisergeschichte*, as quoted by W. M. Calder III in "Mommsen's *History of the Empire*," *CW* 76 (1983) 295-96.

⁵⁹ According to G. W. Bowersock, *Julian the Apostate* (Cambridge, MA 1978) 101.

own speech, but a rather different impression is given in the speech of Alcibiades; the penultimate speaker among the competitors in Julian's *Caesars*, Marcus Aurelius, is similarly embarrassed by Constantine, who refutes the merit of Marcus' virtuous lifestyle by winning the same reward in spite of his own wicked ways. Now if Marcus occupies the same position in Julian's *Caesars* as Socrates does in Plato's *Symposium*, then one might assume that Marcus and his philosophy of life are its true topic. But as Marcus' philosophy of life is presented essentially as being the same as that which was publicly professed by Julian, it can be argued that the true topic is Julian himself. A final point to consider is that Julian stands outside this heavenly symposium and watches but does not enter: In this he is not like a guest/narrator who eats but does not speak; rather, he is like the Socrates who, in Plato's *Symposium*, stands outside Agathon's door and does not come in.

But the identification of Julian, through Marcus, with Socrates, and of Constantine's function with that of Alcibiades, is complicated by the fact that the divine equivalents of Socrates and Alcibiades, namely Silenus and Dionysus, also play prominent roles in the *Caesars*.⁶⁰ Dionysus and Constantine are clearly divine and mortal sides of the same coin, for it is Dionysus who requests that Constantine be allowed to participate in the competition as a representative of all pleasure-seekers (317d), the god himself presumably included. Silenus, moreover, merely echoes the outer Socrates, through his appearance, his flirtatiousness with Alcibiades/Dionysus, and his tendency to be a gadfly, while the inner Socrates, Socrates the philosopher, is represented by Marcus Aurelius. Marcus' own external characteristics, such as the abstemiousness that Silenus mocks (333c-d), are reminiscent not so much of Socrates⁶¹ as of the emaciated Julian, and in a sense it is Julian himself who is being mocked.⁶²

Julian also pokes fun at his own supposed sense of superiority by drawing parallels between his *alter ego*, Marcus, and Xenophon's Hermogenes: Hermogenes considers himself a friend of the gods, and he wins their friendship by subscribing to a moral code of which Socrates says (*Symp.* 4. 49), εἰ ἄρα τοιοῦτος ὢν φίλους αὐτοὺς ἔχεις, καὶ οἱ θεοί, ὡς ἔοικε, καλοκάγαθία ἴδονται. Marcus too has lived his life in accordance with what he believed were the wishes and precedents of the gods (333c), assuming, for the most part, that they took pleasure in the good and the beautiful as Hermogenes said. Hermogenes' speech had become rather

⁶⁰ For Alcibiades as Dionysus, cf. the description of him as ἐστεφανωμένον . . . κίττου τέ τινη στεφάνῳ δασεῖ καὶ ἴων, καὶ ταινίας ἔχοντα ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς πάνυ πολλὰς (Pl. *Symp.* 212d-e).

⁶¹ Cf. Xen. *Symp.* 2. 19: ἢ τὸδε γελᾶτε, εἰ μείζω τοῦ καιροῦ τὴν γαστέρα ἔχω μετριωτέραν βούλομαι ποιῆσαι αὐτήν;

⁶² The Platonic Socrates is often fragmented in later symposia—in Lucian's *Lapiths*, for example, the jester resembles the outer Socrates/Silenus in both appearance (18) and name (19); the closest thing in Lucian to the inner Socrates is probably the Platonic philosopher Ion.

serious in tone (Οὔτος μὲν δὴ ὁ λόγος οὕτως ἐσπουδαιολογήθη), and to preserve the balance of the serious and the comical that is so important in symposia it is followed by the speech of the jester Philip; this too is echoed in Julian's *Caesars*, where the serious speech of the ascetic Marcus is followed by the laughable effort of the sybarite Constantine.

Julian's *Caesars* displays a remarkable acquaintance with the earlier Greek works, and his encyclopedic catalogue of dead emperors in divine assembly participates in the sort of energy that Athenaeus and Macrobius have. I have argued for his close acquaintance with Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* in *Ancient Menippean Satire*; it should be added that Julian knows the symposiac traditions as well as the Menippean ones, and is at home in the late classical traditions that use old genres as fantastic containers for ever greater amounts of learning. But his is a creative use, respecting those traditions that rejoice in cacophony and do not expect philosophy to escape unscathed from the banquet, and his symposium, like that of Methodius, deserves to be much better known.

The Saturnalia

This title Macrobius shares with Julian's subtitle; the Saturnalia are a feast of social inversion, in which the lowly are exalted, just as Julian's mortal emperors get to be gods for a day. Even Methodius sees that a symposion is an appropriate setting for celebrating inversion; but the same cannot be said for Macrobius. His characters are more like students home for vacation; there is nothing subversive going on; all is politeness and order; the goal is the writing of an educational work, from father to son. It is a homophonic, nostalgic return to Plato by a Platonist who does not see the irony of Plato; the frame has little to do to modify the learning contained within it. We are far from the world of Plutarch's *Banquet*, or Athenaeus', for that matter. But there is one incongruous element in all of this, and all that the symposium genre offers by way of disorder, multiplicity and impropriety is wrapped up in it: the person of Evangelus.

Evangelus, who dares to ask, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" to a group of philologues (*Sat.* 7. 16. 1), is really one of the most intriguing rogues in classical literature. He is not just a character who needs to be educated about the glories of Vergil, as the author's son is; and he is more than the braggart scholar who haunts the pages of Aulus Gellius, from whom Macrobius gets much of his material. Braggarts let Gellius and his scholastic clan reveal the depths of their knowledge, but Gellius rebukes his braggarts in the same way that Evangelus rebukes Praetextatus and his friends.⁶³ Praetextatus, the one who, in the main, must put down these

⁶³ For Gellius' braggarts and Evangelus, see T. R. Glover, *Life and Letters in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge 1901) 175. This sort of anonymous character serves as a foil to be put down by the likes of Fronto and Favorinus, to avoid their facing off against one another.

remarks, is always the very picture of gentility and modesty (as is, say, Apollinaris in Gellius 13. 20. 3). Evangelus is never forced to say "uncle,"⁶⁴ nor does he ever leave in a huff.⁶⁵ Obviously, this symposium needs him.

Evangelus is in fact three different characters rolled into one: As the uninvited guest, he represents the unpredictable element, the element of surprise; this follows in the footsteps of Aristodemus and Alcibiades in Plato, of Philip in Xenophon, of Gorgus in Plutarch, of Alcidas and the letter of Hetoimocles in Lucian. But he is also a buffoon, the one who raises a laugh, or at least laughs at what goes on. In Book 2, the guests agree to tell the jests of the great men of old; Evangelus is needed to goad the reserved Servius and Disarius on to speak (2. 2. 12-14). While not a comic on the order of Plato's Aristophanes, or even Xenophon's troubled humorist Philip, Evangelus is close to Lucian's Satyrion, or Julian's Silenus, who can mock all in turn without rousing too much ill will.⁶⁶ A third function is that of the contentious Cynic. Consider Xenophon's Antisthenes, who asks Socrates about his unmanageable wife (*Symp.* 2. 10). Impoliteness does not necessarily generate friction; characters often rise above the insults directed at them. Unpredictability, humor and strife are all to be seen as ineradicable elements of the literary symposium. Evangelus is in fact doing what should be done at a symposium. After all, Plutarch says that asking whether the chicken or the egg came first is a perfectly good sympotic poser (*Table Talk* 635d), and Evangelus is satisfied with the answer he gets; what is remarkable is that our respondent, the doctor Disarius, is so caught up in his own erudition that he gives answers on both sides of the question (7. 16. 2-14).

Evangelus is Macrobius' spirit of symposium. His objections motivate the Vergilian discussion, but it is clear that the guests could talk even without his prompting. He is rude, but does not seem to suffer for it; he makes his characters think. The suspicion here is that in Evangelus we have reunited some of the various aspects of Socrates which were fragmented in Plato's *Symposium*, and variously reflected after it.

Christian Symposia and the End of the Classical Genre

Many of the forms of late classical prose literature are Platonic: Lucian's dialogues are obvious as comic developments of the master's special genre, but there are other, less obvious, reflections of Platonic practice as well. Menippean satire is inspired by Platonic myth-making, particularly the myth

⁶⁴ Aulus Gellius 6. 1.

⁶⁵ Aulus Gellius 6. 17.

⁶⁶ However, when Satyrion reaches Alcidas the Cynic, the latter becomes very angry and challenges him to a fight (*Luc. Symp.* 18-19). The blushing reaction of Alexander and Constantine to Silenus' criticisms in Julian (328c-31b) is closer to the reactions that Satyrion generates.

of Er. Not only is the device of the fantastic story important; the Platonic insistence that words cannot convey ultimate reality is very close to the heart of this subversive genre. Utopian literature has its origins in the *Timaeus*, where too we find that not everyone believes that such stories can reveal the truth. Prose fiction and romance can be said to draw inspiration from Plato's deliberate fictions and then to reject Plato's cautious desire to gain the reader's conscious acceptance of fictional devices and the reader's willed complicity in the fabulous.⁶⁷ The romance lulls the reader into taking the false as true, but we may suspect that there is enough Second Sophistic humor in the romance that we are to laugh at the incongruity of the lovers' adventures and the language which they use and which encloses them.

What becomes clear is that Plato bequeaths to literature not only a number of forms and genres but also a certain intellectual attitude concerning the function of literature. It is at an ironic distance from what is real; it is playful; it begs the question of whether fiction is true. To say this is not merely to assert the modern critical viewpoint that the meaning of literature lies in its inability to mean anything; rather, it is the acknowledgment of a Platonic point of view that transcendent reality is only approximated by words and stories, and that wise readers must appreciate the gulf between stories and the truth. Plato stands at the head of a number of traditions, all of which assert that wisdom is found outside of the propositions of the wise.

And so we would understand the symposium. Throughout its history, the Platonic symposium is taken as a medium for depicting a social microcosm and a crucial anomalous element. In Plato, this is Socrates, the unsympotic man, whose opinions, and whose chosen form for the expression of those opinions, set him apart from his fellows, and in fact mark him for death. The fate of the main speaker is more important than his opinions; the learning exposed to public view may be grand or contemptible, but it is the inability of those who have these opinions to make their points forcibly that is to the fore. We may have to allow that Macrobius is off to one side, unable as he is to make fun of Praetextatus' guests, even though he seems to allow Socrates to come to life to some extent in the rude Evangelus. The literary symposium implies a conflict, but the resolution typically lies outside the symposium which it describes.

If we want to describe the end of classical symposia, we face a couple of facts. There are no Byzantine symposia, and only the *Cena Cypriani* (in its first edition of 400 and the expanded rewriting of it around 800) stands between late antiquity and Dante's *Convivio*. The heavenly banquet allows no classical symposia, though we can imagine how the Crucifixion could

⁶⁷ See C. Gill, "Plato's Atlantis Story and the Birth of Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979) 64-78. I discuss Gill's views at greater length in the concluding chapter of *Ancient Menippean Satire*.

serve to frame a discussion of different views of the nature of history, God and salvation; dialogue exists, but there is little interest in writing a dialogue in such a form as to suggest that the differing points of view must be subjected to a higher principle of interpretation; in this light we must view the boldness of Methodius as a thing we should have liked to see more often in Christian texts.

It is worth asking why Christian symposia are so rare. Here we must look to the Gospel of John, whose importance in the history of the classical genre needs to be asserted. John's Gospel, unlike the synoptic gospels, has Jesus handed over for trial and execution on the Passover. Consequently, this Last Supper (Chapters 13–17) is not a Passover meal, and Jesus does not institute the Eucharist (though he does speak of the Bread of Life at 6. 26–59 in ways that remind us of the symposiac insistence that real food is not physical food but words; or, here, the Word). Related to these is the fact that John's Last Supper comes much closer to the form of a classical symposium than does any of the other, much shorter, Last Suppers. The beloved disciple reclines languorously close to Jesus; questions are asked that betray the ignorance of the speakers; and perhaps more clearly here than anywhere else the impending sacrificial death of the main speaker gives an edge to his discourse, for he continually speaks of things that his listeners do not understand. Note too that John never has Jesus foretelling his passion and death outside of the Last Supper, though he does foretell his betrayal. We think here of Socrates and Lycon in Xenophon.

We could say that John understands that the symposium has its place in religious discourse through the example of Job: Jastrow's old theory, that the form of Job is the classical symposium, is out of favor these days, though I think it more persuasive than the more popular view that the book is a five-act drama.⁶⁸ Note how the frame of the story of Job, which makes it quite clear that Job's sufferings are due exclusively to a wager made between God and Satan, makes all of the talk of sinfulness and justification irrelevant; there is a constant undercutting in Job, a constant presentation of the limitations of both conventional wisdom and conventional piety; and even God's epiphanal speech, which shuts off any further discussion, rather pointedly refuses to tell Job of the truth of things. There is no undercutting of Jesus in John, of course; but the wisdom of the speaker is over the heads of the listeners, and death and resurrection will give a meaning that speech cannot: These are all in the ballpark of the classical symposium. We are not terribly far removed from the world of the social microcosm, the

⁶⁸ M. Jastrow, *The Book of Job: Its Origin, Growth and Interpretation* (Philadelphia 1920) 30–38. One could similarly point to the debate among the three courtiers in the intertestamental Esdras (3–4) on "What is strongest?" to demonstrate the vitality of elements of the classical symposium in Judaeo-Christian literature. Similarly, in the *Letter to Aristaeas* 187–294, the 72 translators of the Septuagint are described as philosophers in the court of Ptolemy, each being asked a question at a banquet lasting seven days and each having his answer approved by the king (see Murray [above, note 9] 271).

enigmatic Socrates, the levelling riddle and the impending doom. It may be that the symposium does not flourish in Christian literature out of deference to this evangelical symposium; certainly Jesus' "open commensuality" could have inspired the creation of gatherings of people from all walks of life whose equality before God and each other is stressed. Also missing are symposia set at the heavenly banquet, or parodies of symposia in the abundant literature of the visions of Hell. It is probably no accident that gnostic writings have no time for symposiac forms, stressing rather direct revelations of truth from master to student. At any rate, Methodius remains our lone example of a thoroughgoing Christian symposium.

The *Cena Cypriani* represents a sort of dead end in the history of the Christianized symposium.⁶⁹ It belongs to a jumble of late classical symposiac works, of which Vespa's *Iudicium coci et pistoris* and the *Riddles* of Symphosius (or Symposius) are best known. It is a remarkable attempt at Biblical parody, a symposium told entirely through enigmatic Biblical references that have the status of riddles. King Iohel invites all the famous Biblical personalities to a wedding feast at Cana: The Christian reader thinks immediately of the miracle of the wine, but the reader steeped in the symposiac tradition will expect drinking and inappropriate behavior, and will not be disappointed. It is fantastic, as late symposia often are; because all these different personalities exist at the same time and in the same place, one could say that this is in effect a heavenly banquet; but it ends in death, and nearly conjures up more of the atmosphere of the *Dialogues of the Dead*.

We hear of sympotic practice, but usually in a fleeting reference. All bathe in the Jordan before seating; there are latecomers who must find their own seats (Job complains that he has to sit alone on a dung heap, 893); food is brought, but rather than sharing, each takes an appropriate food (Jonah takes gourds, 875); they put on festive clothing; drinking habits and drunkenness are described (887). At one point, all change clothes and play dress-up (Jesus as a teacher, Pharaoh as a persecutor, Nimrod as a hunter,

⁶⁹ Text edited with an introduction by K. Strecker, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Poetarum Latinorum Medii Aevi* IV.2-3 (Berlin 1923) 857-900. As the text is mostly verse with the occasional prose insert, the line numbering of the text is somewhat misleading and I cite by the page number of Strecker's edition. As each page consists mostly of apparatus, with small pieces of the two versions of the text printed above each other, the page number is sufficient. For discussion, see P. Lehmann, *Die Parodie im Mittelalter* (Munich 1922) 25-30; Jeanneret (above, note 5) 204-05.

The work is related to a work of Zeno of Verona (1. 24, *post traditum baptismum*) in which those who have fasted and been baptized are invited to a heavenly, not an earthly banquet, for which the Father provides the bread and wine, Christ pours the oil, Isaac carries the firewood, John the Baptist brings locusts and honey, Peter provides the fish, and Noah (the *arcarius*) provides from his store whatever any guest may feel the need of. I offer only about half of Zeno's examples. The *Cena* could be uncharitably thought of as this sort of playfulness carried to lunatic proportions; it seems to lie along the line that leads to the playful trivia questions of the *Joca Monachorum*.

889). They return a second day, bearing gifts, but at this point a theft of some cups is discovered (reminiscent of the theft by which Joseph playfully frames his younger brother Benjamin in Genesis) and various suspects are tortured in an attempt to find the criminal (Jesus is crucified at this point, 893), and we are in the world of the *Lapiths*, as all the guests suspect each other. The thief turns out to be Achan, son of Carmi, known from Joshua as the man who stole from Jericho after it had been destroyed and declared a holocaust. After his execution in Joshua (7. 16–26) the Lord's favor is restored; Iohel hands him over to the guests for execution in the *Cena Cypriani* to provide another happy ending. Judas and Jesus work side by side to kill him (896, though John the Deacon rewrites this part).⁷⁰ They are all ordered to bury him, and the text ends with a laugh (897):

Vendidit agrum Emmor, emit Abraham,
monumentum fecit Nachor et aedificauit Cain,
aromata imposuit Martha, clusit Noe,
superscriptsit Pilatus, pretium accepit Iudas.
Quo facto
gaudens clamat Zacharias, confunditur Helisabeth,
stupet Maria, ridebat de facto Sarra.

It is stunning that a death actually, instead of only potentially, terminates a symposium. This is a symposium which obeys no proprieties. Iohel, as *rex mensae*, commands certain things; each brings appropriate food; but there is no discussion, no topics, no undercutting; the symposium is itself a set of riddles, but the guests are not set to solve riddles; all are levelled by the accusation of Iohel, though not all are tortured; the guilty party is expelled from the group as the symposium becomes a sort of fantastic detective story. While the form shows the genre at its end, its themes are exactly those of its more polyphonic predecessors. There is no respect of persons, all are subjected to ridicule, and the one who does not belong must die.

It is regrettable that this did not inspire further symposia. We leap ahead to Dante, who is important to the later history of the genre in two ways. First, as the author of *La Vita Nuova*, he knows of Menippean satire in its ancient form. The love story with its dream vision and constant academic reference to the poetry of the author's youth is at some remove from the medieval *Aucassin et Nicolette*. Second, his *Convivio* also reflects more of the late classical fascination with the encyclopedic potential of the symposiac genre: It is a philosophical work designed as a series of discussions and explications of fourteen of the author's own *canzoni*. Dante knows well the academic functions of the varieties of late classical prose and prosimetrum; but for all this his works must be set apart from either

⁷⁰ The original reads: . . . *lapide percussit Dauid, uirga Aaron / flagello Iesus, medium aperuit Iudas . . .* John the Deacon, who also omits Sarah's final laugh, rewrites this last line as *Iudas intima diffidens in ficus supposuit*. So creeps propriety into an upside-down text.

Plato or Athenaeus. But one later medieval text seems to recall an earlier, more Socratic form of the symposium. In *Piers Ploughman* there is an inset symposium, Passus 13 in the B-text, Passus 15 in the C-text, in which the dreamer encourages the assembly to admit Patience, who stands outside and begs bread. This hermit becomes the presiding genius of the banquet; there is also a friar, who cannot digest satisfactorily the diet of the scriptures, and the dreamer will reject the book-learning and theology of this fat man for a more experiential approach to Faith and the Active Life. We could say that here too we see the halves of a divided Socrates, both the reluctant soothsayer and the buffoon. Langland seems to understand something of the nature of the classical symposium, and this is worth further study; his commentators do not seem to discuss by what medium he acquires it.⁷¹

But the problem, it seems to us, is Macrobius. He has the homophonous guests of a Platonic symposium, but all at the standard of an absolute truth; the value of Vergil seems not to be countermanded by context; the later death of Praetextatus does not seem to affect the presentation of the learning; the character of Evangelus, though he can be seen profitably as the confluence of a number of symposiac conventions, shows how tolerant his host and the other guests are. When Plato's rhetoric of ambiguity and doubt are completely written out of the genre, we may have to admit that only the shell remains, and we no longer have the spirit which animated our genre. We do not say that Macrobius is simple-minded or unsophisticated, only that his symposium seems not to insist on the subordination of scholars' views to some higher reality. Or could the cult of the sun so lovingly expressed in the first book be like Plutarch's religious framework, and could Servian commentary still be the stuff of eggheads? Could Macrobius' son learn from the predigested learning here that there are religious truths and spritual views that transcend the bookworm's truth? It is hard here to keep wishful thinking from filling Macrobius' lacunae.

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⁷¹ I owe this reference to Langland to my colleague Charles Wright.