Diotima's Speech as Apophasis

A Holistic Reading of the Symposium

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Among philosophical texts, Plato's dialogues present a challenge that is infrequent, if not rare: there is no explicit argumentation on the level of the entire text as a unit. While Socrates does often speak the most, and with the most developed arguments, it is quite uncertain if he is meant to be taken seriously on the literal level. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that the other literary elements, such as the descriptions of the interlocutors and the setting of the dialogues, do not carry a literary purpose other than providing a context in which for Socrates to speak. This paper is one attempt at deciphering a portion of a Platonic text, Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, in relation to its narrative context. It combines Michael Sells' study of apophasis[1] and Claude Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myths[2] to formulate and argue for the hypothesis that the *Symposium* is an apophatic endeavor which illustrates the pursuit of transcendent truth and is written in the structural meta-language of myth.

Sells defines apophasis as an instance of linguistic performance in which the ineffable nature of the transcendent "is not only asserted but performed" through "a continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false, or even as meaningful."[3] He explains this form of writing as a response to "the *aporia*—the unresolvable dilemma— of transcendence":[4]

> *The transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond names, however, I must give it a name, "The transcendent." Any statement of ineffability, "X is beyond names," generates the aporia that the subject of the statement must be named (as X) in order for us to affirm that it is beyond names.*[5]

A similar theme of transcendence is also the primary object of discussion in Diotima's explication of love and the process of reaching true Beauty to Socrates. In Diotima's characterization of Beauty, one can observe the incompatibility of her exposition with non-contradictory logic—what Sells might call the logic of "object entities"[6]—and therefore any language founded upon that system of thought. The true Beauty that is described as the ultimate goal of love in the *Symposium* is not only eternal and complete,[7] but also:

> *…not anywhere in another thing, as in an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself…and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change.*[8]

Beauty, according to this description, is nowhere but in itself, and yet other things partake in it; those who partake in Beauty may change, without bringing the least bit of change to Beauty itself. It is obvious that this

kind of Beauty lies in a different realm of existence than what descriptive language can directly refer to. What is arguably the most essential part of the *Symposium* is a discussion of, to use Sells' terminology, a "transcendent principle of reality."[9]

There are further connections between Sells' discussion of apophasis and Diotima's speech. Sells gives three major characterizations for "[classical] western apophasis": an emanatory language in which "a defined and stable hierarchy is constructed, form the source of the emanation…to the final, furthest level"[10]; "dis-ontological discursive effort"[11] which constantly "strains against its own reifications and ontologies"[12]; and "a distinctive dialectic of transcendence and immanene in which the utterly transcendent is revealed as the utterly immanent."[13]

"The metaphor of overflowing or 'emanation'"[14] is apparent where Diotima describes "stages" of love through which one ascends to reach true Beauty; one starts with the love of a beautiful body, and subsequently recognizes higher forms of beauty for which one abandons the former—this continues until Beauty itself has been reached.[15] Sells also explains that structural dilemmas occur in emantory metaphors because "the source of emanation" is transcendent,[16] and there is a "turning back… a folding of the multitiered hierarchy of being back into itself to a moment of equality."[17] So is the case with Diotima's stages of ascension; they have hierarchical relationships in their approximation of true Beauty, but one cannot compare them in terms of the measure of Beauty, since that can only be participated in without its substantive presence. All the rungs, therefore, equally occupy the space that is "in between" beauty and ugliness. [18]

Furthermore, the "dialectic of transcendence and immanence"[19] finds a vivid expression when Diotima explains to Socrates that the aim of love "is giving birth in beauty."[20] In this imagery, the otherness and the sameness between beauty(Beauty) and its pursuer are both validated. One does not procreate with oneself, nor with a completely dissimilar being. Moreover, "reproduction…is what mortals have in place of immortality";[21] it is both self-preservation and creation, the reinvention of the self into a more permanent other. To desire to reproduce in beauty is to seek the immanent through the recognition of the transcendent.

There are, of course, significant differences between Sells' qualification of apophatic discourse and the format of Diotima's speech. It does not contain the constantly regressing and correcting "dis-ontological discursive effort,"[22] and more importantly, it does not seem to "perform" the transcendence that it discusses. Still, the parallels drawn above are hard to ignore. This leads to the question of whether

the speech can be plausibly analyzed in such a way that accounts for these seeming disparities and qualifies Diotima's rhetoric on love and Beauty as apophatic.

In this case, the answer to one conundrum lies in another. Diotima's explication of love and the process of reaching true Beauty to Socrates perhaps comprises the discursive crux of the *Symposium*. This is where the long discussion on love, which takes up most of the text, draws to a close, and it is also the last portion of the text in which an explicit philosophical argument is made. Most importantly, it is the point in the text where the discussion on love, which had been previously operating within the realm of conventional thought—such as medicine[23] or education[24]—becomes a leaping point for intellectual exploration into original insight. However, it is not easy to understand on the first reading of the *Symposium* why Diotima's speech is placed within the larger text, and how its meaning changes through its relation to the narrative context.

It turns out that the relationship between Diotima's speech and its place within the *Symposium* is what transforms the oration from a literal exposition on the qualities of the transcendent principle, Beauty, into an apophatic piece of fiction that "performs" the relationship between that transcendence and its pursuer. In fact, seen in relation to Sells' discussion, the *Symposium* reveals strong allusions to this trasformative relationship within the text itself. For instance, Sells uses the parallel between apophasis and a joke to illustrate the performativity of apophatic language.[25] It does not seem to be a coincidence that the setting of the *Symposium* narrative is the celebration of Agathon for his success in theatrical comedy-writing;[26] a distinguished feat of linguistic performance makes the *Symposium* possible, so to speak. Sells also explains apophasis as a "meaning event,"[27] which "is the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union. It does not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union."[28] This is an uncanny parallel to the character of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, who is driven to frenzy out of his love for Socrates and his wisdom.[29] Alcibiades demonstrates a desire for the sublime that does beyond simply wanting to *understand*; rather, it wants to *be united* with the source and object of understanding.

In deciphering Diotima's speech with regards to its relationship to the entirety of the *Symposium*, Lévi-Strauss' structural framework for the analysis of myth proves itself the most useful.

In *Structural Anthropology*, he argues for the parallel between myth and language[30], claiming that "If there is meaning to be found in mythology, it cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined."[31] He isolates the smallest units of relations in a myth, labeling them "mythemes," and argues that "The true constituent units of a myth not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning."[32] The narrative elements of the myth become the building blocks of a meta-language, though which one can reach the true meaning of the story.

One of the ways in which Lévi-Strauss reads this structural meta-language is by identifying structures of opposite ideas and their mediation within the basic elements of mythical meaning.[33] In explaining the recurring attribution of the "trickster" role "to either coyote or raven," he claims:[34] "We need only assume that two opposing terms with no intermediary always tend to be replaced by two equivalent terms which admit of a third on as a mediator."[35] However, Lévi-Strauss recognizes another possibility:

> *But the trickster figure is not the only conceivable form of mediation; some myths seem to be entirely devoted to the task of exhausting all the possible solutions to the problem of bridging the gap between two and one. For instance, a comparison between all the variants of the Zuni emergence myth provides us with a series of mediating devices, each of which generates the next one by a process of opposition and correlation...*[36]

In this case, "a whole series of variants" is constructed between two extremes, with multiple intermediaries.[37] When this latter interpretive paradigm is applied to Diotima's speech *both* as a part of the Symposium myth, *and* around the theme of transcendence, the apophatic qualities of the narrative construction come to life. While the speech itself is not entirely compatible with Sells' idea of apophasis on the literal level, the meta-language of mythical meaning relations takes on the constantly regressive and the performative qualities that, in conjunction with its other features discussed above, qualify the oration as an apophatic discourse and a "meaning event".

When one divides Diotima's speech and the related narrative elements to the most basic units of meaning and examines their relations, one discovers several constructs of opposition and mediation, each with the uninformed inquirer of the transcendent on one end and the sought after transcendence

itself on the other.   The most apparent of these is the process of reaching Beauty through various stages of love, but there are other significant examples.   The *Symposium* narrative has many layers of transmission, and Diotima's speech is in fact four communicative degrees removed from the reader— the speech is told to Socrates, who tells the story to Aristodemus, from whom Apollodorus, the chief narrator (who, again, is telling the story to a friend!), gets his information.[38]   Since neither Apollodorus, Aristodemus, nor Diotima play any other roles within the *Symposium*, this layering can seem redundant, until one realizes that each messenger is a mediator between the truth (regarding both Beauty and the facts on Diotima's speech) and the ignorant student. The circumstances that prompt Socrates to pass on the rhetoric of Diotima are similarly complicated. Previous speakers take turns praising love, but Agathon sees a flaw in their approach and tries to correct it.[39] His speech, in turn, is challenged by Socrates,[40] who presents an alternate viewpoint by citing a conversation in which he himself was challenged.[41]   Again, the different interlocutors serve as mediators between correct understanding and confusion.

The re-structuring of Diotima's speech and its narrative circumstances into the meta-linguistic description of the opposition between transcendence and its seeker reveals the patterns of the "dis-ontological"[42] and "open-ended dynamic that strains against its own reifications and ontologies."[43]   The picture of opposition and mediation may normally invoke the image of consistent increase.   However, in the hierarchies of transcendence related to Diotima's speech, the higher mediator negates and transforms the lower.[44]   In the quest for Beauty, lower "stages" of love are no longer sought after when the lover moves to a higher one.[45]   In the chain of transmission, doubt is cast on the accuracy of the interlocutors; Apollodorus acknowledges his own madness before passing on the account,[46] and the end of the *Symposium* shows Aristodemus unable to properly remember the details of the night due to drowsiness.[47] Finally, in the line of questioning, each speaker criticizes the argumentative flaws of the former and contradicts his opinion.   The fact that Diotima stands at the top of this hierarchy is another contradiction of its own; maleness is apparently considered superior among the *Symposium* interlocutors,[48] and yet the only character wise enough to instruct Socrates is a woman.

Because of these constant denials embedded in each stage of mediation, the narrative structures of opposition in the *Symposium* end up not giving much descriptive commentary on either pole—ignorance or transcendence. Instead, it demonstrates the indescribability of the opposition and the inability of common logic and language to accurately portray the struggle of starting at one end and pursuing the other. Moreover, the text itself is not only a medium of demonstration, but an embodiment of that endeavor—the inquisitive reader, the *Symposium*, and the inquired truth form the final construct of opposition, with the text serving as the mediator. In this light, it finally becomes clear why the most overtly sustained theme of the *Symposium* is love, something in between the extremes of "good and beautiful"[49] and "bad and ugly"[50], but in desire of the good.[51] The text is driven by, and embodies, intellectual love.

Notes

1. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 206.

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), 210-211.

3. Sells, *Unsaying*, 3.

4. Sells, *Unsaying*, 2.

5. Sells, *Unsaying*, 2.

6. Sells, *Unsaying*, 3-4.

7. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. with introduction and notes by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 58.

8. Plato, *Symposium*, 59.

9. Sells, *Unsaying*, 4-5.

10. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6.

11. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6.

12. Sells, *Unsaying*, 7.

13. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6.

14. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6.

15. Plato, *Symposium*, 48-60.

16. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6-7.

17. Sells, *Unsaying*, 208.

18. Plato, *Symposium*, 46.

19. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6.

20. Plato, *Symposium*, 52-53.

21. Plato, *Symposium*, 54.

22. Sells, *Unsaying*, 6-7.

23. Plato, *Symposium*, 20-24.

24. Plato, *Symposium*, 13-19.

25. Sells, *Unsaying*, 210.

26. Plato, *Symposium*, 1-8.

27. Sells, *Unsaying*, 9.

28. Sells, *Unsaying*, 9.

29. Plato, *Symposium*, 61-77.

30. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 208-211.

31. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 210.

32. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 211.

33. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 211-227.

34. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 224.

35. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 224.

36. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 226.

37. Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis", 226-229.

38. Plato, *Symposium*.

39. Plato, *Symposium*, 32.

40. Plato, *Symposium*, 37-44.

41. Plato, *Symposium*, 45-60.

42. Sells, *Unsaying*, 7.

43. Sells, *Unsaying*, 7.

44. Plato, *Symposium*, 57-60.

45. Plato, *Symposium*, 59.

46. Plato, *Symposium*, 2-3.

47. Plato, *Symposium*, 77.

48. Plato, *Symposium*, 14, 27-28.

49. Plato, *Symposium*, 46.

50. Plato, *Symposium*, 46.

51. Plato, *Symposium*, 50.

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Lévi-Strauss, Claude, "The Structural Study of Myth" in Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire

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1-13, 206-217.