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Part II  
*To Kalon* in Plato



Mateo Duque<sup>1</sup>  
**Two Passions in Plato's *Symposium*:  
Diotima's *To Kalon* as a Reorientation of Imperialistic *Erōs*<sup>2</sup>**

In this essay, I propose a reading of two contrasting passions, two kinds of *erōs*, in the *Symposium*. On the one hand, there is the imperialistic desire for conquering and possessing that Alcibiades represents; and on the other hand, there is the productive love of immortal wisdom that Diotima represents. It's not just what Alcibiades *says* in the *Symposium*, but also what he *symbolizes*. Alcibiades gives a speech in honor of Socrates and of his unrequited love for him, but even here Alcibiades recounts his attempted seduction of Socrates as a failed conquest, as an unsuccessful attempt to violently take possession of something that Socrates has within him. Even more importantly, in 416 BCE (the dramatic date of Agathon's symposium) Alcibiades was soon to encourage his fellow countrymen to set off on the ruinous Sicilian expedition. Alcibiades's actions behind-the-scenes of the *Symposium* reveal the clearest manifestation of his imperialistic *erōs* (for political power in Athens). They also constitute some necessary background to the dialogue, which Plato's Athenian readers would have had in mind.<sup>3</sup> Where else can we catch a glimpse of this disastrous desire? It is best illustrated

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Nick Pappas, William Altman, Federico Di Pasqua, Tony Leyh, and the participants of the 2018 Fourth Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Heritage of Western Greece on *to Kalon*.

<sup>3</sup> At the conference in Sicily we were able to go to the ancient quarry where thousands of Athenian prisoners of war tragically died in squalid conditions. Everyone who reads the *Symposium* should keep the fate of those men in mind, especially in relation to the character of Alcibiades.

in Thucydides's *History*. I show that the beginnings of this political passion can already be seen in Pericles's funeral oration (2.35-46, specifically 2.43.1) and that after Pericles's death, Alcibiades stokes this *erōs* to such a fevered pitch that the Athenians agree to launch the tragic venture against Sicily. Opposed to this political passion, is Diotima's.<sup>4</sup> She tries to reorient this misguided *erōs* and presents an alternative form of desire for everlasting wisdom (*philosophia*).

### Pericles's Political Pederasty

In one of the most memorable images from Pericles's Funeral Oration, Thucydides records Pericles as saying to the survivors of war that instead of listening to someone go on at length about how good the fallen soldiers were in thwarting the enemy, instead

They should rather every day gaze upon the manifest might of the city and become lovers of it [ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὴν τῆς πόλεως δύναμιν καθ' ἡμέραν ἔργω θεωμένους καὶ ἐραστὰς γιγνομένους αὐτῆς] (Thuc. 2.43.1).<sup>5</sup>

We should remember the perilous context Pericles is in. He has been elected to speak in honor of those who have died in the war, but at the same time he needs to motivate the surviving Athenians—many forced to come inside the walls of a cramped city—to stay the course. Pericles is deftly combining a factual description of Athens with a normative prescription. On the one hand, Pericles is using figurative language to describe Athens's existing practice of pederasty, which helped to constitute its socio-political order. Social networks and

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<sup>4</sup> For the idea of "political passion" see Daniel Falkiner, *The erotics of empire: love, power, and tragedy in Thucydides and Hans Morgenthau*, PhD diss., The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2015; Victoria Wohl, *Love among the ruins: the erotics of democracy in classical Athens* (Princeton University Press, 2009), "Thucydides on the Political Passions," *The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides*, eds. Sara Forsdyke, Edith Foster, and Ryan Balot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 443.

<sup>5</sup> My translation from Thucydides. *Historiae*, Volume I and II. Edited by Henry Stuart Jones and Johannes Enoch Powell. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1942. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

connections were formed by the relationships between *erastai* and *erōmenoi*, they functioned as a process of political acculturation and socialization.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Pericles also exhorts his audience; he holds out an ideal to them. He inspires the citizens to behold and love the city as one would a beloved. Pericles wants to harness the ambition, and drive in *erōs* that lives in every citizen, and to channel that collective energy toward a shared love object, Athens. All of it is in service to the war effort.

*Erōs* has the capacity to move, to direct, and orient even the most egotistical and self-centered people toward someone or something outside of themselves. One can criticize some egotistical relationships as just selfish lovers treating their beloveds merely as extensions of themselves—these are forms of narcissism.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, *erōs* is other-directed and it can also lead to intense devotion, and even to a willingness to sacrifice oneself.<sup>8</sup> The problem with erotic passion in Pericles's image, and not just for his immediate audience, is the object of the erotic desires. Most often, lovers wish to possess the object of their amorous feelings *exclusively*. And the mere thought, suspicion, or suggestion of a beloved being with someone else can drive a lover to fits of jealousy. This is because of the concept of scarcity in erotic relationships. Every one of the potential lovers wishes to win and possess the beloved for him or herself only. It is a zero-sum game with winners and losers. I must be the only one to grasp, to take, to have and to hold, my beloved. Is there an alternative to the Periclean image?

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<sup>6</sup> I rely on Sara Monson's "Citizen as *erastēs*: erotic imagery and the idea of reciprocity in the Periclean funeral oration." *Political Theory* 22:2 (1994): 253-76. She connects Pericles's metaphor to the context of the "highly formalized and valorized erotic relations between adult, citizen men (*erastai*) and adolescent, free-born boys (*eromenoi*)," 256.

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes's speech in the *Sym.* 189d-193 might exemplify this narcissistic love of oneself; see also Socrates/Diotima's quick criticism of this view at *Sym.* 205d-e (that one does not love something merely because it belongs to one, but, ultimately, because it is good).

<sup>8</sup> See Phaedrus's speech in the *Sym.* 178a-180b.

### **Philia and Family**

There is a contrast case to Pericles's erotic analogy. In the *Menexenus*, Socrates recounts a funeral oration that he learned from Aspasia. The speech is a response to Pericles's oration, and Socrates references it directly.<sup>9</sup> The funeral oration in the *Menexenus* marshals the metaphor of the family and of the first citizens of Athens being birthed autochthonously from the Earth.<sup>10</sup> The city is the mother or the father to all citizens. In this image, a father or mother can love several siblings, and these several siblings can love a mother or father, without as much animosity and competition as in erotic rivalries.<sup>11</sup> This familial image also recurs in the *Crito* where the Laws and commonwealth of Athens act as parent to all citizens.<sup>12</sup> There are also parallels with the *Republic*, where the myth of metals is told to convince all the citizens that they are all brothers and sisters from mother Earth, and that the *kallipolis* is supposed to act as a single body, and as if they were one family.<sup>13</sup> While this familial counter-image to Pericles's erotic citizenship recurs in Plato, it is a matter more of *philia* and so does not confront *erōs* head on, like Diotima's philosophical *erōs* will.

### **Erōs in Thucydides<sup>14</sup>**

The admixture of patriotism and eroticism that Pericles joins together is dangerous; it can be *hubristic* and lead to ruin. In fact, after

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<sup>9</sup> *Menex.* 236b.

<sup>10</sup> *Menex.* 237e-38c; 238e-39c. See P. Ludwig, "Eros in the Republic," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press) 2007, 210-17.

<sup>11</sup> Is sibling rivalry less competitive than romantic? Perhaps not. But in general, the parent-sibling is a one-to-many relation, whereas it exceptional when a lover-beloved relationship is more than the dyadic one-to-one relation.

<sup>12</sup> *Crito* 50d-51b; 51e.

<sup>13</sup> Myth of Metals *Rep.* III 414b-417b; See also *Rep.* IV 424a; V 449c; V 462a-b; V 464c-d. It is this very aspect, the homogeneity of the *kallipolis*, that Aristotle, in fact, will criticize in the *Politics* 2.2, 2.4.

<sup>14</sup> Thucydides also discusses *erōs* in his digression on the tyrant-killers Harmodius and Aristogeiton, but I must set this section aside. It is worth noting that Thucydides places this account right before turning to the Sicilian expedition.

Pericles's death, Alcibiades inflames the populace with a competitive desire for conquering Sicily over Nicias's objections (Thuc. 6.16-18). In a debate about whether to attack Sicily, Nicias calls the venture "a fatal passion for what is beyond your reach [δυσέρωτας εἶναι τῶν ἀπόντων]" (Thuc. 6.13.1).<sup>15</sup> Nicias calls this misguided emotion for the faraway Sicily *duserōs*. The Athenians were so taken with Alcibiades's imperialistic vision that after the vote one could find young boys in gymnasiums tracing the shape of Sicily in the sand in relation to even further dreams of conquest, like Libya and Carthage; and the older men kept harping on the many marvelous things that would come from the campaign (Plut. *Alc.* 17.3.)<sup>16</sup>

At the end of *Symposium*, the skilled writer is described as one who can compose *both* tragedy *and* comedy; likewise, Thucydides writes scenes, like the debate between Nicias and Alcibiades, which can be read *both* as tragic *and* as comic (223d). From one angle, Alcibiades's boasts are utterly ridiculous, some of the very things a braggart of ancient comedy might say: 'No one is as great as me, I sent seven chariots to the Olympics and I won first, second, and fourth.'<sup>17</sup> Alcibiades's boasts are supposed to be part of his argument to convince the Athenians to go to war. From a historically tragic perspective, however, this is *hubris* and it will cause the ruin of the entire polity. Nicias's inability to stop the expedition also fails spectacularly. He attempts a gambit. He knows he has lost the vote to go to war, but he tries to scare off the Athenians by impressing upon them the required size and scope of the journey as immensely prohibitive. Instead of intimidating and browbeating the Athenians, it instead further stokes their *duserōs*, "fatal passion." They believe Nicias's assessment is accurate and honest and they overwhelmingly

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<sup>15</sup> This translation is from F.M. Cornford, *Thucydides mythistoricus* (London: E. Arnold, 1907) and the idea has resonances with Socrates/ Diotima's of *erōs* as a desire for things that are not present to the lover 200a-201e.

<sup>16</sup> See Mark A. Ralkowski, *Plato's Trial of Athens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Thuc. 6.16; Plut. *Alc.* 11. Isocrates (16.34) claims Alcibiades won first, second, and third place.

vote in favor of the intense preparations for conquest. It is almost comical, and yet the tragedy awaits.<sup>18</sup>

After the decision to begin preparing for Sicily, Thucydides, in his own voice, describes what happens to Athens:

And a *passion* fell on all alike to set sail. [καὶ ἔρωσ ἐνέπεσε τοῖς παῖσιν ὁμοίως ἐκπλεῦσαι] To the older men, it was on the grounds either of the coming conquest [καταστρεψομένοις] of the places they were sailing off to or that their great power could in no way be foiled [ἢ οὐδὲν ἂν σφαλεῖσαν μεγάλην δύναμιν]. To the men in their youth it was by a longing for sightseeing and beholding abroad [τῆς τε ἀπούσης πόθῳ ὄψεως καὶ θεωρίας] and being in good hope of being saved <from death> [καὶ εὐέλπιδες ὄντες σωθήσεσθαι]. The mass of the crowded soldiers <desired> the coming haul of ready money and to gain moreover the power from which there would be a wage to depend on forever. Because of the excessive excitement of the many, if someone was not pleased with it [sc. the vote], he remained silent, fearing he would be thought to be hateful to the state by voting against it. (6.24.3-4).

Thucydides presents the multiple motives the Athenians had, all of which fall under the single name of *erōs*. Just like different rival lovers can have diverse reasons for their passions for the same beloved, so too the Athenians all had various intentions for invading Sicily. This means that *erōs* was not relegated to what we would narrowly call the 'erotic realm,' but was a broader, thicker concept.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, as Thucydides reiterates, the Athenians' *erōs* for Sicily was mixed

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<sup>18</sup> Thuc. 6.15.4: "The many feared him for the magnitude of his going-beyond-the-normal [παρανομίας], which would come out—with respect to his own body, and also in his lifestyle and in his thoughts [ἐς τὴν διαίταν καὶ τῆς διανοίας]—in each of the things he was doing, just as those desiring to be a tyrant [ὡς τυραννίδος ἐπιθυμοῦντι]." See also Annie Larivée, "Eros Tyrannos: Alcibiades as the Model of the Tyrant in Book IX of the Republic," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 6:1 (2012): 1-26.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, [1985] 2006), 130-52; 216-19 borrowing from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, vol. 5043 (New York: Basic books, 1973).

with hope, with certain expectations of what was to come in the future. Lastly, the ferocity of the *erōs* of those smitten with the expedition to Sicily scared away public dissent. The erotic majority acted like a tyrant. A tyrant does not need to order or command those around him, instead they just sullenly anticipate what it is the tyrant wants and they avoid publicly dissenting with the tyrant at all costs.

For those who know the *History*, there is a pall over the *Symposium*—a tragic backstage. The dramatic date of the *Symposium* is on the eve of several characters being accused of sacrilege, and later being exiled or dead.<sup>20</sup> Alcibiades was accused of the destruction of the Herms and the profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>21</sup> Also, the relative peace that Athens had enjoyed (Nicias's Peace) was about to end with Athens embarking on an unprecedented imperial expedition to Sicily. Plato in the *Symposium* stages a series of erotic failures. The obvious one is the dissolute Alcibiades's. To be sure Alcibiades gives a speech praising Socrates but Alcibiades's real love is his love of himself and of his desire to be loved by the polis in return.<sup>22</sup> This love is only hinted at in Alcibiades's speech, e.g., when he says, “Yet I neglect myself while I attend to the affairs of Athens [ἔτι ἑμαυτοῦ μὲν ἀμελῶ, τὰ δ' Ἀθηναίων πράττω]” (216a). What were these Athenian affairs Alcibiades speaks of? The Sicilian conquest. A subtler failure is perhaps Socrates's. Socrates, as lover of Alcibiades and as a philosopher and teacher, was not able to get Alcibiades to see that he was not ready for political matters, and, thus, was unable to constrain the young man's overweening political and imperial ambitions.

Pericles asked the Athenians to long for the spectacular power of the city. And that is exactly what they get in the form of Alcibiades and the Sicilian campaign. The manifest might, the power and energy, expended in the building of new ships and their armament is

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<sup>20</sup> Debra Nails, *The people of Plato: a prosopography of Plato and other Socratics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 142.

<sup>21</sup> Walter M. Ellis, *Alcibiades* (Routledge Revivals [London: Routledge, 2014]), 58-62.

<sup>22</sup> I am not able to analyze Alcibiades's speech in this paper. I am bracketing it for the purposes of my argument.

a fulfillment of Pericles's vision for the city (Thuc. 6.31).<sup>23</sup> Also, the contest displayed in the decking out the ships and in the individual boats racing to be the first to Aegina, are almost like rival lovers competing for the glory of a beloved (Thuc. 6.32.) Plutarch tell us that Alcibiades had a shield made interwoven with gold; it had no family or hereditary insignia, but he chose instead the figure of the god *Erōs* wielding a lightning bolt (Plut. *Alc.* 16). Plutarch intimates much with this brief sketch. Alcibiades displays an insouciance to fathers and family, both human and divine. He disrespects his adopted father, Pericles, by choosing not to honor and display his family crest. In his ostentation, Alcibiades selects the fickle god of passion and desire, depicting him as hubristically usurping the weapons of father Zeus.

Given Alcibiades's role in the dialogue, Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*—which gives us an image of an ascent to The Beautiful in itself (210e-212b)—is a response to the tyranny of this imperialistic *erōs* that afflicts Athens. A consequence of presenting the two contrasting passions in the *Symposium*, is that the reader is meant to abandon the imperialistic *erōs* initiated by Pericles and exemplified by Alcibiades and the tragic Sicilian venture. Diotima gives us an alternative to the political love offered by Pericles and Alcibiades. She redirects and reorients *erōs* towards *auto to kalon*, the Beautiful itself. Beyond loving a beautiful boy or beautiful laws and customs (tellingly, not love of 'a city'), one ought to love the eternal, unchanging, and everlasting Beautiful itself. Her love is a radical alternative to Pericles's. But it is another tragic turn of the dramatic screw that Alcibiades has missed Socrates's speech and only arrived right after it ended. Would things have gone differently if he had listened?

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<sup>23</sup> As both Mark Ralkowski and William Altman have pointed out to me, Pericles does warn the Athenians to stay behind the walls and to not venture out (Thuc. 1.140-4). My claim is that when Pericles urges the Athenian to admire the "manifest might [δύναμιν]" of the city and to become lovers of it, he is setting in motion a desire for power that will lead to imperialistic overreach that will not be restrained by walls or Pericles's warnings.

## The Dual Aims of Diotima's Account and Three Re-Orientations of "the Higher Mysteries"

Diotima's ascent speech has two main parts. The first part is descriptive, it is the so-called "lower mysteries" (201d-209e).<sup>24</sup> There she describes how *philotimia*, love of honor, drives humans in all their life-projects. Every mortal human is actually aiming for eternal honor, for immortality. Thus, the first part of her ascent applies to everyone, to all humans. The second part is prescriptive, the so-called "higher mysteries" (209e-212a). It advocates for a *philosophia*, a love of wisdom. And the young Socrates might not even be ready for the full ascent up to the higher mysteries! There are three ways in which Diotima's higher mysteries re-orient the diseased political *erōs*: (1) by emphasizing the infinite difference between the beloved, divine *to kalon* itself, and any and all mortal lovers of it; (2) by reminding us of the necessity for climbing partner(s) in the ascent; and (3) by reiterating the continued need to produce *logoi* throughout the ascent.

### 1. The Infinite Difference Between Humans and Divine

I disagree with Jill Frank and other interpreters of *Symposium* who hold that Diotima's vision represents the overcoming and the death of *erōs*.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, the constant urging of *erōs* is everywhere present in the ascent, even in the final revelation described. I see the ascent more like the vision we get in the palinode of the *Phaedrus* where there is always distance between ourselves and divine things, whether they be the gods leading us in a circuit or the

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<sup>24</sup> At 210a Diotima calls the later part of her speech, the ascent, "τὰ δὲ τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικὰ" often translated as "the highest and final mysteries." Diotima says that the early "rites" mentioned are for sake of these [ὧν ἕνεκα καὶ ταῦτα ἔστιν] higher and final mysteries. This is where the distinction between "lower" and "higher" mysteries arises, which is used extensively in the secondary literature.

<sup>25</sup> Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 155; Leo Strauss, *Leo Strauss on Plato's Symposium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 181.

Forms glimpsed from a distance (244a-257b).<sup>26</sup> The infinite distinction in the philosophical *erōs* between mortal and immortal contrasts with the hopeful distance for conquering faraway lands in the political *erōs*. Sicily is quantitatively very far from Athens; for ancient Greeks, it is a journey of many months, but it *feels* to the Athenians within their reach, within their grasp. Although the Sicilian expedition is one of high hopes, there is the expectation that at the end they will possess Sicily, and perhaps other lands beyond. By comparison, in *philosophia* there is a fundamental qualitative difference between the mortal lover and the beloved object of that love, the immortal Form of the Beautiful.

The figure of Diotima herself is a way for Socrates to perform—and, ultimately, for Plato to narratively represent—the always deferred divine. To honor god, as Diotima’s name means, is to understand one’s mortal relation to the immortal divine. In the *Symposium* there are various lovers of Socrates. There is Aristodemus, Apollodorus, possibly Agathon, and, of course, Alcibiades. But these are all failed lovers of Socrates. Socrates points beyond himself. He is like the wise man in the Zen koan who says, “look up” and points his finger into the night sky. The fool is so captivated by the wise man’s extended finger that he misses the brilliant face of the moon just beyond it.<sup>27</sup> All of Socrates’s lovers attempt to follow him, and yet he is pointing elsewhere.

### **Don’t call the ascent a ladder!**

The images we use to conceptualize the ascent are crucial, and no figure has been more central to understanding the ascent than that of the ladder. But the image of the ladder deceptively makes the difference between the philosopher and the Form a quantitative one of distance as opposed to a qualitative one. Plato could have used the word ‘ladder’ if he wanted to. There is a Greek word specifically for

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<sup>26</sup> The divine Beautiful itself *Symp.* 211e and there is an oblique reference to ‘divine preservation’ at 208b.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Luk, *The Surangama Sutra, Chinese Rendering by Master Paramith of Central North India At Chih Monastery, Canton, China, AD 705*, (London: Rider, 1966), 59-60.

a ladder: ἡ κλίμαξ. English speakers, like the symposiasts after Agathon's speech (198a), have been seduced by euphony. The allure of alliteration of "the ladder of Love" has clouded our conception of the analogy of the Ascent, and we have assumed that it is much easier than it really is. When I grab a ladder, I already know the object I am aiming for and the distance between myself and what I am reaching for. I am only using the ladder as means, as a mere contrivance, to accomplish and possess what is too far for me to grab without it. But if I am right to stress Diotima's firm distinction between mortal and immortal, then the divine Forms are not something that a finite human could ever fully capture or possess. Interpreting the ascent as a ladder, used merely as means for the end of arriving at the Forms, distorts Diotima's image; it makes it more like the Tower of Babel, Jacob's ladder, or Wittgenstein's ladder.<sup>28</sup>

What does Diotima actually say? At 211c, Diotima compares the upward journey of the ascent: "just as someone using steps [ὡσπερ ἐπαναβασμοῖς χρώμενον]." <sup>29</sup> But what kind of steps [ἐπαναβασμοί] these are left is left unspecified. This is also the case in the Latin translation, *scala amoris*. The ascent is more properly seen as "a staircase of passionate desire" "since it leaves room on each step

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<sup>28</sup> For the Tower of Babel see Genesis 11:1-9. For Jacob's ladder see Genesis 28:10-17. See also John Climacus, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982). Kierkegaard used the pseudonym "Johannes de Climacus" for the works *Philosophical Fragments* (1985 [1844]), *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1992 [1846]), and a posthumous work, *Johannes Climacus, or De omnibus dubitandum est* (1967). Kierkegaard also used the pseudonym "Anti-Climacus" for the works: *Sickness Unto Death* (1983 [1849]) and *Practice in Christianity* (1991 [1850]). In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1998 [1921]), Wittgenstein uses the image of the ladder in his penultimate proposition 6.54: "My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it)." He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

<sup>29</sup> My translation from John Burnet, *Platonis Opera. Tomus II.* (Oxford University Press, 1900). All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

for company.”<sup>30</sup> A normal ladder cannot hold two people on the same step. Additionally, and more to the point, to read the ascent as a ladder [κλίμαξ] is to read it as culminating in a climax. But the true eroticist never climaxes. He or she is constantly urging the human beloved further up the ascent, to the always possibly higher heights toward the divine beloved. Never allowing the mortal beloved to remain, to plateau, or at worse to fall down. This is closer to the vision in the *Phaedrus* (246d-257a). If we think we can reach it, if we think of love as merely a means for something else, say, for attaining divine immortality, then we are like Aristophanes’s double creatures who want to scale the divine realm of the gods and overthrow them (190b). This is why Diotima distinguishes between a spiritual man [δαίμωνιος ἀνὴρ], wise in the ways of the divine, as opposed to whoever is wise in any other way, in a profession or handiwork, [τέχνας ἢ χειροουργίας] who is a laborer [βάνουσος] (203a). To confuse the spiritual ascent with a handy ladder is to think there is a mechanical solution and method for arriving at the divine. The man who looks for a “technical” solution to the Form views the difference between mortal humans and the Beautiful itself in terms of a quantitative distance and is thus closer to Pericles’s and Alcibiades’s imperialistic *erōs* in that both ultimately aim to possess its object.

## 2. *The Ascent Implies A Climbing Partner*

Diotima gives us only a mystical glimpse of the infinite ascent, but even the way she describes it shows us how important partnerships are in climbing upward. Diotima leads Socrates through a poetic ascent to her vision. This erotic partnership is in contrast with Pericles’s image of political pederasty. Although Pericles wants Athenians to work together to achieve the greatness of the Athens, the language he uses speaks against this very aim. We don’t partner with a rival lover to possess the beloved. This individualized and privatized, but still political, *erōs* reaches its acme with the Athenians’ desire to capture Sicily, which is, in truth, composed of various, even

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<sup>30</sup> Ruby Blondell, “Where is Socrates on the ‘ladder of love?’” in *Plato’s Symposium: Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, eds. J.H. Leshner, Debra Nails, and Frisbee C.C. Sheffield, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 147n2.

conflicting, motivations. On the other hand, the philosophic *erōs* is not one of scarcity. The Forms don't shrink or grow by having more or less sensible things participate in them (210e-211b); nor do they alter by having more or less seekers of wisdom trying to understand and to know them. On the contrary, the philosophic lover is generous and will try to turn as many who are willing and able to follow him/her toward the Forms.

At 210a at the very beginning of the ascent, Diotima describes it not as a private journey but as one in the company of others:

But try, as much as you can, to follow [ἔπεισθαι]. For the one going about this matter correctly, he must begin when he is young to go out among beautiful bodies... if the one leading [ὁ ἡγούμενος] leads [ἡγῆται] correctly.

There is vagueness in the text. Who is Diotima talking about? Who is the one leading? Who is the leader (*hegoumenos*)? One suggestion, put forth by Nehamas and Woodruff, is that leader is the god *Erōs*.<sup>31</sup> Although there are resources within the *Symposium* to answer this question, I propose to look at the *Republic*, where nearly identical language is used to that in the *Symposium*. At *Republic* 476c Socrates says:

Therefore, someone believing in many beautiful things [καλὰ μὲν πράγματα νομίζων], but not believing in a beauty itself [αὐτὸ δὲ κάλλος μήτε νομίζων], nor being able to follow [δυνάμενος ἔπεισθαι] if someone might lead [τις ἡγῆται] <him> to the knowledge of it (emphasis added).

There are many echoes of the *Symposium* in this passage of the *Republic*. There is the distinction between many beautiful particulars and the Beautiful itself. There is also the suggestion that person does not have to go it alone; someone can follow another person to the knowledge of this difference. Again, a bit later at *Republic* 479e Socrates repeats this idea with near identical language:

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<sup>31</sup> Nehamas and Woodruff in John M. Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, eds, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 492n45.

As for those who contemplate many beautiful things [πολλὰ καλὰ θεωμένους], but don't see the beautiful itself [αὐτὸ δὲ τὸ καλὸν μὴ ὁρῶντας], nor are able to follow someone else who leads <them> to it [μηδ' ἄλλω ἐπ' αὐτὸ ἄγοντι δυναμένους ἔπεισθαι] (emphasis added).

When first encountered, the cryptic phrase uttered by Diotima in the *Symposium* can be ambiguous; perhaps, the leader is Love as Nehamas and Woodruff propose. But these other lines from *Republic*, mirroring ideas and language of the *Symposium*, don't seem to reference *Erōs* the god but just a person leading another who is following. In philosophic love, we are always involved with others, not in a competitive zero-sum game of winners and loser, but in a cooperative win-win where someone else's success does not mean another's loss, but accomplishments can be shared.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. The Logoi of The Ascent

There are some interpretations of the ascent that forget Diotima's insistence on creation and (re)production. In contrast to the possessive and acquisitive imperialistic *erōs*, Diotima offers an alternative productive and generative *erōs* (cf. *Sophist* 219a-c). At each step of the ascent, the lover must somehow externalize and make manifest his/her love with *logoi*: words, speeches, thoughts, etc. Since *logos* is a very hard and ambiguous word to translate, I will leave it untranslated. I think that the lover is composing something in words, maybe poetry, maybe philosophy, maybe history.

The lover at the first step "must love one body and here engender beautiful *logoi*" (210a8). Here we can think of Sappho or Dante producing beautiful poetry inspired by a single beautiful body that they love. At the next step,

<it is necessary> to believe that the beauty in souls is more valuable than that of bodies, so that it if someone is decent in his soul although he has little in the bloom <of physical beauty>, it suffices to love and to be concerned for him and to seek to give

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<sup>32</sup> See *Rep.* III 403b-c where the aim of a musical (we might say cultural) education ought to be toward love of the beautiful.

birth in the sorts of *logoi*, whichever will make young men better [οἵτινες ποιήσουσι βελτίους τοὺς νέους]" (210c1)

Emphasizing a major theme in *Symposium* as a whole, the lover must love and concern himself with—or to use a better word, ‘care’ for—others, plural. In the process of this love, the lover will offer more *logoi* that make young men better. Diotima seems to be alluding to Greek pederasty, but the idea is broader. It is directed not just to a single young beloved boy, but to young men plural, and perhaps, to youth in general. The true lover will have a *pedagogical* aim to make the souls of the young [τοὺς νέους] better. The true lover is not exclusive but generous with his educational love. At the end of this erotic education the lover will again be called on to produce *logoi*. In her final vision of the Form of Beautiful, Diotima says, “Having been turned to the great sea of beauty and gazing <at it> he gives birth to many, beautiful and magnificent *logoi* and notions [διανοήματα], in unstinting love of wisdom (philosophy) [ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ ἀφθόνῳ]" (210d5). The erotic lover turns to philosophy, and to beautiful *logoi*.

### **To Kalon as the Radical Alternative to the Periclean Love-Object**

Whereas Pericles urged citizens to love a collective object, Athens, *individualistically*, Diotima enjoins the lover to love the Beautiful itself, a seemingly individual object, *collectively* and *publicly*. As we saw the leader leads at least one other person, but there could be others. It is a form of pedagogy. So, it could be a classroom or an Academy. Furthermore, we saw how many times up the ascent Diotima enjoined the climber to express and incarnate his love in *logoi*. Plato's own dialogues, especially the *Symposium*, could be one of these *logoi*. One that Plato wrote while in throes of a love for Socrates or Dion, or for some kind everlasting immortality, or even for a love of divine things. Lastly with erotic love, one wouldn't want to share a beloved, but an Idea, a Form, can be held in common. The Form of the Beautiful does not alter when beautiful particulars come or go out of existence. Instead the Form is the single thing responsible for all temporal, incarnate manifestations of beauty; it is what bestows beauty to all those things. Thus, all beautiful things necessarily participate in it. Although the Beautiful is a single Form,

the way of expressing one's love of this ultimate love-object is to see its universality as openly embracing all beautiful things—like a great sea (*pelagos*). Pericles's love is egocentric, it is a patriotism that appeals to the selfishness of private passions. Diotima's love is spiritual and transcending, it spurs the lover to keep seeking that which is larger than one's self, and even larger than one's own space and time.