

Joanne WAUGH
Speaking to the Soul, Reading the Symposium

In speaking of Plato as a literary author, we imply that he was also the author of a specialized type of writing. But our notions of reading and writing, literature and philosophy, and the history of both genres - indeed, the very ideas of a genre and of the history of literature - do not adequately describe the phenomena of speakers and texts, audiences and performances, and memory and history in classical Greece. *Philosophy* does not mean for us what *philosophia* meant for the Greeks. For us, philosophy is a type of writing that effaces that it is a kind of writing; for those who coined the term *philosophia* and the concept(s) it names, it connoted something else - a way of living. Not that the Greeks of classical Athens were agreed about the meaning of the term; what constituted *philosophia* was in dispute from its earliest documented usages in the fifth century until the middle of the fourth. But these disputes occurred against a background of shared agreement about other matters of cultural importance and tradition.

Plato's choice to write philosophy as dialogues may be seen as a consequence of historical conditions in fifth- and fourth-century Athens: the traditional role of spoken discourse in establishing, enacting, and transmitting Greek culture, and the increased production of written texts as transcriptions to be read rather than inscriptions to be performed. The Platonic dialogue accomplishes the task of *paideia* that had been the province of oral discourse: the dialogue dramatizes the actual terms and consequences of engaging in debate that was the hallmark of democratic life in the polis at the same time as it re-enacts philosophical inquiry - what Sellars describes as "the art of giving and asking for reasons." In preserving the performative and contextual elements of speech while demanding explanations and arguments for and against the principles invoked in urging and justifying actions, the dialogue allows its audience to experience almost first-hand [or in a way that is second-best] what other forms of writing neither encourage nor allow: the lived social practices, the normative structure of which must be made visible or explicit in order for Plato's audiences - ancient and modern - to occupy the space of reasons.

Plato's *Symposium* illustrates the truth of these claims, whatever its differences from the typical Platonic dialogue. In dramatizing an occasion for praising *eros*, the *Symposium* re-enacts ideas that while familiar to the audience in and of the dialogue, are less familiar to us. The symposium is *the* occasion of *paideia* for the elite citizens of Athens, but contemporary education does not openly include the element of sexual desire that is central to the educational function of the ancient symposium. Nor do we typically see speech as a means of effecting something, although we recognize a smallish class of performative utterances, and lawyers, judges, and holy men or women acknowledge the giving of testimony and the invocation of a power greater than ourselves. But lacking in our concepts of speech and education is the power of speech to effect, as Socrates and Alcibiades both put it on various occasions, "the soul of the hearer." I hope to show that if we read the *Symposium* in its historical and cultural context, we will understand just how seriously these words are meant, and how philosophy is literature in the ancient

sense of the word, the sense in which Socrates tells us that "the supreme music is philosophy."