

## FEUERBACH'S 'DAS GASTMAHL DES PLATON' AND PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

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### *Abstract.-*

In 'Das Gastmahl des Platon' (1869) Anselm Feuerbach depicts the scene in Plato's Symposium in which a drunken Alcibiades, accompanied by a band of revelers, enters the house of the poet Agathon. In this paper I offer an account of the significance of 'Das Gastmahl' in the light of three aims we have reason to attribute to its creator: (1) to recreate a famous scene from ancient Greek literature, making extensive use of (then) recent results of archaeological research; (2) to convey a sense of the nobility of the ancient Greeks; and (3) to offer a visual contrast of reason with desire. I also argue that as he set out to accomplish these objectives Feuerbach displayed considerable indifference to the contents of Plato's dialogue. Thus what 'Das Gastmahl' offers us is less 'Plato's symposium' and more 'Feuerbach's symposium', a visually striking but in some respects unfaithful representation of the Platonic original.

### *Resumen.-*

En "Das Gastmahl des Platon" (1869), Anselm Feuerbach describe la escena del simposio de Platón en la que un alcoholizado Alcibíades, acompañado de una banda de juerguistas, irrumpe en la casa del poeta Agatón. En esta comunicación, presento una interpretación del significado de "El banquete" a la luz de tres propósitos atribuidos a su creador: (1) la recreación de la famosa escena a partir de la literatura Griega antigua, en la que se consideraron los por aquel entonces recientes hallazgos arqueológicos; (2) la transmisión de una idea de nobleza aplicable a los antiguos griegos; y (3) la intención de ofrecer un contraste visual entre la razón y el deseo. Mi comunicación discute asimismo el hecho de que al tratar de cumplir tales objetivos, Feuerbach mostrara una considerable indiferencia hacia los contenidos de los diálogos de Platón. "Das Gastmahl" nos presenta así no tanto el simposio de Platón sino más bien el simposio de Feuerbach, una representación visualmente impactante pero en cierto sentido infiel al original platónico.

*Key words:* Plato, Feuerbach, Das Gastmahl, Symposium.

*Palabras clave:* Platón, Feuerbach, Das Gastmahl, Simposio.

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## SETTING THE SCENE.

‘Das Gastmahl des Platon’<sup>1</sup> of Anselm Feuerbach depicts the moment in Plato’s *Symposium* when a drunken Alcibiades, accompanied by a band of revelers, enters the house of the poet Agathon (fig. 1).

On the left we see a partially clad Alcibiades descending the stairs, right arm draped around a female companion and left arm extended in greeting to Agathon. Three men accompany Alcibiades, two of them carrying torches, while a half-dressed woman plays the tambourine. Two *putti* enter alongside Alcibiades, one holding up a wreath and the other playing a double-flute. In the center, a laurel-crowned Agathon holds a cup in his left hand and extends his right hand in welcome to his guests. Sitting next to Agathon is an older man who observes the late arrivals while lifting his left leg. On the right, seven symposiasts gather around the philosopher Socrates who appears to be pondering remarks being made to him by a companion. Two smoking torches and two oil lamps, one entwined with a snake, illuminate the richly decorated dining chamber<sup>2</sup>. Peter Paul Rubens, Pietro Testa, and Asmus Jakob Carstens had previously produced sketches based on Plato’s *Symposium*, but none of those works approached ‘Das Gastmahl’ in either complexity of design or richness of detail<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, among works of art devoted to philosophical subjects, only Raphael’s ‘School of Athens’ and Jacques-Louis David’s ‘Death of Socrates’ offer images of comparable complexity and interest.

It has never been clear, however, exactly what Feuerbach hoped to achieve through the creation of ‘Das Gastmahl’. We do know that he considered the work his *magnum*

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<sup>1</sup> The first version of ‘Das Gastmahl’, a watercolor sketch, dates from 1865-66 and is today in private hands; the second (1869) version is in the collection of the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe, Germany; the third (1873) version is in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin. Visiting Google (by typing in ‘Feuerbach Das Gastmahl’) and selecting ‘Images’ will provide a view of the second and third versions, one of the artist’s many self-portraits, the Feuerbach family tree, his home in Speyer, and much more. For reasons that will soon be clear, I focus my discussion on the second (1869) version.

<sup>2</sup> The identity of the other symposiasts remains a matter of dispute. One plausible approach, defended by Heinrich Meier (in his Introduction to Benardete, S., 1994, 1-2): proposes a correlation between visual proximity and the degree of personal attachment and takes the snake-entwined lamp as a sign of the god Aesculapius which marks the presence of the physician Eryximachus. This leads to the identification of the figure just to the left and behind Agathon as Pausanias, the figure half-hidden in the shadows along the wall as Aristodemus, and the person whose head is visible just next to Eryximachus as Phaedrus. This leaves Aristophanes as the figure seated directly opposite Socrates. Meier also speculates that the eager observer shown on the far right-hand side is Plato. For other approaches see Ahlers-Kestermann, F., *Anselm Feuerbach, Das Gastmahl des Platon*, Berlin 1946, 8, and Keisch, C., *Um Anselm Feuerbachs ‘Gastmahl’: Katalog, Ausstellung in der Alten Nationalgalerie auf der Museumsinsel vom 15. Juli bis zum 13. September 1992*, Berlin 1992, 8.

<sup>3</sup> These works date from 1601-02, 1648, and 1793 respectively. For detailed discussions, see McGrath, E., “The drunken Alcibiades: Ruben’s picture of Plato’s *Symposium*”: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 46, 1983, 228-35, and Cropper, E., *Pietro Testa*, Philadelphia 1988.

*opus* and was deeply disappointed when critics proclaimed it drab and lifeless<sup>4</sup>. A subsequent reworking (so enlivened as to border on the grotesque) provoked an equally negative response. Clearly, neither of the full-sized versions of 'Das Gastmahl' brought Feuerbach the critical acclaim he had hoped would be his. We also know that in fashioning 'Das Gastmahl' Feuerbach made use of various pre-existing materials. He based his depiction of Socrates on an elderly painter he had observed sitting in a restaurant<sup>5</sup>, and he created the image of Alcibiades and his companions before he conceived of 'Das Gastmahl' in its entirety<sup>6</sup>. In format, though not in substance, the work resembles Testa's 1648 '*Symposium*'<sup>7</sup> and, to a lesser degree, Carstens' 1793 'Alcibiades places a crown on the head of Socrates'<sup>8</sup>. But uncertainty remains concerning what truth, lesson, or message Feuerbach intended for his monumental work to convey to its viewers.

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<sup>4</sup> Feuerbach wrote: 'This work, which has already preoccupied me for years...has grown colossal in my mind, as a monumental deed, which perhaps more than any other painting has to make me and posterity aware of my artistic ego... as a triumph of my art, the serene bliss of that banquet hovers before me day and night, whose completion will be a redemption of my talent' (quoted in Meier, H., 'Introduction' in Benardete 1994, 10). Yet one critic likened 'Das Gastmahl' to 'a sea of ice that forced itself undesired into a perfume shop' while a second described it as 'an extreme of ugliness in form and color which borders on vulgarity and filth...as if Feuerbach put his paint brush into ink and calcium water instead of color' (Bratke, E./ Schimpf, H., *Anselm Friedrich Feuerbach: 1829-1880*, Koblenz-Ehrenbreitstein 1980, 10).

<sup>5</sup> Mentioned in a memoir by the Heidelberg theologian Adolf Hausrath (quoted in Muthmann, F., 'Alkibiades und Agathon. Über die antiken Grundlagen von Anselm Feuerbachs "Gastmahl des Plato"': *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 14, 1951, 97-98).

<sup>6</sup> In his *Vermächtniss* ('Testament') Feuerbach wrote that 'Bei dem Symposion war die bacchische Gruppe des Alkibiades lange schon vorhanden; erst bei dem Suchen eines ihr entsprechenden Gegengewichtes fiel mir in plötzlicher Eingebung das Gastmahl des Platon ein' (Feuerbach, A., *Ein Vermächtniss von Anselm Feuerbach*, Vienna 1885, 82). Bratke and Schimpf state that the 1865 drawing consisted of two sheets of paper joined together behind the back of Agathon.

<sup>7</sup> Testa's '*Symposium*' also featured a sensuous Alcibiades on the far left, with Agathon (depicted through the use of the standard image of the poet Homer) seated near by, looking directly at Alcibiades, with Socrates attempting to continue with his philosophical discourse. E. Cropper makes a persuasive case that in his '*Symposium*' Testa was constructing a 'beauty triangle': 'Poetry gazes adoringly at Beauty, whose virtues are sung by Philosophy, and Beauty in turn praises Philosophy, although without the adoration it bestows on Beauty that makes it immortal' (Cropper, *Pietro Testa*, 248). But since Feuerbach chose to keep Socrates' distinctive (Silenus-like) face hidden from view it seems unlikely that he was seeking merely to reiterate Testa's point. For an image of the Testa sketch see the article by McGrath or visit Google Images by entering 'Pietro Testa'. For the Carstens sketch (now in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen), see Trapp, M. (ed.), *Socrates in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Aldershot 2007, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Three points of similarity are the black and white patterned floor, the double columns in the background, and the classical works of art displayed on the left and right sides.

In this paper I offer an account of ‘Das Gastmahl’ in the light of three aims we have reason to attribute to its creator: (1) to recreate a famous scene from ancient Greek literature, making extensive use of (then) recent results of archaeological research; (2) to convey a sense of the nobility of the ancient Greeks; and (3) to offer a visual contrast of reason with desire. I will also argue that as he set out to accomplish these objectives Feuerbach displayed considerable indifference to the contents of Plato’s *Symposium*. If I am right on this last point then what ‘Das Gastmahl’ offers us is less ‘Plato’s symposium’ and more ‘Feuerbach’s symposium’, a visually striking but in some respects unfaithful rendering of the Platonic original<sup>9</sup>.

### A READING OF ‘DAS GASTMAHL DES PLATON’.

Even a cursory reading of Plato’s *Symposium* will reveal that in fashioning ‘Das Gastmahl’ Feuerbach took considerable liberties with Plato’s text<sup>10</sup>. According to Plato, the group of friends who gathered at Agathon’s house agreed to give a series of speeches in praise of Erôs (the god of love or ‘passionate desire’), proceeding

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<sup>9</sup> Thus leading me to dissent from the account given in Henderson, J., “(At) the Visual Point of Reception: Anselm Feuerbach’s *Das Gastmahl des Platon; or Philosophy in Paint*”, in: Martindale and Thomas 2006, 274-87. Henderson there holds that Feuerbach employed visual structure in order to create an ekphrastic response to the Platonic original, in the process highlighting the role played by the artist as one who plays host to philosophical wisdom. While Henderson concedes that Feuerbach’s portrayal is in some respects at odds with Plato’s account (e.g. given Plato’s description of Agathon’s location at the symposium it would have been impossible for him to answer the door), he maintains that the two works explore similar themes e.g. both engage in repositioning their characters, both play with the idea of layers of narration, and, in different ways, both call into question the adequacy of the visual image). The first two claims rely heavily on taking the changes introduced in the 1873 version as a basis on which to interpret the 1869 version, but it seems clear that those changes were provoked by criticisms of the earlier work. As Muthmann („Alkibiades und Agathon...“, 3) observes: ‘[the third version differs] by an increase of accessory parts which disturbs the clear, peaceful overall impression. For these reasons, for examination or study, the [1869] Karlsruhe painting must be considered the best and most authoritative version.’ The third line of argument attributes an epistemological view to Feuerbach that is at odds with his view of himself as devoted from an early age to ‘eine Classicität auf menschlich Wahres und Grosses’ (Feuerbach, *Ein Vermächtniss...*, 1). Henderson, J., “Anselm Feuerbach’s *Das Gastmahl des Platon*”, in: Trapp 2007, 82-83/ 87, covers some of the same territory but identifies several respects in which Feuerbach’s depiction of the event contrasts with Plato’s (e.g. its departure from classic sympotic practice and the relocation of Agathon from his sofa to center stage. Henderson appears to regard ‘Das Gastmahl’ as contesting rather than replicating Plato’s account. For reasons that will soon become clear, I regard it as doing neither.

<sup>10</sup> Plato described the scene as follows: ‘Not long after [the loud knocking], they heard the voice of Alcibiades in the courtyard; he was very drunk and shouting loudly, asking where Agathon was and demanding to be brought to him. He was brought in, supported by the flute girl and some of the other people in his group. He stood by the door, wearing a thick garland of ivy and violets, with masses of ribbons trailing over his head...’ (*Symposium* 212d-e, following the translation in Gill 1999).

around the room *epi dexia* or 'to the right' (177d), i.e. in an anti-clockwise direction<sup>11</sup>. As the dialogue unfolds it becomes clear that Phaedrus occupies the top position (typically the couch nearest the door). Next to him are (probably) two unidentified guests, then Pausanias, then Aristophanes, then Eryximachus and Aristodemus together on a single couch, and finally Agathon and Socrates also sharing a couch<sup>12</sup>. Even though considerable disagreement surrounds the identity of the persons depicted in 'Das Gastmahl' it seems clear that Feuerbach made no attempt to recreate the seating arrangements Plato described<sup>13</sup>. Two of Feuerbach's symposiasts occupy the bench in the foreground, four others are seated behind the bench in upright positions, and the symposiast just behind Agathon (perhaps Pausanias) appears to sit on a chair. A figure in the shadows (perhaps Aristodemus) stands rather than sits. Clearly we do not have the typical sympotic space in which an *epi dexia* sequence of speeches might have taken place—i.e. a square or rectangular-shaped chamber with couches or sofas (*klinai*) lining the walls, each couch holding one or more recumbent participants<sup>14</sup>. Feuerbach has also deprived Alcibiades of his 'garland of ivy and violets, with masses of ribbons', converted the flute girl into flute and wreath *putti*, and added a tambourine player. Perhaps the most significant innovation is the relocation of Agathon to the center of the scene, removing him from the couch he has been sharing (and will continue to share) with Socrates. Contrary to what a reading of Plato's *Symposium* might lead one to expect, pride of place on this occasion belongs neither to Alcibiades nor to Socrates but to Agathon<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> The detail is not devoid of philosophical significance; here as often elsewhere in the *Symposium*, physical movement anticipates and parallels the path of intellectual discovery. See further Reeve, D., "A Study in Violets: Alcibiades in the Symposium", in: Leshner/ Nails/ Sheffield 2006, 145-46.

<sup>12</sup> For a defense of this view of the seating arrangement, see Nails, D., "Tragedy Off-Stage", in: Leshner/ Nails/ Sheffield 2006, 179-207, and von Blanckenhagen, P., "Stage and Actors in Plato's *Symposium*": *GR&BStud.*, 33, 1992, 51-68.

<sup>13</sup> In the catalogue description he wrote for the 1869 Munich exhibition Feuerbach mistakenly included Glaucon (who appears as a character in Plato's *Republic*) among the participants in Agathon's symposium, a small error but perhaps an indication that it had been some time since Feuerbach had looked at Plato's text.

<sup>14</sup> See the accounts of the ancient Greek sympotic space in Lang, M., *Socrates in the Agora*. Princeton 1978; Berquist, B., "Sympotic Space: A Functional Aspect of Greek Dining Rooms" in Murray, O., *Sympotica*, Oxford 1990, 37-65; and Pantel, P., *La cité au banquet*, Paris 1992.

<sup>15</sup> That Plato was seeking to portray Agathon in an unfavorable light is suggested by the 'over the top' character of Agathon's speech, his inability to respond effectively to Socrates' questions concerning the nature of desire, and his admission (at 201b) that 'It looks, Socrates, as though I didn't know what I was talking about.' It also seems to reflect poorly on the other symposiasts that after Agathon delivered his poetic extravaganza 'there were shouts of admiration from everyone present' (198a). Feuerbach has not been the only person to regard Agathon highly. In the notes on his 'Serenade for Violin after Plato's *Symposium*' the composer Leonard Bernstein stated that he found Agathon's speech 'the most moving in the entire dialogue'.

This is not to say that Feuerbach was uninterested in achieving historical verisimilitude. In fact, ‘Das Gastmahl’ evokes the ancient world in many ways. The satyr and dancing maenads shown on the back wall are similar to the wall paintings Feuerbach would have seen during his travels in Italy (especially the frescoes in the house of the Vettii in Pompeii). The painting on the right-hand side of the back wall depicts the marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne with the happy couple resembling the figures of Apollo and his companion that appear on the East frieze of the Parthenon; the leg-lifting ‘Pausanias’ resembles a leg-lifting Ares in the same location<sup>16</sup>. Feuerbach’s depiction of Alcibiades and the two children has been linked with the image of Dionysus accompanied by a boy-Pan and boy-satyr on a Roman sarcophagus in the collection of the Naples National Museum, as well as with the design of a Hellenistic marble relief traditionally entitled ‘Youth among the Courtesans’, also in the Naples Museum. The division of the scene into two separate groups, the placement of a dominant figure in the center, and the image of the figure seated on the bench leaning toward Agathon have been linked with a third Hellenistic frieze in the Naples Museum<sup>17</sup>. It has also been suggested<sup>18</sup> that Feuerbach modeled his Alcibiades on the Vatican Apollo Belvedere (the subject of a book by Feuerbach senior). Some have seen in the predominantly grey tone of the work an evocation of ancient statuary<sup>19</sup>, and more than one viewer has detected in Agathon’s pose some suggestion of a Roman emperor<sup>20</sup>. We also have some evidence of Feuerbach’s attitude toward classical antiquity in his mother’s comment: ‘That which one constructs with effort from books and reflection, the consciousness of that which is beautiful, I can even say classical, to be sure in the old and good sense—that became for him a spontaneous act’<sup>21</sup>. All

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<sup>16</sup> As noted in Froning, H., “Ästhetik und Antikenverständnis bei Anselm Feuerbach“: *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch* 42, 1981, 164-66.

<sup>17</sup> Muthmann, “Alkibiades und Agathon...”, 98-100.

<sup>18</sup> By Marianne Küffner, cited in Bratke/ Schimpf, *Anselm Friedrich Feuerbach...*, 202. Feuerbach observed the work first-hand in October of 1856 (Finke, U., *German Painting: from Romanticism to Expressionism*, Boulder, Colorado 1974, 116).

<sup>19</sup> ‘The format of the picture is based on classical wall-painting as seen by the artist on his frequent excursions to Naples, Herculaneum and Pompeii; the figures are arranged in the form of a relief and the dominant grey tone is a further conscious attempt to conjure up the spirit of antiquity...’ (Finke, *German Painting...*, 134).

<sup>20</sup> Compare, for example, the Via Labicana Augustus, a representation of the Roman emperor Augustus as Pontifex Maximus. In a letter to his mother of 11 November 1867 Feuerbach wrote: ‘My preliminary work on ‘Das Gastmahl’ will be devoted entirely to the left side, the classical, especially Roman part; the rest can be completed anywhere and at any time. (Muthmann, “Alkibiades und Agathon...”, 98).

<sup>21</sup> ‘Was man aus Büchern und Nachdenken sich mühsam aufbaut, das Bewusstsein dessen, was schön ist, ich kann auch sagen klassisch, und zwar im rechten alten und guten Sinne—das ist bei ihm zur freien Tat geworden’ (quoted in Muthmann, “Alkibiades und Agathon...”, 110).

this suggests that one of Feuerbach's main aims in 'Das Gastmahl' was to depict the quintessential ancient symposium, making extensive use of the knowledge of classical works of art he had acquired during his stay in Italy.

Feuerbach was of course not the only artist of his time to engage in such an enterprise. Near the outset of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a group of German artists known as 'the Nazarenes' left for Italy and many others would follow them to the south in search of warmer temperatures and new sources of inspiration. Many of these 'Deutsch-Römer', as they were called, made use of the results of contemporary classical studies and recent archaeological findings in fashioning their images of the ancient world and its inhabitants<sup>22</sup>. We should therefore see Feuerbach's 'Das Gastmahl' as one of the many works on classical subjects fashioned by German artists who lived and worked in Italy during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Especially relevant comparison works would include the 1828 'Italia and Germania' of Friedrich Overbeck, and the 1868 'Bacchus among the Muses' of (the Berlin born) Bonaventura Gennelli.

Attention to the historical context in which Feuerbach created 'Das Gastmahl' can also help us to understand a second message he intended for his work to convey. We can infer from his criticism of Testa's 'Symposium' that Feuerbach regarded the attributes of 'depth', 'nobility' and 'perfection of form' as essential to an adequate realization of the event<sup>23</sup>. Testa's Agathon, based on a traditional image of the poet Homer, is an elderly, bearded, and wizened individual who is visibly agitated by the entrance of a naked, dancing Alcibiades. Feuerbach's Agathon, in sharp contrast, is smooth-shaven and handsome, and a model of dignified self-possession in the face of an unexpected development. The grey tones in Agathon's clothing and his statuesque pose serve to set him apart from his companions as well as to suggest a calm state of mind.

Feuerbach's representation of Agathon reflects the aesthetic values introduced into European arts and letters a century earlier through the writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann<sup>24</sup>. Winckelmann's basic thesis was that in order to achieve an ideal

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<sup>22</sup> Vaughan in Hartley, E./ Hughes, H./ Schuster, P.-K/ Vaughan, W., *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790-1990*, Stuttgart 1995, 211. See also Finke, *German Painting...*, 31 ff.

<sup>23</sup> 'Some individual aspects of [Testa's] representation, such as his creativity, were so well manifested that they probably could not be better rendered; but it [the subject] would need more depth, ennoblement, and a more flexible perfection of form' (quoted in Muthmann, "Alcibiades und Agathon...", 98).

<sup>24</sup> In the *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1754) and *History of Ancient Art* (1764) Froning ("Ästhetik und Antikenverständnis...", 163) comments on the sources of Feuerbach's 'classicism': 'Das bedeutet einen bewussten Verzicht auf Novellistisches. Darin erweist auch er sich der von Winckelmann entwickelten Betrachtungsweise der Klassik verpflichtet, von der Künstler und Gelehrte bis ins 20. Jahrhundert hinein nachhaltig beeinflusst wurden. Nach Winckelmanns Urteil bildet den Gipfel allen Kunstschaffens die griechische Kunst, die als unerreichbarer Höhepunkt normatives Vorbild und richtungsweisend für das zu verkörpernde Schönheitsideal sein sollte.'

beauty the artist of today must seek to emulate the qualities of ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’ embodied in ancient works of art. As he explained in his 1755 work, *On the Imitation of Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks*:

The last and most eminent characteristic of the Greek works is a noble simplicity and sedate grandeur (edle Einfalt und stille Grösse) in gesture and expression. As the bottom of the sea lies peaceful beneath a foaming surface, a great soul lies sedate beneath the strife of passions in Greek figures<sup>25</sup>.

In his *History of Greek Art* Winckelmann emphasized the importance of the quality of stillness or quietness of manner:

“Stillness is the state most proper to beauty, as it is to the sea, and experience shows that the most beautiful beings are of a still and well-mannered nature” (204).

And as to the requisite facial features:

“In the appearance of the face, the so-called Greek profile is the chief characteristic of a high beauty. This profile consists of a nearly straight or gently concave line which describes the forehead and nose on youthful heads...and if on a face seen from side, a bad profile appears, one can spare oneself the trouble of looking for something beautiful in it” (210).

Each of these key notions—‘noble simplicity’, ‘quiet grandeur’, ‘stillness’, ‘well-mannered’, and ‘Greek profile’—fits Feuerbach’s Agathon perfectly.

Agathon’s statuesque dignity, moreover, sets the tone for the entire occasion, as is evident in Feuerbach’s use of grey under-layering throughout the work. Despite the tumult caused by Alcibiades’ arrival, most of the symposiasts remain absorbed in talk and reflection, to some extent screened by Agathon and his companion. The quality of serenity is evident in other works of Feuerbach, most notably in the three versions of his ‘Iphigenia’ (1862, 1870, and 1875) where a seated pose and use of grey tones throughout contribute to a sense of quiet dignity.

Finally, no reading of ‘Das Gastmahl’ would be satisfactory that failed to consider the significance of its contrasting left and right-hand sections. Feuerbach’s friend and biographer Julius Allgeyer suggested that through this feature Feuerbach was seeking to express ‘the ethical contrast between sensual and intellectual life which dominates the nature of man’<sup>26</sup>, and many students of ‘Das Gastmahl’ have followed Allgeyer’s

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<sup>25</sup> Irwin, D., *Winckelmann: Writings on Art*, London 1972, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Allgeyer, quoted in Bratke/ Schimpf, *Anselm Friedrich Feuerbach...*, 2.



lead<sup>27</sup>. In some instances, as in Ecker's recent study, not one but many pairs of contrasts have been thought relevant<sup>28</sup>. Two points of contrast, however, are especially salient: (1) while the group around Alcibiades displays a high level of centrifugal energy and disorder (e.g. with some faces looking to the left and others looking to the right, some looking up and others looking down, some arms extended forward and others reaching back), the symposiasts seated around Socrates remain orderly (with three of them forming a precise equilateral triangle around Socrates); and (2) the individuals entering on the left are depicted in warm skin tones (including the two naked *tutti*, traditional icons of love), while those on the right are (nearly all) clad in subdued-colored clothing. The overall effect is an impression of two distinct zones of activity—one a domain in which the passions are on display and the other a domain in which rational thought holds sway. The description Feuerbach wrote for the 1869 exhibition suggests a reading along the same lines:

“In order to celebrate the victory of the prize-winning tragic poet Agathon, friends are gathered in his home... After the meal, while they were engaging in a witty and cheerful conversation about the nature of Eros—the most powerful and magnificent of gods—Alcibiades appears, returning from a nightly feast in the company of bacchantes and intoxicated from wine and desire. He comes to crown the poet who welcomes him graciously”<sup>29</sup>.

Thus while the symposiasts were engaged in *discussing* Eros, Alcibiades *manifested* the god in their midst. Alcibiades, therefore, represents both Eros and Dionysus; which is to say, the basic human desires for food, drink, and sex. And since Alcibiades serves as the visual foil to Socrates, the latter must be regarded as representing ‘none of the above’.

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<sup>27</sup> Finke, for example, states that ‘Feuerbach was concerned... to sum up the contrast between the life of the senses and that of the intellect.’ (Finke, *German Painting...*, 133). Similarly Keisch: “Feuerbach... represents here the opposition and reconciliation of intellectual reflection and sensual pleasure under the sign of the god Dionysus. The gold-crowned poet Agathon and the half-naked womanizer Alcibiades are two different aspects of the same artist’ (Keisch, *Um Anselm Feuerbachs ‘Gastmahl’...*, 98).

<sup>28</sup> Among them: movement versus statue-like calm, dynamic versus static, exuberant abundance versus meagerness, vitality versus continence, sensuous delirium versus chastity, extroverted versus introverted, Dionysian versus Apollonian, etc. (For the complete list see Ecker, J., *Anselm Feuerbach: Leben und Werk*, München 1991, 298).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Den Sieg des preisgekrönten Tragödiendichters Agathon zu feiern, sind in seinem Hause die Freunde versammelt... Während sie sich nach dem Mahle in sinnvollen und heiteren Wechselreden ergehen, über die Natur des mächtigsten und herrlichsten der Götter, des Eros, erscheint, von nächtlichem Feste heimkehrend, in baccischem Geleite der wein- und lustberauschte Alkibiades. Er kommt, den Dichter zu bekränzen, welcher ihm freundlichen Willkomm bietet (quoted in Bratke/ Schimpf, *Anselm Friedrich Feuerbach...*, 182).

When seen in the light of a contrast between Dionysian passion and Socratic rationality ‘Das Gastmahl’ might be thought to anticipate the Dionysian-Apollonian contrast Nietzsche would explore in his *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (published in 1872, three years after the exhibition of the first version of ‘Das Gastmahl’). According to Nietzsche, Greek tragedy was the product of two opposing elements in the ancient Greek spirit as reflected in the worship of the complementary deities Dionysus and Apollo. Associated with the former is orgiastic excess grounded in a fundamentally irrational view of life and the world; associated with the latter are impulses toward a rational grasp of the cosmos and the imposition of regular form. The contrast between reason and the passions as epitomized in the worship of Apollo and Dionysus had, however, been a feature of German thought and literature well before Nietzsche presented it as his personal revelation to mankind<sup>30</sup>. In some respects the distinction can be traced back to Schopenhauer’s *World as Will and Idea*, the first volume of which was published in 1819. Here too, then, we should see Feuerbach’s ‘Das Gastmahl’ as to some extent a product of its time and place; in offering a vision of antiquity that evoked the deities Apollo and Dionysus Feuerbach was operating in terms of a distinction that would have been well understood by his contemporaries. The message they would have taken away from ‘Das Gastmahl’, we may reasonably conclude, was that on one notable ancient occasion on which both reason and the passions were much in evidence, it was the poet Agathon who remained calm and self-possessed in the face of an unexpected development<sup>31</sup>.

### **FEUERBACH’S ‘DAS GASTMAHL’ AND PLATO’S SYMPOSIUM.**

How closely did Feuerbach’s depiction match up with Plato’s account? Certainly in his basic choice of subject Feuerbach gave honor to the *Symposium* and its most famous scene. There is also (so long as we are talking about **Plato’s** Socrates) some validity in Feuerbach’s representation of Socrates as an embodiment of a rationalist approach to life i.e. as one who sought ‘so far as possible to act on the basis of the

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<sup>30</sup> Baumer (Baumer, M., “Nietzsche and the Tradition of the Dionysian”, in: O’Flaherty, J./ Sellner, T./ Helm, R., *Studies in Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition*, Chapel Hill 1976, 165-189) recounts the earlier explorations of the distinction by Winckelmann, Hamann, Herder, Hölderlin, Novalis, and others; and then comments: ‘One can grant Nietzsche the primacy he asserts for himself only with relation to his “transformation” of the Dionysian into a “philosophical pathos”, that is, into a rhetorical cliché. He accomplished this so brilliantly and propagandized it so effectively, however, that we hardly remember anything more about the long and significant prehistory of the Dionysian in the nineteenth century, or the mighty epiphany of Dionysus in early German Romanticism’.

<sup>31</sup> Some have speculated that Agathon *qua* artist represents Feuerbach (Henderson, “(At) the Visual Point of Reception...”, 281 and Lesher, J., “Some Notable Afterimages of Plato’s Symposium”, in: Lesher/ Nails/ Sheffield 2006, 317), but I know of no evidence that confirms this hypothesis.

principle that seemed upon reflection to be the best' (*Crito* 46b). It has also been pointed out that in his use of contrasting elements Feuerbach was replicating an interest in opposites present in the *Symposium*, although the particular contrast of reason with desire does not appear to have been one of them<sup>32</sup>. However, 'Das Gastmahl' differs from Plato's *Symposium* in several significant respects.

We have already identified various un-Platonic elements in Feuerbach's representation of the dining chamber, the attributes and arrangement of the participants, and the choice of Agathon as the figure of central importance. But in linking Alcibiades with Dionysus and Eros, while placing Alcibiades in opposition with Socrates, Feuerbach also places 'Das Gastmahl' at cross purposes with one of the major themes developed in the *Symposium*, that of **Socrates** as the embodiment of *erôs* or 'passionate desire'. (This is made evident in the dialogue by the close parallels between the descriptions of the god Eros and of Socrates (203c-d) and by the characterization of Eros as a *daimôn* who moves between two worlds and lies in between knowledge and ignorance, hence a 'lover of wisdom' or philosopher (204a)<sup>33</sup>. In addition, Feuerbach's image provides no visual hint that, at least as Plato described him, Alcibiades' most egregious failure was neither his physical beauty nor his carnal desire for Socrates but rather his inability to resist the call of the political life—his obsessive pursuit of public honors and fame (216b)<sup>34</sup>. Suppressing Alcibiades' political identity serves to strengthen the visual contrast of desire with reason, but provides an additional point of contrast between the two works.

Similarly, although the theme of conflict between reason and desire figures prominently in some Platonic dialogues (especially in the *Republic*), it is not a feature of the *Symposium*. Indeed, in the 'ascent passage' that runs from 210a to 212a (and immediately precedes Alcibiades' entrance) Socrates offers an account of the workings of *erôs* that focuses on the ways in which reason and desire, working together, can enable us to progress toward our most important objective, living the best

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<sup>32</sup> In Henderson, „Anselm Feuerbach's *Das Gastmahl des Platon...*“, 87; following the account given in Wardy, R., “The Unity of Opposites in Plato's *Symposium*”: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 23, 2002, 1-61. Wardy identifies a total of twenty-nine contrasts developed in the *Symposium* (five 'collapsing polarities', twelve 'maintained polarities', and twelve 'problematic cases'), but nowhere on any of his lists (and rightly so) is a contrast of reason with desire.

<sup>33</sup> This is in turn one formulation of the larger lesson about *erôs* imparted by the *Symposium*; namely, that a life of philosophical contemplation is as much a manifestation of *erôs* as any other passionately pursued enterprise.

<sup>34</sup> It would have been easy enough for Feuerbach to depict Alcibiades in military garb, as Raphael had done in his 'School of Athens'.

kind of human life<sup>35</sup>. According to Socrates (and the priestess Diotima who instructed him on this topic), one who is properly educated in the ways of love will begin by loving a single beautiful body before proceeding to love all beautiful bodies, then beautiful souls, then beautiful practices and institutions, then beautiful forms of knowledge, and finally the knowledge of Beauty Itself (*auto to kalon*). What Socrates emphasizes is not the conflict of reason with desire but rather how, given proper instruction, we can employ reason to advance by stages toward a grasp of the nature of the beautiful, with a resultant redirection of our desires. In its philosophical outlook, then, as well as in many of its details of setting and characterization, Feuerbach's symposium differed markedly from Plato's. In light of what we have been able to determine about Feuerbach's plans and hopes for 'Das Gastmahl' it seems clear that his main concerns lay elsewhere<sup>36</sup>.



Fig. 1. Das Gastmahl des Platon (1869).

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<sup>35</sup> It has seemed to many readers that one of Plato's main aims in the *Symposium* was to promote the life of philosophical contemplation (modeled on the Socratic quest) as the best life for a human being. In his commentary on the dialogue Christopher Rowe comments: '...Plato is clearly using 'Socrates' for a purpose...to advance the claims of philosophy'; and 'The *Symposium* as a whole is (no doubt among other things) an extended protreptic—an invitation to philosophy, on the Socratic model' (Rowe, C., *Plato: Symposium*, Warminster 1998, 1/ 4). We have no reason to suppose that Feuerbach shared Plato's desire to promote the philosophical life.

<sup>36</sup> I am grateful to Sean Burrus, Aileen Das, Allison Das, Kurt Pfund, and William Race for helpful discussions of this topic.