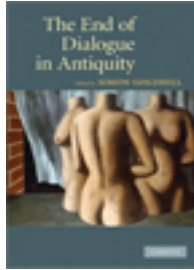


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CHAPTER 5

Sympotic dialogue in the first to fifth centuries CE

Jason König

SYMPODIC QUESTIONS

Many of the essays in this volume, the introduction included, interrogate the idea that Christian writers felt uncomfortable with the dialogue form, and so either neglected it completely or else used it very differently from their Greco-Roman or Jewish counterparts. There are reasons for expressing reservations about those formulations. Most strikingly, it is easy enough to amass a long series of counterexamples: many Christian writers did write dialogues.¹ However, one area where dialogue form does come to a very conspicuous halt is in the area of sympotic writing.² The Greek literature of the Roman Empire is saturated with descriptions of sympotic commensality and philosophical conversation. For whatever reason, literary representation of the symposium seems to have been an attractive vehicle for writing which explores and dramatises the relations between Greek past and Greek present (more on that below). But it is hard to find anything in Christian literature which resembles Plato's *Symposium* or Xenophon's, or even the more loosely structured, miscellanistic composition of Plutarch's *Sympotic Questions*, with their vivid sketches of social context and their conversational style, or of Athenaeus' more chaotic compilation of quotations and erudite sympotic discussions, the *Deipnosophists*. Methodius' *Symposium* is one exception. But there is little to match it within the landscape of surviving Christian writing throughout the long period of

¹ See Hoffmann (1966); Voss (1970).

² Martin (1931) assumes a clearly defined sympotic genre, and usefully outlines some of the recurring sympotic motifs which helped to signal membership of it; while I agree that there are many texts (including the four main texts discussed here, by Plutarch, Athenaeus, Methodius and Macrobius) which represented themselves as part of a sympotic tradition descended from Plato's *Symposium* – and I will sometimes use the phrase 'sympotic genre' as a shorthand for that tradition – it also seems to me important to go beyond Martin's excessively rigid model, and to recognise that many texts which contained sympotic motifs had a more marginal or hybrid relation with that Platonic tradition, though without being clearly separable from it.

the first to fifth centuries CE. Similarly within classicising pagan literature of late antiquity, there are relatively few examples. Keith Hopkins, in his imaginative reconstruction of early Christian culture, invents a 'recently discovered' work by an author he names Macarius which draws on many of the apologetic motifs familiar from the works of Justin and others.³ The work is set, however, at a symposium, where Macarius debates with non-Christian interlocutors. In that sense it is starkly unlike any other Christian apologetic writing. One might imagine that the symposium would be a promising space for Christian writers to explore their own cultural self-positioning in relation to other communities, in the light of traditions of the symposium as a place for cosmopolitan dialogue, as well as being a promising place to appropriate the familiar images of Greco-Roman culture for new Christian uses, given its relevance to Christian metaphors of feasting with Christ. Certainly Hopkins' Macarius exploits that potential. However, Justin and his fellow apologists seem uninterested in following the same path. Whether Hopkins was aware of that disjunction between imaginative reconstruction and surviving material is not immediately clear from his text, but either way his chapter usefully poses for us the question of why there is so little in surviving Christian literature whose setting even faintly resembles that of Macarius' *Symposium*.

This chapter outlines some of the key texts which might lie at the heart of an account of this later history of the literature of sympotic dialogue.⁴ It also attempts to answer a number of questions. How do we account for the

³ Hopkins (1999) 210–21.

⁴ Histories of the ancient world's sympotic literature have generally taken an unflattering view of the Roman Empire's sympotic accumulations of erudition, seeing them as degenerate imitators of their inspired and more lifelike Platonic predecessor, in line with a tendency to denigrate the Greek literature of the Imperial period more generally for its derivativeness; the bulk of symposium scholarship has accordingly been directed towards the Archaic and Classical periods. It is only recently that we have begun to appreciate some of the attractions these Imperial texts must have held: important examples include Romeri (2002) on the symposia of Plutarch, Athenaeus and Lucian; Braund and Wilkins (2000) on Athenaeus; Jeanneret (1991). There is also discussion of late sympotic texts in works by Relihan (1992) and Martin (1931), both of whom survey the sympotic genre across its whole history; even these studies, however, tend to take little interest in late-antique and Christian symposium texts. Other important discussions of pre-Imperial sympotic literature include Ullrich (1908–9); Dupont (1977) 19–89; *RE* 4a 1273–82; Hunter (2004) on Plato; Cameron (1995) 95–7, with reference to Slater (1982) 346–9, for literary symposia in Hellenistic Alexandria. For major works on the symposium as an institution, see (amongst very many others) Murray (1990a) including comprehensive bibliographies in major areas of symposium scholarship, with updated bibliographical addenda for the later paperback edition; also Murray (1983) and (2003); Lissarague (1990); Slater (1991); Murray and Tecuşan (1995). Recent works on Christian institutions of eating and drinking and Christian attitudes to consumption include Smith (2003) and Grimm (1996), but neither gives any great attention to narrative representation of consumption, or to the sympotic form. On the massive renaissance tradition of sympotic dialogue, see Jeanneret (1991).

obsession with symptotic writing within Imperial Greek works? How do we account for the loss of symptotic forms within Christian writing, and within late-antique literature more broadly? How reliable is that model? How do Christian writers and their late-antique classicising counterparts give expression to their own relationship with symptotic traditions even as they shy away from them? In the process, and picking up on that last issue in particular, I aim to move beyond my original formulation – why Christian/late-antique disinterest in symptotic form? The more revealing question, as I aim to show, is about how Christian and late-antique literature, when they do it, do symptotic dialogue differently, engaging with their classical and Roman precedents while also reshaping them subtly and self-consciously.

REACTIVATING THE PAST

First, some claims about the development of the symposium genre. Why does symptotic dialogue matter for Greek writers under Roman rule? One answer is simply that the symposium could be envisaged as a key space for displaying elite, Hellenic identity, and so offered a natural home for the obsession with explorations and assertions of elite identity in the writing of the Imperial period. Those connotations of elite display were not new. In the Archaic and Classical period the symposium was a venue for the politically charged elite performance culture which we glimpse in lyric poetry. In the post-classical world we see an extension of the Platonic/Xenophontic philosophical symposium as a venue for socially empowering performance of knowledge, for bringing to light the accumulated wealth of the Greek archive. That latter project was one that symptotic writing held in common with many of the Roman Empire's many other miscellanistic, scientific or encyclopedic texts;⁵ but few other compilatory genres showed so vividly how this kind of knowledge could be mobilised for the purposes of displaying social status.⁶ That sense of the symposium – and particularly dialogue in the symposium – as a space for performing Greekness, for displaying a particularly Hellenic form of philosophical identity and traditional knowledge within conversation, is one reason for its attraction for Plutarch and Athenaeus, and similarly for satirical authors like Lucian: his misbehaving philosophers in the *Symposium or Lapiths*, with their preference for Homeric one-to-one conflict at the expense of any kind of dialogic

⁵ See König and Whitmarsh (2007) on compilatory styles of writing in the Roman Empire.

⁶ Cf. Schmitz (1997) 127–33 on competitions in wisdom at the symposium as socially prestigious.

interaction whatsoever, are an extension of Lucian's characteristic interest in undermining inherited convention.⁷

More specifically, the sympotic form in Imperial Greek writing is concerned with *active* treatment of inherited knowledge, which enacts continuity with and inheritance of the past while also reshaping it for its new context.⁸ Plutarch and Athenaeus, far from being faceless reorganisers of inherited erudition, dramatisé obsessively the *processes* of performing knowledge, inviting us to admire the inventiveness of sympotic speech as we read. Christian Jacob has demonstrated that claim at length for Athenaeus.⁹ Display of knowledge for the deipnosophists, at least under Jacob's guidance, becomes a masterful performance of improvisation for an audience acute to the smallest innovation, akin to the mastery of sophistic oratory.¹⁰ Similarly, the style of dialogue Plutarch puts on show is one which relies both on intricate knowledge of the writing of the past, and at the same time on ingenious improvisation, drawing on long-standing traditions of competitive speech and spontaneous invention in the symposium,¹¹ and based in particular around the technique of offering a range of different answers to each question discussed.¹² Often successive speakers contradict each other, as if on the assumption that dialogue between opposed viewpoints can help them to reach the truth. At other times, however, ingenuity and conviviality seems to be just as important as getting the right answer. Plutarch often

⁷ See Branham (1989) 108–20; Frazier (1994); Männlein (2000); for other pictures of sympotic philosophy done wrongly, cf. Lucian *Nigrinus* 25; *Pisc.* 34; *Timon* 54–5; *Lexiphanes passim*; see also Philostratus, *VS* 627 for the sophist Aspasio declaiming in wine shops; Dio Chrysostom 27.1–4 for examples of sympotic speech done badly, but also for the claim that the symposium is a venue for display of moral character through fitting conversation; cf. 30.28–44 and 32.53 for a similar contrast. All of these passages as well as other examples of engagement with the symposium in sophistic writing are discussed by Amato (2005); what all of them have in common, regardless of whether their aims are satirical or protreptic, is an emphasis on interactive philosophical speech as the pinnacle of good behaviour, and an awareness of how this ideal falls down when the symposiast becomes self-absorbed. It is relatively rare to find examples of dialogue form in Imperial Greek literature which do not have philosophical overtones; however, see Lucian's *Dialogues of Courtesans*, *Dialogues of the Dead*, *Dialogues of the Gods* (on the last of those see Branham (1989) 139–63) for one set of exceptions.

⁸ Cf. Martin (1998) on the way in which the seven sages in Archaic Greek literature are used to illustrate an active, performative concept of wisdom.

⁹ See Jacob (2001).

¹⁰ See Anderson (1997) on Athenaeus' links with his sophistic contemporaries, and more generally Amato (2005) on links between sympotic and sophistic writing.

¹¹ See esp. Frazier and Sirinelli (1996) 177–207; the *Sympotic Questions* has often had a bad press, denigrated for the implausibility of its arguments by scholars who have not recognised the prestige of these argumentative styles: e.g., see Fuhrmann (1972) xxiv; Flacelière and Irigoien (1987) lxxxiii; Teixeira (1992) 221. Romeri (2002) 109–89 is an important exception. On traditions of agonistic discussion and performance at the symposium, see esp. Collins (2005).

¹² See Hardie (1992) for discussion of some of the many precedents and connotations of this kind of alternative explanation; and further discussion and bibliography in König (2007).

stresses, for example, the way in which his contributions are improvised, made whether or not he is confident of having a reliable answer. In 3.5 (652b), for example, he tells us that he is reusing an argument he had come up with a few days before, when he had been forced to extemporise (αὐτοσχεδιάσαι). In 2.2 (635c), similarly, Plutarch speaks ‘in order to avoid the impression of joining in the conversation without making a contribution’. The image of the festival often provides a metaphor for that kind of active, engaged treatment of tradition. Plato and Xenophon both set their symposia on festival occasions, at dinners celebrating victories in agonistic competition. It is striking that festival settings become standard features of the symptotic genre throughout the following centuries.¹³ One effect, I suggest, is to portray philosophical debate and elite conviviality as a more elevated equivalent of the active citizen involvement in spectatorship and sacrificial ritual which was central to festival culture. Plutarch sets many of the conversations in his *Symptotic Questions* at festivals, offering us in the process a sustained vision of philosophical conversation as an elevated equivalent of sacrificial banqueting and agonistic competition. Performing knowledge in the symposium becomes, by that metaphor, an active process of publicly celebrating Hellenic tradition within a specific local context.¹⁴

Moreover, the dialogue form is crucial not only to the agonistic experience of the symposium guests, but also to our own involvement as readers in the process of reactivating the past. The recurring emphasis on the requirement for young men to learn from their fellow symposiasts offers, I suggest, a model for the reader’s engagement with the text.¹⁵ The text’s scenes of learning contain both explicit and implicit instruction on the styles of speech and interpretation one should aim for, lessons offered both to the young symposiasts themselves and to us. For example, Plutarch’s teacher Ammonius plays a prominent role, both in Book 9 and elsewhere, as if to remind us of the way in which Plutarch’s own interpretative virtuosity has itself been learnt, painstakingly and gradually, in the course of a long process

¹³ That said, there were models available for almost entirely non-contextualised portrayal of erudite symptotic conversation, perhaps most famously in the symptotic writing of Epicurus, which seems to have conspicuously neglected any detailed attention to dramatic setting: see Usener (1887) 115, with reference to several passages of Athenaeus (177b, 182a, 186e, 187b). On Plato’s appropriation for philosophy of the civic settings of festival and gymnasium, see Blondell (2002) 63–4.

¹⁴ See König (2007) for longer discussion; cf. Schmitt-Pantel (1992) 471–82 for comparison of *Symptotic Questions* 2.10 with the picture of sacrificial feasting we gain from the epigraphical evidence, emphasising both Plutarch’s engagement with civic life and also his tendency to distance himself from it; see also Dio, *Or.* 27 for comparison between festival and symposium.

¹⁵ See König (2007) on the didactic atmosphere of Plutarch’s text; and cf. Jacob (2001) xcvi on the way in which Athenaeus’ text offers its readers models and resources for their own scholarly activity.

of development from pupil to expert. For both Plutarch and Athenaeus, moreover, there are right and wrong ways of speaking; Plutarch often shows his characters correcting or criticising each other.¹⁶ But combined with that prescriptive atmosphere, as we have seen already, is an equally strong, sympotic ideal of equal dialogue, where each contributor has an equal right to speak, where no single answer to a question is ever validated as the correct and only response. The point of the work's ingenuity seems to be the way in which it encourages each listener to think actively for him- or herself, on the principle that curiosity is the first step on the road to learning and philosophical reflection, a claim Plutarch makes at length in his work *On Listening*. Each listener, if he or she is listening well, must be ready with his or her own addition to the string of alternative explanations on offer. And crucially we too, as readers, are drawn into contributing. The work's structures of dialogue and its atmosphere of unfinalisability – which is conspicuous within sympotic speech perhaps more than anywhere, with its balance between *spoudaion* and *geloion* (the symposium is always at least in part about play) and with its traditions of equal contribution from all guests in turn – draw us in as we read, prompting us to make our own interventions, and our own reactivations of our Greek heritage.

CONVERSATION AND DIALOGISM

There is a further question of why the symposium should be seen at all as such a promising place for replaying tradition and collecting knowledge: where might that assumption have come from in the first place? One answer, I suggest, is that the central role of conversation with one's peers in the symposium allows the further fantasy of entering into conversation with the writings of the past.¹⁷ Plutarch uses that metaphor.¹⁸ For Athenaeus

¹⁶ E.g., see *Sympotic Questions* 8.4 (723f–724a) for an example of a character criticised for excessive ingenuity.

¹⁷ That technique of introducing authors of the past into dialogue occurs outside sympotic writing too, and stretches back at least to Plato (e.g. the ventriloquising of Simonides at *Pl. Prt.* 339a–347b); for other good examples, see Vitruvius *De arch.* 9, preface, 17; and Lucian *VH* Book 2, where the narrator dines regularly with the inhabitants of the Isles of the Blessed (2.14–16, 2.24, 2.25), and questions Homer about his work (2.20).

¹⁸ E.g., see *Sympotic Questions* 8.2 (718c), where Plato is brought into conversation. For similar examples of the processes of reading described with overtones of personal interaction, see (amongst many others), the opening of 3.5 (651f) where Plutarch describes himself having 'come across', or alternatively 'met with' or even 'talked with' (ἐντυχῶν) a text of Aristotle; or the opening of 3.6 (653b), where he describes a group of young men who have only recently begun to 'spend time with' ancient texts (προσπεφοιτηκότες — the word also can mean, more specifically, to spend time with a teacher: LSJ 1530).

it is even more deeply ingrained. In his work the voices of the deipnosophists, who spend so much of their time quoting, repeatedly blend with the voices of their source texts. Athenaeus orchestrates that effect carefully, showing his characters losing sight of the distance between past and present, between written and spoken, allowing the voices of the past to speak through them.¹⁹

This technique makes Athenaeus' work, I suggest, profoundly dialogic in a Bakhtinian sense. For Bakhtin all human expression is to a certain degree dialogical, in the sense that it is in dialogue with the multi-faceted linguistic and social background from which it emerges and to which it is in turn directed. All utterances are inescapably ingrained with the many different meanings and connotations imposed on them by previous users of language. Moreover, all utterances are directed towards addressees whose positioning makes a difference to the utterances themselves: the making of meaning comes from the always provisional process of sorting through an enormous variety of competing possible meanings, and that process is always a social act, undertaken with a particular audience in mind. Some types of literary writing, according to Bakhtin, do their best to shut out that multi-faceted, polyphonous character of language, attempting to stress their own singleness and consistency of voice; others, however – which often receive the label 'dialogic' or 'heteroglossic' in modern scholarship on Bakhtin – do the opposite, revelling in the richness of the competing voices and tones which are woven into them: 'for the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they "do not sound."²⁰

The relevance of those formulations for Athenaeus' fictional world, where the voices of the library speak through his characters, should be fairly clear. But how far do these effects depend on the work's dialogue form in particular? Bakhtin himself hinted, albeit rather vaguely, at connections between dialogue form and dialogic character, for example in viewing the Socratic dialogue – along with a number of other ancient sympotic and more

¹⁹ See König (forthcoming) for longer discussion; and cf. Jacob (2001) I–li and Too (2000) on the way in which the deipnosophists come to embody the texts of the library, allowing those texts to speak through them.

²⁰ Bakhtin (2006b) 278, with good discussion by Bialostosky (1992) 55–6. Bakhtin (1984) is also particularly relevant here; for a good introductory discussion of Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue, see (amongst many others) Holquist (1990); cf. Lodge (1990) for an attempt to apply these concepts to criticism of the modern novel in English; for application of this and other Bakhtinian concepts to Classical texts, see Branham (2002), and Greenwood and Long in this volume.

broadly seriocomic texts – as a precursor of the dialogic novel.²¹ Andrea Wilson Nightingale has recently built on that claim in discussing Plato's dialogues as texts which aim at incorporating and reshaping/parodying a great range of other genres.²² Bakhtin also named the *Deipnosophists* – albeit without any lengthy justification, and without particular discussion of its dialogue form – within that selection of seriocomic texts.²³ Perhaps more importantly, it is clear that the idea of communication between present and past is central to Bakhtin's concept, and that the image of dialogue between sympotic interlocutors in the present has the potential to act as a model for that other kind of communication. For example, in characterising the ancient 'seriocomic' genres Bakhtin stressed not only their 'deliberate multi-styled and multi-voiced nature', but also their tendency to bring past and present into contact, in ways which are strikingly appropriate to the sympotic enterprise: 'In these genres the heroes of myth and the historical figures of the past are deliberately and emphatically contemporised; they act and speak in a zone of familiar contact with the open-ended present'.²⁴ That image again seems strikingly appropriate to Athenaeus and to the other sympotic writings of this chapter and the next. It seems odd that Bakhtin's work has to my knowledge had almost no attention in modern scholarship on Athenaeus, or indeed on other ancient sympotic miscellanies.²⁵

Moreover, this sense that dialogue between the work's interlocutors is both a model and a vehicle for dialogue with the voices of the library is enhanced, as I have already suggested, by the work's carefully managed techniques of blurring between the voices of speakers and their source texts. One of the difficulties of Bakhtin's theory is to distinguish in practice between dialogic and non-dialogic texts,²⁶ and to work out exactly what it is that makes the difference. If language is always inherently dialogic, how can we say that some texts are dialogic or heteroglossic when some texts are not? What exactly is it in the novel, as Bakhtin defines it, which makes it inherently heteroglossic? If we accept that not all novels are heteroglossic, and that some non-novelistic texts are, how do we distinguish in practice? Would we not be better off seeing a continuum between these two poles; or else seeing all works oscillating between the two poles, or offering the

²¹ Bakhtin (2006b) 21–2 and 24–6. ²² See Nightingale (1995), esp. 6 on Bakhtin and Todorov.

²³ Bakhtin (2006b), esp. 53. ²⁴ Bakhtin (1984) 108.

²⁵ The obvious exception is Jeanneret (1991), whose whole approach to the classical and Renaissance symposium genre is informed by Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony, although he does not at any point discuss their significance for Athenaeus in particular; see also Whitmarsh (2000) 572, n. 28 for brief acknowledgement of Bakhtin's interest in Athenaeus.

²⁶ E.g., see Lodge (1990) 90–99.

potential to be read from either of these two perspectives at different moments?²⁷ There is, however, one particular technique which for Bakhtin sets the novel genre apart from others, enhancing its dialogic potential in particularly novelistic ways, and that is its capacity to produce utterances which seem to blend the voices of author and character through what he refers to as ‘doubly oriented speech’. This happens in particular when the narrator records the words or thoughts of a character outside direct quotation marks, in such a way as to leave it unclear what degree of authorial paraphrase has crept in, or to make us suspect that the character’s thoughts have been overlaid by the narrator with styles of speech drawn from other genres, which cast the character momentarily in terms alien to his or her conscious self-perception.²⁸ That confusion of boundaries is a staple effect of much novelistic fiction. My suggestion here is that we see a similar though not identical effect within the dialogue form as Athenaeus presents it. Athenaeus presents us in the work with an elaborate series of frames: the outside frame of the conversation between himself and Timocrates, which contains the conversation of the deipnosophists, which in turn contains the source texts they quote, some of which themselves contain inserted speech or quotation.²⁹ Because the text moves quite readily, sometimes abruptly, backwards and forwards between these framing levels (unlike, for example, Platonic dialogue, where such movements are for the most part clearly signalled), and because Athenaeus’ own quotation-obsessed style of speech, in his role as narrator, is so similar to that of his characters and in some cases to that of the quoted texts – for those reasons it often becomes easy to lose track at least momentarily of which level we are in at any one moment. Athenaeus’ own voice merges with those of his deipnosophists; their voices merge with their source texts; and we slip between these different levels as we read, lured into missing the points of transition from one level to the next, so that the boundaries between library and life become broken down.³⁰ That technique is obviously not available for dialogues which are presented in play-script form, but it is an opportunity which the ancient technique of framing philosophical dialogue within one or more outside layers of narrative opens up powerfully, although to my knowledge no other ancient author pursues it so intricately as Athenaeus.

²⁷ Cf. Lodge (1990) 98: ‘One could develop a typology of genres or modes of writing according to whether they exploit and celebrate the inherently dialogic nature of language in living speech or suppress and limit it for specific literary effects.’

²⁸ See Lodge (1990) 25–44, with good examples, and 90–93.

²⁹ Cf. Ceccarelli (2000), drawing on but adjusting Letrouit (1991).

³⁰ For discussion of that effect, see Ceccarelli (2000); Romerí (2002) 268–78.

For Athenaeus' *deipnosophists*, then, as for Bakhtin, there is no voice which is not simultaneously a compound of previous utterances and associations, and the dialogue framing makes a central contribution to that effect. It is easy enough to see how we might fit the late-fourth- or early-fifth-century work of Macrobius into the same template, as a late reactivation of some of those same dialogic characteristics. He too shares a sense that sympotic conversation – or in his case, in Latin, convivial conversation – is the proper place for display of identity. His work is set in Rome at the festival of the Saturnalia; it is fundamentally concerned with displaying knowledge of the Roman heritage, centred in particular on the writing of Virgil, and delving into the most intricate corners of Roman religious tradition and Latin etymology. And despite the surface appearance of derivativeness it dramatises an active style of speaking, and a fundamentally dialogic one (in a Bakhtinian sense). He shows a fascination, for example, with the many different layers which lie behind the words of his text, the way in which his own text and whatever his readers will themselves make of it in the future is both derived from the existing material of the past and also reshaped seamlessly and organically to fit the voice of the speaker:

We ought in a sense to imitate bees, which go from place to place and gather the flower blossoms, and then distribute the harvest among their honeycombs, transforming the varied juices into a single flavour by a process of mingling and by imbuing them with their own distinctive qualities. (*Saturnalia* I.pr. 5)

That metaphor is itself borrowed from Seneca who in turn borrows from Virgil, as Sabine MacCormack notes: 'Language, for Macrobius, was what the present user made of it, even though the thoughts and expressions of the present were inseparable from what had been thought and written earlier by others'.³¹ And for Macrobius, too, as I will argue in more detail later (see pp. 107–113), the conversation between his guests becomes an important metaphor for their dialogue with the writings of the past.

TWO FORMS OF DIALOGUE?

Where does Christian writing fit into that equation? Is Macrobius reactivating a kind of sympotic speech and a kind of dialogue which is largely absent within Christian literature? If it is the case that sympotic dialogue fails to feature within Christian writing, why is that? Is it because the particular kind of dialogue which the symposium attracts, with its emphasis on

³¹ MacCormack (1998) 82.

convivial openness and ingenuity, the symptotic dislike of authoritative statement – of the kind I have outlined for Plutarch – is not a comfortable one for Christian writers? The dialogue form in itself may not require that kind of openness, but in the symposium, one might suspect, it is hard to escape from. Is it, too, because the symptotic fascination with setting dialogue in specific social contexts is something Christian writing tends to feel uncomfortable with? In other dialogue forms it is much easier to skate over setting, to skate over the awkward realities of real speech and the distorting factors which come with it, but for the symposium, again, are they harder to avoid?

One way of bringing those questions into sharper relief might be through a distinction between open and closed dialogue. M. Prince, writing about the dialogue form in the British Enlightenment, identifies two very different meanings for the word dialogue or dialectic which he suggests stand in uneasy tension with each other as far back as Plato.³² The first (type a) is a model which sees dialogue as the division of an argument into two parts which eventually come together in the harmony of final resolution, akin to the resolutions of comedy. The second (type b) is a more open form, where verbal interaction may be between two or more voices, and where there is no necessary resolution, as at the end of tragedy. He sees a move from type (b) in the early works of Plato to type (a) in the later works. And he sees type (a) as a form central to Christian writing from its very beginning: ‘From the beginning of the Christian era until the middle of the 18th century, dialectic became one of the dominant methods of argument for Christian theology.’³³ The Enlightenment sees a dispute between these two modes of dialogue. We hear, for example, of Floyer Sydenham, an eighteenth-century type-(a) interpreter of Plato, criticising Plato’s blunder of allowing the drunken Alcibiades to spoil the carefully crafted metaphysical structure of the *Symposium*: ‘we cannot altogether justify and consequently ought not to follow our author [Plato] in introducing to his Banquet the thoroughly debauched Alcibiades’.³⁴ Paradoxically, Prince suggests, that dispute leads both types in the same, increasingly novelistic direction. Proponents of type (a) become increasingly novelistic in their portrayal of characterisation and context ‘once confidence in a disembodied criterion of arbitration (reason, logic, common sense) declines’. Proponents of type (b) become increasingly

³² Prince (1996); see also Cox (1992), esp. 2–3 for a similar distinction within Italian Renaissance dialogue.

³³ Prince (1996) 5. ³⁴ Prince (1996) 173, quoting from Sydenham’s *Dialogues of Plato*, pp. 247–8.

novelistic ‘in order to show why the contingencies of human desire and self-interest frustrate any move to a forced consensus’.³⁵

Some of Prince’s scheme looks oversimplified. For example his claim to see a move from open to closed dialogue within Plato’s oeuvre looks highly debatable.³⁶ An alternative model might stress Plato’s concern with truth and clarity in all circumstances:

Plato does not use the possibilities of the genre of drama to produce maximal ambivalence, but as a rule he leads the reader by means of frequently ambivalent steps to a clear final result, and to the equally clear assurance that further substantiation and tracing back to even higher principles is not as yet forthcoming, but is necessary and probable.³⁷

Or instead one might prefer to hang on to the view of Plato as a writer who does value openness and ambivalence, and who uses the dialogue form to achieve that aporetic effect, or at least to allow us to experience a tension between certainty and uncertainty. David Halperin, for example, writing of the *Symposium*, views Plato as ‘a cunning writer fully alive to the doubleness of his rhetoric ... and who actively courts an effect of undecidability’. Halperin urges a sensitive reading of the ‘alternating doctrinal and counter-doctrinal pressures’ of the text³⁸ (although he also notes that the *Symposium* is in some ways highly untypical of Platonic dialogue as a whole). In other words the model of a dichotomy between type (a) and type (b) looks very undernuanced. We might think instead of a continuum between those two poles, with Lucian furthest towards type (b), with his refusal to allow any single perspective in dialogue to predominate,³⁹ and Plutarch closer towards the centre (hinting as he does at a hierarchy between explanations, with the most plausible usually kept till last, but also constantly undermining any such hierarchy within the frivolous sympotic context of the *Sympotic Questions*).⁴⁰ Or we might prefer a more complex picture of texts oscillating self-consciously between the two poles – as Halperin in fact suggests for Plato’s *Symposium* – flirting in different ways and to different degrees with the motifs associated with both.

Despite those caveats, however, I want to hang on to that distinction for now, and to test it out as a template for viewing the distinctions between Christian and Greco-Roman sympotica. The dialogues of Augustine are at first sight a promising place to look for a Christian example of the first,

³⁵ Prince (1996) 18–19. ³⁶ See Long in this volume. ³⁷ Szlezák (1999) 108.

³⁸ Halperin (1992) 114. ³⁹ See Branham (1989).

⁴⁰ By contrast some of Plutarch’s other dialogues offer a much more clearly signalled progression from less to more plausible explanation: see Hardie (1992) 4755.

transcendental kind of dialogue – type (a) – as something incompatible with the symposium form.⁴¹ His dialogues often seem to be dramatising their own resistance to symptotic tradition, stressing the inappropriateness of mixing rational discussion with prominent features of the symposium tradition. For one thing, Augustine ostentatiously avoids linking conversation with commensality.⁴² *De Beata Vita* is set on Augustine's birthday, at lunchtime, in the baths, where he has invited his family to join him – this is a version of post-consumption philosophy, but one that pointedly avoids any hint of drunkenness and discards the model of an evening setting. In several places he leaves gaps in the dialogues for listeners to go off and eat meals and relax, as if suspicious of mixing consumption and serious conversation;⁴³ and the debates are broken off (rather than begun) at nightfall to allow the scribes who are recording them to work. All of that combines with a more general lack of interest in the benefits of audience response to unresolved dialogic uncertainty: there is a preference for written exchange ahead of oral, and Platonic reminiscence is replaced by reading of transcriptions from previous days' conversation (hence the stenographers). At one point it is suggested that it may be detrimental to the audience to see a public quarrel between the interlocutors.⁴⁴ Plutarch's *Sympotic Questions* deprecates excessive disputatiousness, for sure, but for that work disagreement is nevertheless the crucial ingredient which allows the reader's own philosophical response, and he and his fellow guests repeatedly push up against the boundaries of propriety in their disagreements and insults and in the ingenuity and frivolousness of their responses (in line with the classical tradition of the symposium as an institution for sanctioned flirtation with disorder).⁴⁵

Augustine thus seems particularly keen to avoid the kinds of dialogue which are associated most often with the symposium, with its traditions of speculative and playful speech, and it may be that his wariness provides one key to Christian neglect of the symptotic genre more generally.⁴⁶ Of course,

⁴¹ For Augustine as one of the most important figures for Christian transcendental dialogue, see Prince (1996) 6; cf. Mourant (1970) on Augustine's achievement of overlaying Platonic, metaphysical dialectic with the added certainty of Christian truth.

⁴² See Stock (1996), esp. 130–7 for many of the examples here.

⁴³ That suspicion is actually the topic of the opening sections of *De Beata Vita*, where Augustine's mother draws attention to the way he himself is distracted by food; literal consumption is replaced by metaphor, through a long account of Christian metaphors of nourishment of the soul.

⁴⁴ Cf. Mourant (1970) 84–5 on Augustine's preference for dialogue with himself in the *Soliloquies*, on the grounds that it avoids the imperfections of real conversation and the emotional responses which accompany competitive discussion.

⁴⁵ E.g. see Relihan (1992) 216; Whitmarsh (2004) 52–67.

⁴⁶ Cicero, Augustine's main model for dialogue, similarly prefers to avoid symptotic settings, and one might explain Augustine's anti-sympotic character simply by the fact that there is no symptotic model

there are other reasons too: there must be features of the symposium tradition quite unconnected with the nature of sympotic *dialogue* specifically which similarly contribute to Christian lack of interest. For example, the long-standing association of the symposium with intoxication and seduction, albeit counterbalanced by philosophical overtones, might well have seemed problematic in the context of new Christian attitudes to pleasure and the body, especially to the pleasures of eating and drinking.⁴⁷ We might also expect the elitist associations of the symposium to have been at odds with early Christianity's stress on inclusiveness (including the tendency to allow the presence of women, in contrast with the Greek symposium tradition) and its appeal below the elite levels of society.⁴⁸ Early Christian feasting consciously broke the mould of hierarchical feasting. It should be no surprise that Christian writing tended to follow suit. It is also striking that our best surviving example of Christian sympotic writing, Methodius' *Symposium*, seems keen to avoid the kinds of locally specific detail we have seen already for Plutarch's work, where philosophical discussion is grounded in the rhythms and institutions of the Greco-Roman city and within the contours of Greco-Roman social status. This too may be an element of sympotic tradition which is out of step with Christian standoffishness from the institutions of the pagan city. Membership of a specific sympotic community is replaced in Methodius' work by attendance at the universal, metaphorical banquet of the Christian church. Despite all those other factors, however, it seems likely that the particular kinds of dialogue which were specific to the symposium were a major factor.

WHAT DOES CLEMENT'S *PAIDAGOGUS* BOOK 2 LOSE OR
GAIN BY NOT BEING A DIALOGUE?

I have spent some time already in examining the many-voicedness of Athenaeus' text. How does the *Deipnosophists* measure up against the work of his Christian contemporaries, many of whom were concerned with compiling and inventively reshaping the resources of the past? At the

within Cicero's work for him to imitate. That seems like an excessively mechanical explanation, however, especially given Augustine's knowledge of Platonic writing; it might be better to see Cicero's avoidance of the symposium as a symptom of precisely what Augustine finds attractive in his work, that is an interest in shutting out the more frivolous extremes of dialogic playfulness and indeterminacy, rather than something unthinkingly imitated.

⁴⁷ See (amongst many others) Grimm (1996).

⁴⁸ On the social inclusiveness of the early Christian movement, see (amongst many others) Clark (2004) 27–30; Stegemann and Stegemann (1999) who argue that New Testament communities after 70 CE showed a wide cross-section of social levels, but not the highest and lowest.

risk of oversimplifying, the example I want to examine briefly here is Clement's *Paidagogos* Book 2, which is sympotic in content (containing instructions for how a Christian should behave in dining)⁴⁹ and sympotic in language (quoting repeatedly from many of the same sources as Athenaeus, from comic, medical, philosophical writing, but also at the same time from Christian scripture, in an exercise of harmonisation between pagan and Christian tradition),⁵⁰ but not sympotic in setting, in the sense that the text presents itself as a prescriptive set of instructions proceeding from a single individual, rather than as a dialogue. It may well be the case, as I will suggest in a moment, that Clement's work is inherently dialogic even though he would prefer it not to be. But I think it is nonetheless a good example of how cutting out the dialogue frame from a subject which is standardly framed within dialogue tends to reduce the impression of polyphony – that is, the sense of a variety of different voices jostling against each other with a degree of independence from any controlling authorial voice. Whether that suppression of polyphony is a distinctively Christian effect is of course highly doubtful, and one might argue that the contrast between Clement and Athenaeus does not stand up to scrutiny, since there are very many examples of similar passages of non-Christian moralising about sympotic conduct, or for that matter non-Christian compilations of quotations which similarly take place outside dialogue form (though none, to my knowledge, which engages with sympotic motifs at quite such length). What sets Clement apart from those Greco-Roman equivalents, however, is the way in which he gives the monovocality of his text an explicitly Christian theorisation: his work has underlying it an assumption that the divine 'Word' (Logos) is the ultimate source of all the utterances he records, and his rationale for quoting from so many pagan authors is that they too were inspired by some spark of divine Logos, albeit without fully understanding its implications.⁵¹

⁴⁹ For survey of Clement's attitude to food and feasting, see Grimm (1996) 90–113; on Clement's aims of giving instruction for Christian behaviour, see Brown (1988) 125–6 (with full discussion in 122–39). Cf. Maier (1994); Bradley (1998) 42–5, who sees Clement as representative of typical Greco-Roman concerns with deportment at dinner; Buell (1999) 119–30; Behr (2000) 162–3; Kovacs (2001).

⁵⁰ E.g. see Marrou (1960) 49–52 and 71–86 on Clement's position in relation to the range of Greek philosophical doctrines he draws on; also Lilla (1971); Berchman (1984) 55–81; Behr (2000) 131. Marrou also shows (e.g. 77–81) how Clement's erudition is marked by the educated culture which Plutarch and Athenaeus wrote for, and he points out that there are moments when Clement duplicates material presented by those two authors in their sympotic writing; for example (80–81) Clement's list of drinking cups in 2.3 is very close to that of Athenaeus in Book 11, and similarly follows alphabetical order.

⁵¹ See Marrou (1960) 47–8; and for longer discussion, Löhr (2000) 417–25 who shows how this idea is linked with Clement's sophisticated working out of the common Christian claim that Greek

For the first half of Book 2 Clement turns his attention to the question of how to behave at dinner. Comparison with Plutarch brings out vividly Clement's ambivalent relations with sympotic precedent. Here too he draws on Greco-Roman material as well as scriptural instruction: for example, we see here a particularly strong concentration of quotations from comic descriptions of gluttony. Many of the topics duplicate the self-reflexive topics of discussion we find in Plutarch and others, and the chapter headings, where issues of proper behaviour are presented as questions, are very close to the titles of Plutarchan *quaestiones*. For example the topic of *Paidagogos* 2.8 – 'Whether perfume and garlands should be used' (Εἰ μύροις καὶ στεφάνοις χρηστέον) – parallels Plutarch, *Sympotic Questions* 3.1 – 'Whether flower garlands should be used while drinking' (Εἰ χρηστέον ἀνθίνοις στεφάνοις παρὰ πότον). There are other similarities too. For example, the concept of progress in education is crucial for Clement,⁵² as it was also for Plutarch. However, Clement's treatment of these topics is also in some ways very different from Plutarch's. In Plutarch's case there is a carefully structured focus on individual initiative and personal response as central features of the process by which individuals make progress in the unsummarisable rules of sympotic philosophy. Clement, by contrast, is much more prescriptive, offering no alternatives to his monovocal instruction, in line with his stress on the importance of uncompromising obedience to the divine Logos.⁵³ There is nothing here to match Plutarch's scenes of active, convivial debate.⁵⁴

From there Clement launches into a set of moralising instructions on proper attitudes to food, closely paralleling and in places quoting from an eclectic range of both Christian and non-Christian writings – even in just the first few pages of the text we see reference not only to a wide range of New Testament texts, but also in addition Seneca, Philo, Galen, Plato, Epictetus, Semonides, Homer and a whole range of comic writings, some of which also appear in Athenaeus. Sometimes Clement names his sources, and occasionally those named sources are pagan writers (e.g. in 2.1.2.3, we hear that Antiphanes the doctor from Delos condemns varied food), but by far the

philosophy had plagiarised from Jewish writing; cf. Ridings (1995) 29–140; Lilla (1971) 9–59, esp. 13–28 on the claim of divine inspiration for Greek philosophy, pointing to his partial dependence on Philo and Justin.

⁵² This work is itself the middle part of Clement's trilogy on the topic of progress in Christian life: the *Protrepticus* (*Exhortation*), the *Paidagogos*, and the *Stromateis* (*Miscellany*).

⁵³ On Clement's concept of authoritative divine voice, which is heavily indebted to Stoic and Platonic conceptions, see Dawson (1992) 183–234.

⁵⁴ However, see Behr (2000) 164–6 on tensions in Clement's attitude to meat and wine between disapproval and acknowledgement that Jesus gives his approval to both in the gospels.

most frequent ‘interlocutors’ are the abstract ‘Scripture says’, or ‘the Apostle says’, or, most tellingly ‘the Lord says’. In all cases the sources seem to be in agreement with Clement; or rather, in the case of his Christian ‘interlocutors’, Clement acts as a mouthpiece for their coherent and consistent instruction. Here, then, the text’s polyphonic character is pointedly overlaid with monologic control.

That is not to say that Clement’s control over all these different voices is absolute. There are moments when they threaten to take on a life of their own. Right from the start, he is vehement in his denunciations of improper behaviour; but he goes into another gear straight after his quotation from Antiphanes, drawing on the resources of comedy to list some of the disgraceful varieties of food which his gluttonous targets lust after, and it is here that his affinity with Athenaeus’ writing starts to become more obvious:

I feel pity for their sickness; but they are not ashamed to sing the praises of their own devotion to pleasure, and they do everything they can to get hold of sea-eels from the Sicilian straights and Maiandrian eels, kids from Melos and the kinds of mullet that come from Skiathos, Peloridan mussels and Abydean oysters; nor must we pass over the sprats from Lipara and Mantinean turnips... (*Paidagogus* 2.1.3.1)

– and so on, for nearly twenty lines. For a moment we might forget where we are, as we get sucked deeper and deeper into this piscological orgy, which combines vehemence and delight in just as intense a form as any of the texts Athenaeus quotes, as if Clement is enacting the temptations of gluttony even as he denounces them. His list, like the gluttons he is denouncing, doesn’t know when to stop. Is he testing us here? Is he setting his own accumulation of material on a more elevated level than the accumulations of the gluttons, or even of his own comic predecessors, flaunting his own ability to turn their comic denunciations to a higher Christian purpose? Or does he risk for a moment associating himself with them? Most strikingly, is he able to shut out the self-reflexive connotations of the imagery of variety and overstuffing which are so deeply ingrained in Latin poetry, and in Greek representations of consumption before that?⁵⁵ Do his own thundering denunciations of variety turn back against himself, at the richness of his own accumulation of literary models and quotations? Athenaeus, too, constantly asks the same question of himself in his obsession with self-reflexive images of excess and intoxication.

⁵⁵ Gowers (1993).

In many ways, then, the voice of Clement's divine Logos is an archetypally Bakhtinian, dialogic one, speaking out its own distinctive self through an astonishingly rich and diverse range of ventriloquised others. There also seem to be moments where his text flaunts its own dialogic character almost whether he wants it to or not, in the sense that his *satira* of borrowings has implications which are hard to control. And yet it is also clear that he is trying much harder than Athenaeus to suppress those implications, and that he does so in part through avoidance of the dialogue form. For Athenaeus, by contrast, it is precisely the dialogue form which brings his mixing of so many different speakers and source texts into prominence, allowing him to move between different levels of narrative, in a way which at times make it hard for us to identify whose voice exactly we are hearing.

METHODIUS

This chapter has so far explored the idea that Christian writing (at the risk of vast generalisation) may often be uncomfortable with the kinds of indeterminacy (pp. 94–8) and many-voicedness (pp. 98–102) which are particularly associated with symptomatic speech, even more so than other types of dialogue. In this section I want to test those assumptions further by looking at one text – Methodius' *Symposium*, written probably in the second half of the third century, and so several generations after Clement's *Paidagogos*⁵⁶ – which I think raises some additional problems and questions, and which might force us into a more nuanced formulation. My main argument here is simply that we should be more ready to see Methodius as a writer who is self-conscious about his own relationship with agonistic or dialogic forms of argument, even as he distances himself from them.

First, a brief summary. The dialogue opens in imitation of Plato's *Symposium*. Two women, Euboulion⁵⁷ and Gregorion, are sharing news of a discussion of virginity at a banquet hosted by Arete the daughter of Philosophia. Gregorion recounts the version she heard from one of the participants Theopatira, who tells of a long and difficult journey up a path crawling with terrifying reptiles, and then their arrival in the garden paradise

⁵⁶ See Musurillo (1958) 4 for dating. For text and commentary, see Musurillo (1963); for English translation, Musurillo (1958).

⁵⁷ Others read masculine Euboulios: see Goldhill (1995) 162–3, n. 8 for arguments in favour of feminine identification, with reference to Musurillo (1963) 42–3, n. 1.

of Arete's home. When they have eaten, Arete proposes a discussion of virginity, and her ten guests speak in praise of virginity in turn. The dialogue ends with a hymn performed by Thekla, the companion of St Paul, and a final return to the framing narrative where Euboulion and Gregorion sum up what they have learned. The text is multi-faceted. It is full of practical instruction, influenced in part by Clement, especially in the notion of the 'progressive release of the soul from the domination of the passions'⁵⁸ and it had a considerable influence over later ascetic practices.⁵⁹ But it also goes beyond day-to-day instruction. Chastity for Methodius is not to be defined narrowly in terms of sexual abstinence only, but instead comes to stand for the whole practice of perfect Christian virtue, by which we can prepare for the final coming of Christ. And the work as a whole stands as an extended refutation of the kind of cosmological dualism which sees embodiment as the origin of sin.⁶⁰

On that basis one might view the text as typically symptotic in the sense that it has compilatory ambitions, ranging over a huge variety of different areas of Christian thought. As Herbert Musurillo puts it:

En un sens, c'est une complète *summula theologiae*, dans laquelle Méthode a incorporé des discussions sur l'encratisme et la christologie, l'astrologie et la détermination, le célibat et la concupiscence.⁶¹

Effectively, the work stands as a compendium of Christian views on the traditionally symptotic subject of desire, with extensive quotation from a range of Christian authorities (often also with allusions to Greco-Roman authors mixed in, although as for Clement these are rarely named explicitly).⁶² Some speakers in Plutarchan fashion use the language of improvisation⁶³ or contribution⁶⁴ to describe their own speeches. There are repeated references to the fact that we are hearing a variety of voices, and to the idea that there are countless numbers of different ways of saying the same thing, although the stress is always on the way in which different contributions

⁵⁸ See Patterson (1997) 8. ⁵⁹ See Musurillo (1958) 3 and 169, n. 2.

⁶⁰ On Methodius' theology, see Patterson (1997); and more briefly, Musurillo (1958) 16–23 and (1963) 13–30. Patterson's very clear and comprehensive account nevertheless pays little attention to the narrative form of the work or to Methodius' ambivalent self-positioning in relation to the norms of classical dialogue; those topics are my main interests here.

⁶¹ Musurillo (1963) 13.

⁶² Cf. Zorzi (2003) on Methodius' reshaping of Platonic concepts of Eros; Goldhill (1995) 1–4 on the theme of chastity and the work's ambivalence towards its Platonic frame.

⁶³ E.g. Thallousa in 5.8 (132): ἐκ τοῦ παραχρήμα.

⁶⁴ E.g. Theophila in 2.8 (50): συμβάλλομαι; Thallousa in 5.8 (132): συμβάλλομαι; Agathe in 6.1 (132): εἰσενέγκασθαι.

work by reinforcing rather than undermining each other. In 4.1, for example, Theopatra explains the varied nature of God's inspiration:

If, virgins, the knowledge of the art of argumentation always relied on the same courses of argument and travelled by the same path, there would be no possibility that I could avoid irritating you in attempting subjects which have been fought out already (τοις ἤδη προηγωνισμένοις). But if it is right that there are countless starting-points and courses for argument – since God inspires us 'in manifold and varied ways' – what an absurdity it is to hide ourselves and be afraid. (*Symposium* 4.1 (93))

That quotation, taken from Hebrews 1.1, is appropriate for Methodius' theme of unity through diversity, describing as it does the way in which God's early, fragmented communication with the prophets has now been clarified through the words of his Son.⁶⁵

Despite being many-voiced in those senses, it is hard to find the kind of ambivalence and playfulness we might normally view as the defining features of sympotic writing within Greco-Roman tradition. However, that is not to say that Methodius is simply uninterested in the agonistic side of the tradition he is working with. My suggestion here is rather that he is fascinated with the project of actively dramatising his own relationship with the agonistic potential of the dialogue form he is using. Musurillo does not mention that possibility. He notes that there is some disagreement between the first two speakers – a 'faible tentative de conflit dialectique', as he calls it – but characterises the final eight speeches as little more than a string of homiletic instructions, which have only a distant, diluted resemblance to their Platonic ancestors:

En tant qu'exemple de la technique platonicienne, pourtant, le dialogue de Méthode n'est guère une réussite: car M. a manifestement manqué la profonde habileté dialectique de son maître, qui fait progresser la vérité par l'exposition organique de points de vue opposés.⁶⁶

On closer inspection, however, the picture is rather more complicated. I want to illustrate that claim by focusing in what follows on just one feature of Methodius' engagement with dialogic norms, that is the way in which he saturates his writing with the language of competition – often added into passages where he is otherwise reproducing the language of Plato's

⁶⁵ See also 7.1 for a similar example, drawing on Eph. 3.10; that passage similarly combines a stress on the varied wisdom of God with the claim that the time is now right for clearer revelation, in this case through Paul's own prophetic voice.

⁶⁶ Musurillo (1963) 24.

Symposium very closely – in such a way as to reflect conspicuously on his reshaping of agonistic traditions of sympotic speech.

Competition is immediately prominent in the work. In the opening paragraph, for example, Euboulion describes what she has heard of the banquet: ‘they tell me that the women competed so very magnificently and vigorously that they missed out nothing of what needed to be said on the topic (φασὶ γὰρ σφόδρα μεγαλοπρέπῳς οὕτως αὐτὰς καὶ ἰσχυρῳς ἠγωνίσθαι ὡς μηδενὸς εἶναι τῶν εἰς τὸ προκείμενον ἀναγκαίων ἐνδεεῖς), (pr. 2). At the end of the framing conversation that agonistic language recurs, as we hear Gregorion complimenting Euboulion: ‘You are always brilliant in discussions (δεινῇ ἐν ταῖς ὁμιλίαις) and keen to find the truth, refuting (ἐξελέγχουσα) everyone easily’, and then Euboulion’s reply: ‘do not argue (φιλονεικεῖν) about that subject now’,⁶⁷ phrases which between them suggest that these two interlocutors share the ten virgins’ appetite for debate – although Euboulion’s preference for avoiding debate in some ways anticipates the move towards increasing consensus in the later sections of the work. Within the inset narrative of the conversation the language of competition is similarly conspicuous. Arete invites Marcella to speak first, in a sentence which very closely imitates the language of Plato, *Symposium* 177d, but she then rounds her invitation off with an additional sentence – not drawn from Plato – comparing the coming discussion to a contest, offering to crown ‘the one who competes successfully (τὴν καλῶς ἀγωνισαμένην)’. Her argument against marriage is then contradicted by Theophila (whose speech begins in almost identical language to the claim of Eryximachus in Plato, *Symposium* 186a that he needs to add to the speech of his predecessor Pausanias, which is incomplete). Not far into Theophila’s speech, Marcella interrupts, and we hear again the language of the wrestling ring: Theophila feels dizzy: ‘like one who is grasped around the midriff by a formidable opponent (ὥσπερ ὑπὸ γενναίου ληφθεῖσα τῶν μέσων ἀνταγωνιστοῦ)’ (2.4). In a sense then, far from downplaying conflict in the opening of the work, Methodius goes out of his way to draw attention to it, although it is a version of competitive dispute that risks violating the Plutarchan friend-making characteristics of the symposium precisely through its vehemence.

Admittedly as we move into the second half, the atmosphere of rivalry drops away: the later speakers tend to become more and more self-deprecating,

⁶⁷ That expression adapts almost identical phrasing at the end of the framing conversation in Plato, *Symposium* 173e.

more and more keen to stress the fact that their own contributions can only be footnotes to the points already made.⁶⁸ For Musurillo this is Methodius running out of steam: after the ‘faible tentative de conflit dialectique’ in the confrontation between Marcella and Theophila he drifts into lazy sermonising. But I wonder if we should at least be granting Methodius a bit more self-consciousness than that. One of the striking developments, for example, is the way in which the language of agonism tends to be redirected, rather than dropping away entirely.⁶⁹ There is an increasing sense that the true struggle is against oneself, rather than against rivals in conversation, with virginity, and the nearness to God it provides, as the prize. That assumption is prominent especially in the speech of Thekla (8) which is saturated with agonistic language; and it culminates in another wrestling image in the work’s final lines, where Euboulion suggests that the best wrestler is the one who is being constantly tested against difficult opponents in competition, just as the most valuable type of virginity is one which is constantly being tested against temptation.⁷⁰ I suggested earlier that Plutarch in his *Sympotic Questions* appropriates the language of agonistic competition and festival participation as an image for his own competitive philosophical conversations, representing them as elevated forms of common civic activities. Methodius reshapes those same images – in line with widespread Christian fascination with the language of athletics – to rather different purposes.

In that sense Methodius, I suggest, may be consciously crafting his reaction to the agonistic, ambiguous potential of the dialogue form, reshaping it self-consciously, rather than simply passively falling short of it. What matters here, in other words, is not simply the fact that this particular Christian writer may be wary of sympotic dialogue, but also that he explores and signals to us with a great deal of intricacy and ingenuity where the differences of his own approach lie.

⁶⁸ E.g. 6.1, 9.1, 10.1.

⁶⁹ Thekla’s speech wins its speaker a special crown at the end of the debate (11, 284), but here we should perhaps see the significance of the agonistic language not so much in its reference to Thekla’s victory in conversation, but more in the overtones of the struggles of martyrdom for which she was so famous (see esp. 8.17, where Euboulion and Gregorion, summing up Thekla’s contribution, praise her for her triumph in the contests of the martyrs). The details of her speech also stress the importance of contests for virginity: e.g. see 8.2 (175), where we hear of virgins crowned with the blossoms of immortality as the result of their contests; and in 8.13 Thekla talks of the need for contest against the seven-headed beast of Revelation, where the virgin can win the seven crowns of virtue from the seven contests of chastity.

⁷⁰ See especially the wrestling imagery in 300, which picks up and rewrites the language of wrestling quoted above from 2.4 (37).

MACROBIUS

This final section jumps ahead by more than a century to roughly 430 CE,⁷¹ asking similar questions of a very different text. How does Macrobius' *Saturnalia* represent dialogue? How self-conscious is Macrobius in his manipulation of traditional uses of the dialogue form? Should we see this as a text which shares Christian wariness of agonistic dialogue communication, and Christian desire to rewrite that inheritance? Or should we see it rather as a text which reactivates Greco-Roman models of agonistic enquiry? Clearly there are some areas, not surprisingly, where Macrobius is much closer than Methodius to his Greco-Roman models.⁷² For example, he matches Plutarch and others in his traditionally sympotic fascination with local context and identity, setting the work at the festival of the Saturnalia in Rome, and making it into a celebration of Roman religious and poetic tradition, and of the Latin language. He also matches both Plutarch and Athenaeus, as we have already seen (p. 94 above), in his fascination with the idea that the multiple voices of the past can be made to speak through his characters in the present. There are, however, important differences. What I want to show here is that Macrobius is highly self-conscious about his engagement with and reshaping of sympotic tradition; that he goes out of his way to draw attention to it; and that at least some features of that rewriting are shared with what we have seen for Methodius.

The feature which most obviously aligns Macrobius with Methodius against his Greco-Roman sympotic models is the fact that he seems to value consensus and agreement much more urgently than they do. He stresses not only consensus between guests but also, implicitly connected with that, consensus between past and present, and in the process he tends to suppress the connotations of uncertainty and inventiveness which are a particular feature of the sympotic form within so much of Greco-Roman tradition. One important reference-point here is the work of Robert Kaster.⁷³ Kaster's primary interest is in examining Macrobius' representation of the grammarian Servius, but in the process he offers an extended reading of the patterning of Macrobius' work. He emphasises, amongst other things, the way in which the guests feel themselves to be part of a clearly defined order, speaking in turn, and with a sense that all are contributing to a common

⁷¹ See Cameron (1966) for date; Döpp (1978) for objections.

⁷² On Macrobius' use of sympotic traditions, see also Martin (1931) 280–86; Flamant (1968) and (1977) 172–232; Relihan (1992) 238–9.

⁷³ Esp. Kaster (1980).

enterprise, each from his own different area of expertise. And he points to the way in which that sense of unity is ‘facilitated ... by the choice of the dialogue form’,⁷⁴ which makes a virtue of the fragmentation of specialisation typical (on some accounts) of late-antique society, fitting it in with ideals of sympotic harmony. That cooperative harmony stands as an equivalent to the harmony between different ages:

literary borrowing conceived of as the preservation of and expression of respect for the *societas et rerum communio*, the ‘unified community’ of the shared culture extending into the past, just as the intellectual ‘borrowing’ among the participants in the symposium is a means of recognising and affirming the order of the ‘unified community’ of the present.⁷⁵

The obligation to maintain that harmony is expressed in moral terms. Within that atmosphere there is no place for competition. Nor is there any place for playful humour. Kaster draws a contrast with Cicero’s dialogues, ‘where the smile is an instrument of amused debate and rejoinder or accompanies ironic banter’; in Macrobius’ work, by contrast, the smile (which recurs repeatedly as a motif) is ‘a signal that debate is being shut off and is the opposite of bantering ... The only man who smiles in the *Saturnalia* is the expert; and not just the expert ... but the expert who has been challenged precisely in the area of his expertise’.⁷⁶ On the rare occasions when conflict does erupt, when one of the guests commits the faux-pas of challenging the atmosphere of consensus, it is suppressed with a brutality which far surpasses the recurrent atmosphere of gentle mockery in Plutarch’s *Sympotic Questions* (as Kaster demonstrates through discussion of the quarrel between Disarius and Eustathius in Book 7.13–15, which flares up after Disarius has dared to criticise Plato’s explanation of a medical matter). The language of ‘brute certainty’⁷⁷ which surfaces here, as Kaster points out, is utterly alien to Plutarch.⁷⁸

In what sense, then, does Macrobius draw our attention to this process of reshaping sympotic traditions? There is space here only for three brief examples. My first passage comes in the enormous string of metaphors Macrobius uses to describe his own work in the first preface of the text, which I quoted from briefly above (p. 94). In that passage, he tries out a wide range of different images for giving expression to his principles of creative imitation: like bees, he says, we should sip from many flowers, combining what we gather into a single flavour; like the human body, which

⁷⁴ Kaster (1980) 230. ⁷⁵ Kaster (1980) 233. ⁷⁶ Kaster (1980) 239.

⁷⁷ Kaster (1980) 241. ⁷⁸ For comparison with Plutarch, see Kaster (1980) 241, n. 68.

absorbs and transforms the food it consumes, so we must digest the food of the mind and assimilate it. One of those images seems to have particular self-reflexive significance for the dialogic scenes which follow, and that is the theme of unity within a choir, which is repeated several times in the rest of the work:

You see how many people's voices a choir consists of; and yet it gives out one single voice from all of them. Some of the singers' voices are high, some are low, some are in the middle range; women are combined with men; the sound of the pipe is added; and in such a way the individual voices of the choir are hidden from view but the voices of all are nevertheless heard, and harmony arises from diverse elements. (*Saturnalia* 1.Pr.9)

That image of voices contributing by their polyphony to a single message or a single voice is programmatic for the conversation which follows; and like Methodius' model of unity in diversity it is rather different in emphasis from the Plutarchan obsession with adversariality.

Second, in the third prefatory section of the work, where Macrobius replays the Platonic layering of different levels of narrative (1.2.1–14), we hear a speaker called Decius, asking his friend Postumanus for an account of the banquet in the expectation that Postumanus had been there himself. Postumanus explains that he was not present, but that he heard everything from his friend Eusebius, and will now repeat it to Decius in turn. Decius has already praised Postumanus for his powerful memory:

I have recently spent time with others who are admirers of the strength of your memory, which has often allowed you to recount in order all the things which were said on that occasion. (1.2.2)

The narrative layering – which in Plato raises doubts about the accuracy of the version we are about to hear, in line with the work's interest in the question of how philosophical knowledge is passed on from person to person – is here (quite bluntly) rewritten to fit Macrobius' preoccupations with creative imitation. Presumably we are to imagine that Postumanus' repetition of Eusebius' own repetition of the conversation is an example of precisely the principles of the preface (and precisely the principles of which Virgil is shown to be the supreme practitioner in the bulk of the text which follows) of faithful repetition which is moulded to the idiom of the new speaker but without ever losing its original character. Once again, the Plutarchan practice of debating with the texts of the past is replaced with a very different process of respectful revoicing, a principle which runs right through the text as a guiding aesthetic.

My third point concerns Macrobius' very pointed rewriting of Plutarch's symptotic dialogues. Macrobius reads the *Symptotic Questions* carefully,

especially in imitating it extensively in Book 7. He clearly recognises the importance of inventive argumentation for Plutarch's work. And yet Macrobius also ostentatiously signals the difference between his own 'creativity' and Plutarch's. For one thing, despite the fact that many passages are translated from Plutarch's version word for word, Macrobius avoids the typical Plutarchan preference for providing several different explanations in turn. Repeatedly his guests seem to be more interested in the performance of a single response to a question, rather than open debate on the subject; repeatedly we see just one speaker addressing a question, rather than several. In the *Saturnalia* it is questions, not answers, which proliferate, as the answer to each enquiry is accepted without challenge and the next enquiry immediately introduced. Even Macrobius' ingenious Greeks (some of the guests, as Greek speakers, are characterised by the other diners as being better suited to inventive argumentation)⁷⁹ are relatively happy to let the answers of others go unchallenged; and when they do lapse into argumentative behaviour they often attract unfavourable comment from their fellow-diners, as if to emphasise the fact that interpretative flexibility is somehow alien to the Latinate culture the work memorialises. We have seen already the vicious dispute which erupts between Disarius and Eustathius in 7.15 – a warning, it seems, of where disagreement can lead to. Immediately after this dispute, one of the other characters, Evangelus, mocks them, characterising their argumentativeness as an example of frivolous, Greek addiction to ingenious argumentation (a misleading characterisation, if Kaster is right to point to the alienness of their exchange from the sympotic ideals of Plutarch and his fellow guests), while at the same time encouraging them to continue with it:

At this point Evangelus, who was unwilling to allow the Greeks any glory, spoke mockingly to them, 'That's enough of these subjects; you're discussing them in order to show off your garrulousness. Instead, if your powers of judgement are of any use at all, I would much rather know from you whether it was the egg which came into being first, or the chicken.' (7.16.1)

The doctor Disarius acknowledges that Evangelus is making fun of them, but launches into a serious answer nevertheless, following the precedent of *Sympotic Questions* 2.3, where precisely that question is discussed. The narrative here offers Eustathius and Disarius another chance to show that they can behave like Plutarchan symposiasts. However, in their eagerness to restore harmony, to show that dialogue can be peaceful after all, they go to

⁷⁹ See 7.5.4 for a good example.

the other extreme, shying away from properly agonistic debate, and treating each other with exaggerated politeness. The work's rewriting of the argumentative structure in *Sympotic Questions* 2.3 makes that departure from Plutarch's agonistic ideals clear: only one speaker, Disarius, replies, summarising both sides of the argument himself, and Eustathius does not even take up the invitation to involve himself, whereas in Plutarch's version many different speakers contribute. In this chapter, then, as elsewhere, and very much unlike Plutarch, Macrobius suppresses divergence of opinion, or at least shows his characters treading very carefully around it. In that sense he enacts his non-Plutarchan attitude to ingenious, creative response precisely through his own allusive engagement with the *Sympotic Questions*.

All of those points may seem fairly straightforward, but they are not necessarily for that reason insignificant, if they remind us that Macrobius, like Methodius, is highly self-conscious and self-aware in his rewriting of dialogue form. Like Methodius, Macrobius tends to avoid sympotic indeterminacy. He does not simply banish or ignore the idea of dialogue entirely, however; rather he redirects it, reshaping the guiding principles of speculative, sympotic speech (ideas of contest and of polyphony) to justify a very different way of understanding the world.

Are the overlaps in this respect between Macrobius and Methodius coincidental? Certainly we should recognise that their attitudes towards authority arise within vastly different social, chronological and theological contexts. Is there really anything to tie them together at all? Or should we stress instead the variety of uses to which the symposium can be put and the danger of generalising? Clearly that last point in particular is crucial. There is, however, one additional feature of Macrobius' text which seems to me to offer a starting-point for thinking about pagan and Christian attitudes to dialogue together, at least within the context of Macrobius' early fifth-century society, and that is the role of the troublemaker, Evangelus. Evangelus is the uninvited guest of the *Saturnalia*. He is argumentative and mocking; we hear several times that the other guests 'shudder' in horror when he intervenes. In that sense he is a figure against whom Macrobius defines the aesthetic of pious harmony to which most of his speakers subscribe. Evangelus is constantly sceptical, constantly keen to catch others out, to encourage his fellow guests to argue with each other. In that sense the passage I quoted above, where he mocks Eustathius and Disarius for their ingenuity, is more complicated than I suggested, given that Evangelus is here criticising the kind of argumentative behaviour he spends most of his time trying to provoke. Evangelus may also be a Christian. That identification (based, for some, simply on his name) was for some time discredited,

especially after Alan Cameron's redating of the text to the 430s CE, half a century later than originally thought, with the consequent implication that we should be very cautious about seeing the text as a doctrine of militant paganism, let alone anti-Christian propaganda. Sabine McCormack has recently revived that interpretation, however, on a number of different grounds, with reference (for example) to Evangelus' attack on Virgil, which she suggests follows the contours of Christian attacks on pagan literature, and to Evangelus' reference to secret rites of his fellow guests, when he finds them all assembled together on his arrival (McCormack reads that reference in the light of legislation against pagan cult).⁸⁰ If that is right, what implications does it have for our understanding of Christian attitudes to dialogue in the early fifth century? How should we read Evangelus' interventions? At times he seems to be the only dialogic, Plutarchan character in view, relentlessly dragging his fellow guests away from their consensual styles of argumentation (despite his typically ungenerous attack on those who break away from consensual styles of argument in the passage I quoted in the last paragraph).⁸¹ Or should we read his disruptive, nihilistic style of argument as something paradoxically and, against first impressions, profoundly unPlutarchan, and in fact not so far removed from that of his pagan interlocutors, in the sense that it arises from a habit of attacking whatever is threatening to one's own position, just as Eustathius attacks Disarius, humourlessly and uncompromisingly, for his criticism of Plato? Kaster argues that we should not see Evangelus as a Christian,⁸² but he hints nevertheless at a similar conclusion in his final paragraphs:

It may be possible to hear in that passage [Eustathius' attack on Disarius] the idiom of the fifth century: the language of Macrobius in the heat of controversy is most closely paralleled by the language used to denounce a contemporary Christian heresy, as the unrestrained assertion of an idiosyncratic *prudencia* which seeks to undo the solidarity of the whole.⁸³

I have suggested here that Macrobius and Methodius, despite their enormous differences and despite the gap of more than a century between them, have a certain amount in common with each other in their cautious, transformative attitude to traditions of sympotic polyphony and contest. If Kaster is right, that may be in part because Christian literature and

⁸⁰ McCormack (1998) 74, 86–7.

⁸¹ On Evangelus' place in a long line of disruptive guests in the symposium genre, see Relihan (1992) 238–9.

⁸² Cameron (1966) 35 rejects the idea that Evangelus is Christian, as does Flamant (1977) 74.

⁸³ Kaster (1980) 262.

Christian thought participated and contributed to wider currents of thought about dialogue and authority which flowed out also into pagan discourse.

CONCLUSION: MORE SYMPOTIC QUESTIONS

This chapter has necessarily skated over many of the nuances and problems which a longer study would need to examine. It also points to many further questions which there is no space to address here. Some of those questions centre around particular works. How, for example, do the many scenes of sympotic discussion in the gospel narratives, especially in Luke, draw on and transform Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions of convivial debate?⁸⁴ What should we make of Jerome's claim that there was a *Symposium* among the works of Lactantius?⁸⁵ What, if anything, can the emperor Julian's curious Saturnalian work the *Caesares* – a balloon debate held in heaven between the previous emperors of Rome – tell us about changing attitudes to sympotic debate?⁸⁶ A longer study of the history of the symposium dialogue might also examine in more detail the impact of the Christian eucharist, Christian asceticism and Christian metaphor as elements which often drown out any interest in the symposium as an institution, but which all nevertheless have the potential, even if rarely, to be overlaid and juxtaposed with sympotic motifs. These questions, however, take us beyond the scope of this volume. What I have tried to do here is to offer a first approach to the question of how and how far sympotic dialogue changes, in the transition from the Greek literature of the Imperial period to the world of early Christianity and late-antique paganism. My argument has been, above all, that we should be wary of generalising too quickly and too simplistically about Christian and late-antique disinterest in dialogue. Even texts like those of Methodius and Macrobius which at first sight have only a very diluted interest in the agonistic potential of the dialogue forms they inherit, nevertheless on closer inspection turn out to be engaging with those traditions intricately, reshaping them for their own new contexts and new uses.

⁸⁴ E.g. see Braun (1995); Smith (2003) 253–72; see also (amongst many others) Stein (1957); see Smith (2003) 133–72 on the question of how far Jewish convivial literature is influenced by the Greco-Roman symposium form.

⁸⁵ Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 100.80.

⁸⁶ For discussion in relation to other sympotic works, see Relihan (1993) 119–34, with further bibliography; Relihan (1992) 236–8.

