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Shoes: An Essay on How Plato's *Symposium* Begins · Anne Carson

The beginning has as its purpose to set us on the road
that leads to the end.

It directs our attention

to our feet
and asks us to remember
the art of stepping along.

The *Symposium*, for example, begins with Apollodoros
going up the road to town (172a).

He is stopped by a voice from behind

and the story of the *Symposium* unfolds.

Stories and roads have something in common,
an important delusion:

that this is the only way to get there.

But what story is inevitable?

Does a road make itself?

“It was and it was not the case” is how a good story begins.

Plato begins the *Symposium* with an anecdote about feet.

“For he said that he met Sokrates coming from the bath

and wearing shoes—

which is something that man did very infrequently” (174a).

So Apollodoros begins. Now it is a notorious feature

of Platonic narrative to map its own roads well.

Apollodoros, speaking to unnamed companions, is

retelling a story he told the day before yesterday to Glaukos,

who had already heard it from someone who heard it from Phoenix, but which Apollodoros heard from the one who told it to Phoenix, who had been an eyewitness.

Why does Apollodoros emphasize that Sokrates had shoes on?
Perhaps because Aristodemos emphasized it in his telling.
Why does Aristodemos notice shoes? Perhaps

because Aristodemos himself was someone
“who went always barefoot” (173b).
A narrator picks out details that are important to himself

and shape his tale.
Some of these are as obvious as shoes.
Others may escape our notice although their effect on the telling

is powerful—like for example the fact that,
at the time the *Symposium* took place,
Aristodemos was himself “one of the chief among Sokrates’ lovers”

(173b). What difference does it make to the *Symposium*
that we witness it entirely through the eyes of a lover?
It is a consideration of at least historical importance,

insofar as the universal erotic experience of the Greek tradition
up to Plato was witnessed in this way.
It is a lover’s experience seen from a lover’s point of view.

Consider the Greek lyric poets of the 6th and 5th centuries BC,
who first named,
defined

and venerated erotic love as an all powerful divinity:
they consistently identify Eros with the lover and represent him
as a damaging external force or incontestable enemy.

This Eros victimizes the lover in exactly the same way the lover victimizes his beloved.

He represents compulsion

and pain and loss of soul's integrity.

Plato seems concerned to rethink this concept and to move beyond traditional typologies of

lover,

beloved

and erotic use. He uses

Sokrates himself as a main mechanism of rethinking.

Part of Sokrates' dramatic function in the *Symposium*, therefore,

is to invert and confuse the traditional roles of lover and beloved, a behaviour about which we hear Alkibiades complain in the latter part of the dialogue:

" . . . And let me tell you I'm not the only one he handles in this way— Charmides and Glaukon and Euthydemos and any number of others are so seduced by his love tricks

that he ends up being treated as the boy toy not the man!" (222b)

His unique erotic fluidity permits Sokrates to impersonate a radically untraditional concept of love;

later in the dialogue

Diotima will describe Eros as a force *metaxu*—

"moving between "

lover and beloved,

moving between human beings and God,

bound by no convention or definition (202c).

Just like Eros, Sokrates is *hikanos amphotera* (176c)—
“fit either way”—
capable of being lover or beloved,

drunk and sober,
mortal and immortal,
well shod or barefoot,

all at the same *Symposium*.
But then it is a radically untraditional symposium.
Plato makes it clear from the beginning that no one at this party

has his own shoes on.
Just as the guests recline for dinner, the host (Agathon)
says something bizarre:

“Come boys—it’s *your* turn to rule *us*.
Set out whatever you like, you are under no orders
from anyone (I must be crazy!)—

imagine that I myself and these gentlemen here
have come to dinner at your invitation: feast us!
Earn our praise!” (175b)

Role reversal is the order of the evening.
Agathon’s order is addressed to his servants
but the Greek word he uses for “boy slave” (*pais*)

is also the conventional term for “beloved boy”
in a homoerotic relationship.
Agathon’s light liberation of his boys

predicts Sokrates’ attitude to erotic role-playing in general
and also Plato’s specific revision of erotic values in the *Symposium*.
It marks the beginning

of a conversation in which Sokrates will tell
how we can set love free
from all enslavement

to personal desire or private narrative.
It sets us on the road to a new story of Eros—
an Eros who, incidentally,

“wears no shoes” (*anupodetos* 202e)
or so we hear from Apollodoros
who heard it from Aristodemos

who heard it from Sokrates
who heard it from Diotima
whose feet remain a mystery.