Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato's Symposium, Diotima's Speech
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“Sorcerer Love” is the name that Luce Irigaray gives to the demonic function of love as presented in Plato's Symposium. She argues that Socrates there attributes two incompatible positions to Diotima, who in any case is not present at the banquet. The first is that love is a mid-point or intermediary between lovers which also teaches immortality. The second is that love is a means to the end and duty of procreation, and thus is a mere means to immortality through which the lovers lose one another. Irigaray argues in favor of the first position, a conception of love as demonic intermediary. E.K.

In the Symposium, the dialogue on love, when Socrates finishes speaking, he gives the floor to a woman: Diotima. She does not participate in these exchanges or in this meal among men. She is not there. She herself does not speak. Socrates reports or recounts her views. He borrows her wisdom and power, declares her his initiator, his pedagogue, on matters of love, but she is not invited to teach or to eat. Unless she did not want to accept an invitation? But Socrates says nothing about that. And Diotima is not the only example of a woman whose wisdom, above all in love, is reported in her absence by a man.

Diotima's teaching will be very dialectical—but different from what we usually call dialectical. Unlike Hegel's, her dialectic does not work by opposition to transform the first term into the second, in order to arrive at a synthesis of the two. At the very outset, she establishes the intermediary and she never abandons it as a mere way or means. Her method is not, then, a propaedeutic of the destruction or deconstruction of two terms in order to establish a synthesis which is neither one nor the other. She presents, uncovers, unveiling the existence of a third that is already there and that permits progression: from poverty to wealth, from ignorance to wisdom, from mortality to immortality. For her, this progression always leads to a greater perfection of and in love.
But, contrary to the usual dialectical methods, love ought not to be abandoned for the sake of becoming wise or learned. It is love that leads to knowledge—both practical and metaphysical. It is love that is both the guide and the way, above all a mediator.

Love is designated as a theme, but love is also perpetually enacted, dramatized, in the exposition of the theme.

So Diotima immediately rebuts the claims that love is a great God and that it is the love of beautiful things. At the risk of offending the Gods, Diotima also asserts that love is neither beautiful nor good. This leads her interlocutor to suppose immediately that love is ugly and bad, incapable as he is of grasping the existence or instance of what is held between, what permits the passage between ignorance and knowledge. If we did not, at each moment, have something to learn in the encounter with reality, between reality and already established knowledge, we would not perfect ourselves in wisdom. And not to become wiser means to become more ignorant.

Therefore, between knowledge and reality, there is an intermediary which permits the meeting and transmutation or transvaluation between the two. The dialectic of Diotima is in four terms, at least: the here, the two poles of the meeting, the beyond, but a beyond which never abolishes the here. And so on, indefinitely. The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in becoming. And the mediator of everything is, among other things, or exemplarily, love. Never completed, always evolving.

And, in response to the protestation of Socrates that love is a great God, that everyone says so or thinks so, she laughs. Her retort is not at all angry, balancing between contradictories; it is laughter from elsewhere. Laughing, then, she asks Socrates who this everyone is. Just as she ceaselessly undoes the assurance or the closure of opposing terms, so she rejects every ensemble of unities reduced to a similitude in order to constitute a whole:

“You mean, by all who do not know?” said she, “or by all who know as well?” “Absolutely all.” At that she laughed. (202)²

(“Ce tout le monde dont tu parles, sont-ce, dit-elle, ceux qui savent ou ceux qui ne savent pas?—Tous en général, ma foi!” Elle se mit à rire.)

The tension between opposites thus abated, she shows, demonstrates, that “everyone” does not exist, nor does the position of love as eternally a great God. Does she teach nothing that is already defined? A method of becoming wise, learned, more perfect in love and in art [l’art]. She ceaselessly questions Socrates on his positions but without, like a master, positing already constituted truths. Instead, she teaches the renunciation of already established truths. And each time that Socrates thinks that he can take something as cer-
tain, she undoes his certainty. All entities, substantives, adverbs, sentences are patiently, and joyously, called into question.

For love, the demonstration is not so difficult to establish. For, if love possessed all that he desired, he would desire no more. He must lack, therefore, in order to desire still. But, if love had nothing at all to do with beautiful and good things, he could not desire them either. Thus, he is an intermediary in a very specific sense. Does he therefore lose his status as a God? Not necessarily. He is neither mortal nor immortal: he is between the one and the other. Which qualifies him as demonic. Love is a demon—his function is to transmit to the gods what comes from men and to men what comes from the gods. Like everything else that is demonic, love is complementary to gods and to men in such a way as to join everything with itself. There must be a being of middling nature in order for men and gods to enter into relations, into conversation, while awake or asleep. Which makes love a kind of divination, priestly knowledge of things connected with sacrifice, initiation, incantation, prediction in general and magic.

The demons who serve as mediators between men and gods are numerous and very diverse. Love is one of them. And Love’s parentage is very particular: child of Plenty (himself son of Invention) and of Poverty, conceived the day the birth of Aphrodite was celebrated. Thus love is always poor and

. . . rough, unkempt, unshod, and homeless, ever crouching on the ground uncovered, sleeping beneath the open sky by doors and in the streets, because he has the nature of his mother. . . . But again, in keeping with his father, he has designs upon the beautiful and good, for he is bold, headlong, and intense, a mighty hunter, always weaving some device or other, eager in invention and resourceful, searching after wisdom all through life, terrible as a magician, sorcerer, and sophist. Further, in his nature he is not immortal, nor yet mortal. No, on a given day, now he flourishes and lives, when things go well with him, and again he dies, but through the nature of his sire revives again. Yet his gain for ever slips away from him, so that Eros never is without resources, nor is ever rich.

As for ignorance and knowledge, here again he is midway between them. The case stands thus. No god seeks after wisdom, or wishes to grow wise (for he already is so), no more than anybody else seeks after wisdom if he has it. Nor, again, do ignorant folk seek after wisdom or long to grow wise; for here is just the trouble about ignorance, that what is neither beautiful and good, nor yet intelligent, to itself seems good enough. Accordingly, the man who does not think himself in
need has no desire for what he does not think himself in need of.

[Socrates.] The seekers after knowledge, Diotima! If they are not the wise, nor yet the ignorant (said I), who are they, then?

[Diotima.] The point (said she) is obvious even to a child, that they are persons intermediate between these two, and that Eros is among them; for wisdom falls within the class of the most beautiful, while Eros is an eros for the beautiful. And hence it follows necessarily that Eros is a seeker after wisdom [a philosopher], and being a philosopher, is midway between wise and ignorant. (203-204)

(rude et malpropre; un va-nu-pieds qui n’a point de domicile, dormant à la belle étoile sur le pas des portes ou dans la rue selon la nature de sa mère. Mais, en revanche, guettant, sans cesse, embusqué les choses belles et bonnes, chasseur habile et ourdissant continûment quelque ruse, curieux de pensée et riche d’expédient, passant toute sa vie à philosopher, habile comme sorcier, comme inventeur de philtres magiques, comme sophiste, selon la nature de son père. De plus, sa nature n’est ni d’un mortel ni d’un immortel, mais, le même jour, tantôt, quand ses expédients ont réussi, il est en fleur, il a de la vie; tantôt au contraire il est mourant; puis, derechef, il revient à la vie grace au naturel de son père, tandis que, d’autre part, coule de ses mains le fruit de ses expédients! Ainsi, ni jamais Amour n’est indigent, ni jamais il est riche! Entre savoir et ignorance, maintenant, Amour est intermédiaire. Voici ce qui en est. Parmi les Dieux, il n’y en a aucun qui ait envie de devenir sage, car il l’est; ne s’emploie pas non plus à philosopher quiconque d’autre est sage. Mais pas davantage les ignorants ne s’emploient, de leur côté, à philosopher, et ils n’ont pas envie de devenir sages; car, ce qu’il y a de précisément de fâcheux dans l’ignorance, c’est que quelqu’un, qui n’est pas un homme accompli et qui n’est pas non plus intelligent, se figure l’être dans la mesure voulue; c’est que celui qui ne croit pas être dépouvu n’a point envie de ce dont il ne croit pas avoir besoin d’être pourvu. —Quels sont donc alors, Diotime, m’écriai-je, ceux qui s’emploient à philosopher si ce ne sont ni les sages ni les ignorants? —La chose est claire, dit-elle, et même déjà pour un enfant! Ce sont ceux qui sont intermédiaires entre ces deux extrêmes, et au nombre desquels doit aussi se trouver Amour. La sagesse, en effet, est évidemment parmi les plus belles choses, et c’est au beau
Eros is therefore intermediary between couples of opposites: poverty-plenty, ignorance-wisdom, ugliness-beauty, dirtiness-cleanliness, death-life, etc. And that would be inscribed in love's nature as a result of his genealogy and date of conception. And love is a philosopher, love is philosophy. Philosophy is not formal knowledge, fixed, abstracted from all feeling. It is the search for love, love of beauty, love of wisdom, which is one of the most beautiful things. Like love, the philosopher would be someone poor, dirty, a bit of a bum, always an outsider, sleeping under the stars but very curious, adept in ruses and devices of all kinds, reflecting ceaselessly, a sorcerer, a sophist, sometimes flourishing, sometimes expiring. Nothing like the representation of the philosopher we generally give: learned, correctly dressed, with good manners, understanding everything, pedantically instructing us in a corpus of already codified doctrine. The philosopher is nothing like that. He is bare-foot, going out under the stars in search of an encounter with reality, seeking the embrace, the acquaintance [connaissance] (co-birthing) [(co-naissance)] of whatever gentleness of soul, beauty, wisdom might be found there. This incessant quest he inherits from his mother. He is a philosopher through his mother, an adept in invention through his father. But his passion for love, for beauty, for wisdom, comes to him from his mother, and from the date when he was conceived. Desired and wanted, besides, by his mother.

How is it that love and the philosopher are generally represented otherwise? Because they are imagined as beloved and not as lovers. As beloved Love, both like and unlike the philosopher, is imagined to be of unparalleled beauty, delicate, perfect, happy. Yet the lover has an entirely different nature. He goes toward what is kind, beautiful, perfect, etc. He does not possess these. He is poor, unhappy, always in search of... But what does he seek or love? That beautiful things become his—this is Socrates' answer. But what will happen to him if these things become his? To this question of Diotima's, Socrates has no answer. Switching "good" for "beautiful", she asks her question again. "That the good may be his," ("Qu'elles deviennent siennes") Socrates repeats.

"And what happens to the man when the good things become his?" "On this," said [Socrates], "I am more than ready with an answer: that he will be happy." (204-205)

("Et qu'en sera-t-il pour celui a qui il arrivera que les choses bonnes soient devenues siennes?" "Voilà, dit Socrate, à quoi je serai plus à mon aise pour répondre! Il sera heureux")

And happiness seems to put an ultimate end to this dialogical repetition between Diotima and Socrates.
Socrates asks: what should we call what pertains to lovers? “By what manner of pursuit and in what activity does the eagerness and straining for the object get the name of Eros? And what may this action really be?” (“Quel est le genre d’existence, le mode d’activité pour lesquels à leur zèle, à leur effort soutenu conviendrait le nom d’amour, dis-moi? En quoi peu bien consister cet acte?”) And Diotima replies: “This action is engendering in beauty, with relation both to body and to soul.” (205, 206) (“C’est un enfantement dans la beauté et selon le corps et selon l’âme.”) But Socrates understands nothing of another, equally clear, revelation . . . He understands nothing about fecundity in relation both to body and to soul:

The union of a man and woman is, in fact, a generation; this is a thing divine; in a living creature that is mortal, it is an element of immortality, this fecundity and generation. (206)

(L’union de l’homme et de la femme est en effet un enfantement et c’est une affaire divine, c’est, dans le vivant mortel, la présence de ce qui est immortel: la fécondité et la procréation.)

This statement of Diotima’s never seems to have been understood. Besides, she herself will go on to emphasize the procreative aspect of love. But first she stresses the character of divine generation in every union between man and woman, the presence of the immortal in the living mortal. All love would be creation, potentially divine, a path between the condition of the mortal and that of the immortal. Love is fecund before all procreation. And it has a mediumlike, demonic fecundity. Assuring everyone, male and female, the immortal becoming of the living. But there cannot be procreation of a divine nature in what is not in harmony. And harmony with the divine is not possible for the ugly, but only for the beautiful. Thus, according to Diotima, love between man and woman is beautiful, harmonious, divine. It must be in order for procreation to take place. It is not procreation that is beautiful and that constitutes the aim of love. The aim of love is to realize the immortality in the mortality between lovers. And the expansion which produces the child follows the joy at the approach of a beautiful object. But an ugly object leads to a turning back, the shriveling up of fecundity, the painfully borne weight of the desire to procreate. Procreation and generation in beauty—these are the aim of love, because it is thus that the eternity and imperishability of a mortal being manifest themselves.

Fecundity of love between lovers, regeneration of one by the other, passage to immortality in one another, through one another—these seem to become the condition, not the cause, of procreation. Certainly, Diotima tells
Socrates that the creation of beauty, of a work of art [l'oeuvre] (solitary creation this time?) is insufficient, that it is necessary to give birth together to a child, that this wisdom is inscribed in the animal world itself. She continues to laugh at the way he goes looking for his truths beyond the most obvious everyday reality, which he does not see or even perceive. She mocks the way his dialectical or dialogical method forgets the most elementary truths. The way his discourse on love neglects to look at, to inform itself about, the amorous state and to inquire about its cause.

Diotima speaks of cause in a surprising way. We could note that her method does not enter into a chain of causalties, a chain that skips over or often forgets the intermediary as generative milieu. Usually, causality is not part of her reasoning. She borrows it from the animal world and evokes it, or invokes it, with respect to procreation. Instead of allowing the child to germinate or develop in the milieu of love and fecundity between man and woman, she seeks a cause of love in the animal world: procreation.

Diotima's method miscarries here. From here on, she leads love into a schism between mortal and immortal. Love loses its demonic character. Is this the founding act of the meta-physical? There will be lovers in body and lovers in soul. But the perpetual passage from mortal to immortal that lovers confer on one another is put aside. Love loses its divinity, its mediumlike, alchemical qualities between couples of opposites. The intermediary becomes the child, and no longer love. Occupying the place of love, the child can no longer be a lover. It is put in the place of the incessant movement of love. Beloved, no doubt; but how be beloved without being a lover? And is not love trapped in the beloved, contrary to what Diotima wanted in the first place? A beloved who is an end is substituted for love between men and women. A beloved who is a will, even a duty, and a means of attaining immortality. Lovers can neither attain nor advance that between themselves. That is the weakness of love, for the child as well. If the couple of lovers cannot care for the place of love like a third term between them, then they will not remain lovers and they cannot give birth to lovers. Something gets solidified in space-time with the loss of a vital intermediary milieu and of an accessible, loving, transcendental. A sort of teleological triangle replaces a perpetual movement, a perpetual transvaluation, a permanent becoming. Love was the vehicle of this. But, if procreation becomes its goal, it risks losing its internal motivation, its fecundity "in itself", its slow and constant regeneration.

This error in method, in the originality of Diotima's method, is corrected shortly afterward only to be confirmed later on. Surely, once again, she is not there. Socrates reports her views. Perhaps he distorts them unwittingly and unknowingly.

The following paragraph takes up what was just asserted. It explains how it is that there is permanent renewal in us. How there is, in us, a ceaseless loss of the old, of the already dead, both in our most physical part—hair, bones,
blood, our whole body—and in our most spiritual part: our character, our
opinions, our desires, joys and pains, our fears. None of these elements is ever
identical to what they were; some come into existence while others perish.
The same is true for knowledges, which are acquired and forgotten—thus
constantly renewed:

"... This is the fashion in which everything mortal is pre-
served, not in being always perfectly identical, as is divinity,
but in that the disappearing and decaying object leaves behind
it another new one such as it was. By this arrangement,
Socrates," said she, "the mortal partakes of immortality, both
in body and all else; the immortal does so in another way. So
do not marvel if everything by nature prizes its own offspring;
it is for the sake of immortality that every being has this ur-
gency and love." ... (208)

([C'est] de cette façon qu'est sauvegardé ce qui est mortel, non
point comme ce qui est divin par l'identité absolue d'une exist-
ence éternelle, mais par le fait que ce qui s'en va, mine par son
ancienneté, laisse après lui autre chose, du nouveau qui est
pareil à ce qu'il était. C'est par ce moyen, dit-elle, qui ce qui
est mortel participe à l'immortalité, dans son corps et en tout
le reste ... Donc, ne t'émerveille pas que, ce qui est une
repousse de lui-même, chaque être ait pour lui tant de sollici-
tude naturelle, car c'est en vue de l'immortalité que font cor-
tège à chacun d'eux ce zèle et cet amour!)

Here, Diotima returns to her type of argumentation, including her mocking
of those who suspend the present in order to search "for an eternity of time an
immortal glory" ("pour l'éternité du temps une gloire immortelle"). She
speaks—in a style that is loosely woven but never definitively knotted—of be-
coming in time, of permanent generation and regeneration here and now in
each (wo)man [chacun(e)] of what is more corporeally and spiritually real.
Without saying that one is the fruit of the other. But that, at each moment,
we are a "regrowth" of ourselves, in perpetual increase. No more quest for im-
mortality through the child. But in us, ceaselessly. Diotima has returned to a
path which admits love as it was defined before she evoked procreation: an
intermediate terrain, a mediator, a space-time of permanent passage between
mortal and immortal.

Next, returning to an example of the quest for immortality through fame,
she re-situates (the) object (of) love outside of the subject: reknown, immor-
tal glory, etc. No more perpetual becoming-immortal in us, but rather a race
toward some thing that would confer immortality. Like and unlike procrea-
tion of a child, the stake of love is placed outside the self. In the beloved and
not in the lover? The lovers cited—Alcestis, Admetus, Achilles, Codros—would not have been cited unless we always remembered them. It was with the goal of eternal reknown that they loved unto death. Immortality is the object of their love. Not love itself.

Well then (said she), when men’s fecundity is of the body, they turn rather to the women, and the fashion of their love is this: through begetting children to provide themselves with immortality, reknown and happiness, as they imagine—

Securing them for all time to come.

But when fecundity is of the soul—for indeed there are (said she) those persons who are fecund in their souls, even more than in their bodies, fecund in what is the function of the soul to conceive and also to bring forth—what is this proper offspring? It is wisdom, along with every other spiritual value.

. . . (208-209)

(Cela étant, dit-elle, ceux qui sont féconds selon le corps se tournent plutôt vers les femmes, et leur façon d’être amoureux c’est, en engendrant des enfants, de se procurer à eux-mêmes, pensent-ils, pour toute la suite du temps, le bonheur d’avoir un nom dont le souvenir ne périsse pas. Quant à ceux qui sont féconds selon l’âme, car en fait il en existe, dit-elle, dont la fécondité réside dans l’âme, à un plus haut degré encore que dans le corps, pour tout ce qui appartient à une âme d’être féconde et qu’il lui appartient d’enfanter. Or, qu’est-ce cela qui lui appartient? C’est la pensée, et c’est toute autre excellence)

What seemed to me most original in Diotima’s method has disappeared once again. That irreducible intermediary milieu of love is cancelled between “subject” (an inadequate word in Plato) and “beloved reality.” Amorous becoming no longer constitutes a becoming of the lover himself, of love in the (male or female) lover, between the lovers [un devenir de l’amant lui-même, de l’amour en l’amante(e), entre amants]. Instead it is now a teleological quest for what is deemed the highest reality and often situated in a transcendence inaccessible to our condition as mortals. Immortality is put off until death and is not counted as one of our constant tasks as mortals, as a transmutation that is endlessly incumbent on us here and now, as a possibility inscribed in a body capable of divine becoming. Beauty of body and beauty of soul become hierarchized, and the love of women becomes the lot of those who, incapable of being creators in soul, are fecund in body and seek the immortality of their name perpetuated by their offspring.

. . . By far the greatest and most beautiful form of wisdom (said she) is that which has to do with regulating states and
households, and has the name, no doubt, of “temperance” and “justice.” (209)

( . . . de beaucoup la plus considérable et la plus belle manifes-
tation de la pensée étant celle qui concerne l’ordonnance des
Etats comme de tout établissement, et dont le nom, on le sait,
est tempérance aussi bien que justice.)

Amorous becomings, divine, immortal, are no longer left to their interme-
diary current. They are qualified, hierarchized. And, in the extreme case, love dies. In the universe of determinations, there will be contests, competi-
tions, amorous duties—the beloved or love being the prize. The lovers disap-
ppear. Our subsequent tradition has even taught us the interdiction or the fu-
tility of being lovers outside of procreation.

Yet Diotima had begun by asserting that the most divine act is “the union
of man and woman, a divine affair.” What she asserted then accorded with
what she said about the function of love as an intermediary remaining inter-
mediary, a demon. It seems that in the course of her speech she reduces a bit
this demonic, mediumlike function of love; so that it is no longer really a de-
mon, but an intention, a reduction to intention, to the teleology of human
will. Already subjected to a doctrine with fixed goals and not to an immanen-
t flourishing of the divine in the flesh. Irreducible mediator, at once physical
and spiritual, between lovers; and not already codified duty, will, desire.
Love invoked as a demon in a method toward the beautiful and good often
disappears from the speech, reappearing only in art, “painting”, in the
form(s) of love inciting to eroticism and, perhaps, in the shape of angels. Is
love itself split between eros and agape? Yet, in order for lovers to be able to
love each other, there must be, between them, Love.

There remains what has been said about the philosopher-love. But why
would not philosopher Love be a lover of the other? Only of the Other? Of an
inaccessible transcendent? In any case, this would already be an ideal that
suppresses love qua demonic. Love becomes political wisdom, wisdom in reg-
lulating the city, not the intermediary state that inhabits lovers and transports
them from the condition of mortals to that of immortals. Love becomes a sort
of raison d’état. Love founds a family, takes care of children, including the
children which citizens are. The more its objective is distanced from an indi-
vidual becoming, the more valuable it is. Its stake is lost in immortal good
and beauty as collective goods. The family is preferable to the generation of
lovers, between lovers. Adopted children are preferable to others. This,
moreover, is how it comes to pass that love between men is superior to love be-
tween man and woman. Carnal procreation is suspended in favor of the
engendering of beautiful and good things. Immortal things. That, surpris-
ingly, is the view of Diotima. At least as translated through the words uttered
by Socrates.
The beings most gifted in wisdom go directly to that end. Most begin with physical beauty and "... must love one single object [physical form of beauty], and thereof must engender fair discourses ..." (210) (par n'aime qu'un unique beau corps et par engendrer à cette occasion de beaux discours.) If the teaching is right, that must be so. But whoever becomes attached to one body must learn that beauty is in many bodies. After having pursued beauty in one perceptible form, he must learn that the same beauty resides in all bodies; he will

... abate his violent love of one, disdaining this and deeming it a trifle, and will become a lover of all fair objects. ... (210)

("[devenir] un amant de tous les beaux corps et détendra l'impétuosité de son amour à l'égard d'un seul individu; car, un tel amour, il en est venu à le dédaigner et à en faire peu de cas.")

From the attraction to a single beautiful body he passes, then, to many; and thence to the beauty residing in souls. Thus he learns that beauty is not found univocally in the body and that someone of an ugly bodily appearance can be beautiful and gentle of soul; that to be just is to know how to care for that person and to engender beautiful discourses for him. Love thus passes insensibly into love of works [œuvres]. The passion for beautiful bodies is transmuted into the discovery of beauty in knowledges. That which liberates from the attachment to only one master opens onto the immense ocean of the beautiful, and leads to the birth of numerous and sublime discourses, as well as to thoughts inspired by a boundless love of wisdom. Until the resulting force and development permit the lover to envision a certain unique knowledge (210). This marvelous beauty is perceptible, perhaps, by whoever has followed the road just described, by whoever has passed through the different stages step by step. He will have, then, the vision of a beauty whose existence is "... eternal, not growing up or perishing, increasing or decreasing" ([dont] l'existence est éternelle, étrangère à la génération comme à la corruption, à l'accroissement comme au décroissement") and which, besides, is absolutely beautiful:

not beautiful in one point and ugly in another, nor beautiful in this place and ugly in that, as if beautiful to some, to others ugly; again, this beauty will not be revealed to him in the semblance of a face, or hands, or any other element of the body, nor in any form of speech or knowledge, nor yet as if it appertained to any other being, or creature, for example, upon earth, or in the sky, or elsewhere; no, it will be seen as beauty in and for itself, consistent with itself in uniformity for ever, whereas all other beauties share it in such fashion that, while
they are ever born and perish, that eternal beauty, never waxing, never waning, never is impaired. . . . (210-211)

(pas belle à ce point de vue et laide à cet autre, pas davantage à tel moment et non à tel autre, ni non plus belle en comparaison avec ceci, laide en comparaison avec cela, ni non plus belle en tel lieu, laide en tel autre, en tant que belle pour certains hommes, laide pour certains autres; pas davantage encore cette beauté ne se montrera à lui pourvue par exemple d’un visage, ni de mains, ni de quoi que ce soit d’autre qui soit une partie du corps; ni non plus sous l’aspect de quelque raisonnement ou encore quelque connaissance; pas davantage comme ayant en quelque être distinct quelque part son existence, en un vivant par exemple, qu’il soit de la terre ou du ciel, ou bien en quoi que ce soit d’autre; mais bien plutôt elle se montrera à lui en elle-même, et par elle-même, éternellement unie à elle-même dans l’unicité de la nature formelle, tandis que les autres beaux objets participent tous de la nature dont il s’agit en une telle façon que, ces autres objets venant à l’existence ou cessant d’exister, il n’en résulte dans la réalité dont il s’agit aucune augmentation, aucune diminution, ni non plus aucune sorte d’altération.)

To attain this sublime beauty, one must begin with the love of young men. Starting with their natural beauty, one must, step by step, raise oneself to supernatural beauty: from beautiful bodies one must pass to beautiful pursuits; then to beautiful sciences, and finally to that sublime science that is supernatural beauty alone, and that allows knowledge of the essence of beauty in isolation (211). This contemplation is what gives direction and taste to life. “. . . It will not appear to you to be according to the measure of gold and raiment, or of lovely boys and striplings. . . . “ (211) (“Ni l’or ou la toilette, ni la beauté des jeunes garçons ou des jeunes hommes ne peuvent entrer en parallèle avec cette découverte.”) And whoever has perceived “beauty divine in its own single nature” (211) (“le beau divin dans l’unicité de sa nature formelle”), what can he still look at? Having contemplated “the beautiful with that by which it can be seen” (211) (le beau au moyen de ce par quoi il est visible”), beyond all simulacra, he is united with it and is really virtuous; since he has perceived “authentic reality” (“réel authentique”) he becomes dear to the divine and immortal.

This person would, then, have perceived what I shall call a sensible transcendental, the material texture of beauty. He would have “seen” the very spatiality of the visible, the real before all reality, all forms, all truth of particular sensations or of constructed idealities. Would he have contemplated the “nature” (“nature”) of the divine? This is the support of the fabrication of the
transcendent in its different modes, all of which, according to Diotima, are reached by the same propaedeutic: the love of beauty. Neither the good nor the true nor justice nor the government of the city would occur without beauty. And its strongest ally is love. Love therefore deserves to be venerated. And Diotima asks that her words be considered as a celebration and praise of Love.

In the second part of her speech, she used Love itself as a means. She cancelled out its intermediary function and subjected it to a telos. The power [puissance] of her method seems less evident to me here than at the beginning of her speech, when she made love the mediator of a becoming with no objective other than becoming. Perhaps Diotima is still saying the same thing. But her method, in the second part, risks losing its irreducible character and being replaced by a meta-physics. Unless what she proposes to contemplate, beauty itself, is understood as that which confuses the opposition between immanence and transcendence. An always already sensible horizon at the depths of which everything would appear. But it would be necessary to go back over the whole speech again to discover it in its enchantment.

NOTES

2. This and subsequent quotations from The Symposium are rendered in the English translation of Lane Cooper in Plato (1938) pp. 252-263. References in French, which follow in parentheses, are Irigaray's citations from the French translation of Léon Robin in Platon (1950).
3. In this and subsequent passages "Love" or "love" is rendered in English with the masculine pronoun—a translation required by French grammar. "L'Amour," capitalized, means "the God of Love"—Cupid or Eros, and is always masculine in French. "L'amour" uncapitalized, means "love" and is also standardly masculine in French. "Eros" and "Love" are interchangeable in English translations of most of Diotima's speech; a similar interchangeability exists in French. Historically, "l'amour" was feminine in French until it was made conventionally masculine to accord with Latin use. In poetry, uses of "l'amour" in the feminine persist to this day; but "l'amour" was not grammatically feminine in the passages from Plato that Irigaray was citing. Irigaray's argument in this essay can be read as an exploration of the ethical implications of these grammatical points. Cf. Grévisse (1964): 190-192. [Translator's note]
4. Irigaray is here exploiting the very characteristics of French grammar which exemplify her argument. "L'amant" must be masculine when any of the lovers is male; but it is also possible to specify that the lover is female, as in the title of her Amante Marine ([Female] Lover from the Seas), 1980. [Translator's note]

REFERENCES