INTERRUPTED DIALOGUE: RECENT READINGS OF THE SYMPOSIUM

While Plato’s Symposium is one of his most admired and widely read dialogues, with its popularity and influence extending well beyond the discipline of philosophy, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that philosophers have not known what exactly to make of it. The three recent books considered here can be said to take this strange state-of-affairs as their starting point. Thus, for example, Sheffield feels the need to assert at the start of her study that “the Symposium deserves to be taken more seriously by those interested in Plato’s philosophy” (3). One thing that motivates the study of Corrigan and Glazov-Corrigan (hereafter C.G.-C.) is their stated conviction that no part of the dialogue is “simply nonphilosophical” (42). In likewise alluding to the difficulties the dialogue has posed for philosophical readers, the volume edited by Lesher, Nails, and Sheffield succinctly states the reason: “The Symposium is a curiously constructed work, which has divided scholars who wish their philosophy and literature to be served up separately” (2). The problem is indeed that those turning to the dialogue for ‘Plato’s philosophy’ tend to find it only in Socrates’ speech; what then to make of the rest, and by far the major part of the dialogue? What philosophical purpose, if any, is served by the other speeches and by all those literary details and flourishes

that so appeal to readers not so worried about the philosophical content? And even if he or she ignores everything but Socrates’ speech, the reader in search of Plato’s arguments and doctrines will still find much in this speech to be puzzled by since it is itself a dialogue that reflects in microcosm the literary and dramatic complexity of the dialogue as a whole. Even if one tries to make one’s hermeneutical task easier by treating the character Socrates as Plato’s mouthpiece, one is still faced with the problem that this character is made to present his account of love in the voice of another character, i.e., the priestess Diotima. The words of this priestess, furthermore, appear rather light in what we would consider today ‘philosophical argument’ and rather heavier in fantasy and poetic effusion.

The two book-length studies of the Symposium under review here, as well as some of the contributions in the collection of essays, have as their more or less explicit aim showing how the dialogue as a whole is a work of philosophy, which in turn involves showing how all of its parts and diverse elements are both interdependent and indispensable to its philosophical point. To begin with the collection, I emphasize ‘some’ because it is a very diverse collection (that is indeed one of its major strengths) and a few of the essays it contains work directly against the mentioned aim.

The most extreme example is Lloyd Gerson’s contribution. Gerson’s argument is that the dialogue is best interpreted from the perspective of ‘Platonism’, by which he means the combination of the following: 1) the rejection of Eleaticism, materialism, relativism, extreme Heracliteanism, hedonism, and the conception of the soul as a harmony (all of which for Gerson are clearly and unqualifiedly rejected in the dialogues, 53); 2) what Aristotle tells us of the Platonist position; 3) what can be inferred from this position, whether or not Plato explicitly saw the implication (53). Gerson attempts to show that Platonism as thus constituted illuminates the Symposium better than anything else. Yet by “the Symposium” Gerson apparently means only the second-half of Diotima’s speech since he makes no attempt to show that Platonism illuminates any other part of the dialogue. Gerson’s argument is also weakened by a failure to