Love, Despair, and Transcendence:
The Tragic and Platonic Views of the Human Condition

Among the particular gifts bequeathed to us by the formidable fourth-century Greeks are tragedy and Plato. If of Plato we can say, as Ralph Waldo Emerson did, that "we have reached the mountain from which all these drift boulders were detached" (qtd in Bloom 123), so too can we see the profound impact of Greek Tragedy on our way of conceptualizing our place in the universe and extracting meaning from human experience. What a different vision of the human condition they present though. From Plato we inherit a message of hope and transcendence, the feeling that virtue can carry eternal rewards and that meaning can be extracted from the chaos of our conflicting desires and drives. Through the tragic lens we are confronted with a clouded vision of despair, chaos and futility. The world that is depicted is one of conflicting energies, flawed heroes, twists of fate, and, despite the noblest of intentions, situations of horrific suffering. Yet, if Charles Segal is correct when he states in his essay, "Spectator and Listener," that "the tragic poets are the spiritual brothers of the philosophers" (215), it is because humans must, by our very threefold nature as physical, intellectual, and emotional creatures, employ both frameworks in our pursuit to discover the truth and to achieve an understanding of why the world is like it is.

Among the most notable and distinctive characteristics of man is love. As such its role in human affairs is the subject of both tragedy and philosophical inquiry. How it is framed in Sophocles's tragic plays, *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, and in Plato's dialogue, the *Symposium*, is, however, the difference between night and day. Within the tragic framework, love is embodied in the god of beauty and desire, Eros, who along with the other gods determine the conditions of earthly existence. From their home on Mount Oympus the gods direct all phenomena and human affairs with a will that is both capricious and mysterious. Their intent remains obscure to the mortals caught in the grip of Necessity and, although humans can and do act according to the dictates of their character, their choice is limited to how to act honorably in the face of inexorable Fate. The finest tragedy, as Aristotle asserts in his *Poetics*, always ends in pain and suffering and involves a reversal in fortune. Most significantly, "The change of fortune … should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character" (Part XIII). Though the eponymous heroes in both of Sophocles's plays display various character flaws – both are willful, passionate, obstinate and rash – the underlying cause of these flaws can be seen as the influence of Eros on the way the action unfolds. *Eros*, as embodied in the Greek god of that name and signifying passionate and sensual love, is not only a powerful creative force but one which unleashes chaos and conflict in the world of men. *Eros* is dangerous, even malicious; its power is inescapable. Most threateningly, e*ros* causes men to behave irrationally. In the words of Bernard Knox, it is "an irresistible force which brings its victims close to madness" (Notes to *Antigone* 400).

This irrational aspect of love can be seen in the eponymous heroine of *Antigone* as well as in the figures of Ismene, Haemon and Creon, who play out the conflicting demands of love on family members. Driven by a passionate devotion to her slain brother, Polynices, and refusing to bow to the decree of the king, Creon, that his body be left unburied, Antigone gives in entirely to her emotions. In contrast to her sister, Ismene, who has suffered equally at the hands of Fate but who maintains a grip on reason,

Antigone would rather die than submit to a law that would disgrace her loved one. The fact that Antigone is willing to leave behind her only living sibling, Ismene, whose laments at the prospect of Antigone's death are heart-wrenching, suggests the dark and chaotic power of *eros* to banish all reason. It is in vain that Ismene pleads with her and asks her "Why rush to extremes? It's madness, madness" (80-81).

This power of love to rob mortals of their reason plays out with Antigone's beloved, Haemon, as well as with his father, Creon. In a telling exchange between the two, filial and fatherly love and control of the passions gives way to irrational outbursts which lead to tragedy for both of them. Haemon begins his defense of Antigone on a rational note, professing his love and loyalty to his father: "No marriage could ever mean more to me than you" (711), he declares. But by the end of the passage, provoked by his father's hostile intransigence and arrogance, he leaves Creon with the ominous foretelling of his, Haemon's, own death. In vain does the leader of the chorus, observe that "You are both talking sense (812). Once unleashed, the passions can not be bottled up again.

The song of the chorus following this exchange encapsulates the irresistible and malicious power of Eros the god and *eros* the emotion. While Haemon appears ambivalent about love in the beginning of the exchange with Creon, he goes through a reversal within the space of one scene, mirroring the reversal of the principle figures that is a hallmark of the tragic plot in general. The chorus reflects afterwards that "Love . . . not even the deathless gods can flee your onset . . .Love alone the victor . . . Throned in power side by side with the mighty laws! . . . never conquered." Not only does *eros* "wrench the minds of the righteous into outrage" and "swerve them to their ruin," it uses men for its amusement, as the chorus acknowledges in the last line, "Love you mock us for your sport" (879-894). Within the tragic framework, the power of *eros* condemns humans to lives of despair and suffering.

In *Oedipus the King*, too, love plays a role in the disaster that befalls the hero. Though the love Oedipus shows for his people may, on the surface, be more connected to *philia* than to *eros*, the irrationality of his acts and the passionate tenacity with which he pursues the truth reveal the rash and headlong power of *eros* and bring doom not only to Oedipus but to the city he has pledged to protect. The play highlights, too, the connection between *eros* and strife.

The power of *eros* to create conflict is revealed in the way that both Oedipus and those who try to shield him from the truth work at cross purposes with each other. The more those who love and respect Oedipus urge him to drop the matter, the more he persists for "not one is as sick as" he over what has befallen Thebes (73). Such is the love Oedipus feels for his people that he grieves for them far more than he fears for his own life (105). A man bound inexorably to the pursuit of truth, a pursuit driven by a passionate love for Thebes, Oedipus dismisses, one after another, the urgings of Tiresias, Creon, and the old shepherd to turn back from his quest. Not even the tender love he feels for Jocasta, (again the result of the dark workings of *eros*) can stop him despite her desperate plea, "Do it for me, for the sake of all your people" (724). Though he arrives "at the edge of hearing horrors" (1280), the love that has translated itself into a willingness to endure whatever disaster will come presses him on to his fate.

In both *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, the conflict *eros* presents is one which pits the passionate love of mothers, sisters, fathers and sons, emotions attached to one's blood ties, against the powerful love for one's state. Whereas Antigone could argue with

the authority of her devotion to Polynices that she was not ashamed to honor her own "flesh and blood" (572), Creon could invoke duty to the state as the higher love, for only with the safety of the country "can we establish friendships, truer than blood itself" (213). Both attitudes exemplify the dangers implicit in the attachment to one extreme at the expense of the other. That they are irreconcilable is the stamp of tragedy.

If the tragic view of love opens up deeper questions about duty and honor, individual and society, the Platonic vision of the human condition strives not to reconcile the conflicts created by *eros* but to transcend them. Plato's complaint against poetry and by extension drama has to do with the way it "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up" (Republic 301). For Plato the loss of control that comes with giving in to the passions precludes living a life of happiness and virtue. This is not to say, however, that Plato does not see a role for *eros*. In *The Symposium*, Plato does not dismantle the mythical concept of Eros nor does he diminish its fundamental importance in the realm of human relations. What he does do is place the power of *eros* within the reach of men promising no less than immortality to those who allow it to guide their lives.

That "the highest and noblest things of the world are not easily severed from the sensual desires" is clearly communicated through the setting and structure of the *Symposium* (Jowett qtd in Phillips). We meet Socrates, Plato's primary mouthpiece, at a drinking party surrounded not only by friends with intellectual interests but by those who are clearly vying for his sexual favors as well. The intent to debate the qualities of *eros* in an honest way that does not dismiss the sensual is underscored by the attributes of the guests who are present, among them the youthful and beautiful Agathon and Alcibiades, and by the suggestive banter, such as the comparisons Alcibiades makes between Socrates and Marsyas, the satyr. The point is driven home at the end as well, when, after Socrates has outlined what is essentially Plato's theory of eternal forms, the love-struck Alcibiades ends the dialogue with a description of his would-be lover's - Socrates's - attributes rather than his own theory on love. The point of the setting seems to be, as Christopher Phillips suggests in *Socrates In Love: Philosophy for a Passionate Heart*, that "if you're going to discuss matters of the heart in ways that will bear fruit, you should not seek out sterile surroundings and merely intellectualize" (25).

It is not purely matters of the heart that Plato is getting at here though. It is truth. Underscoring the challenge in discovering the truth as well as the way that appearances can pose as the real thing, Plato employs both myth and dialogue, allowing a plurality of voices to be heard on the topic and even attributing the great Socrates's comments to the enigmatic Diotima. Setting up the dialogue in such a manner demonstrates "that the dialectical path to truth is a winding and twisted way that often leads in circles or collapses in absurdity" (Hamblet). And while the crucial point of the *Symposium* is not Eros, the use of myth serves to remind us that "Mythos is always conveyed in logos and logos . . . is never without its mythical dimension" (Hamblet). Mythos and logos are both critical to discovering the truth. Indeed, though Plato professes to disdain the poets, his is a literary approach as much informed by the mystical as the rational and, at heart, more intuitive than logical. Plato doesn't discard the validity of the gods; he shows us, here through his focus on Eros, the higher ethical purpose to which thinking about them should be put and suggests that it is by recognizing their true nature that we humans may realize the excellent and divine in ourselves.

Those gathered for the symposium have been challenged to praise Eros, and they do so in a way that fits in with the conventional image of the god as young and beautiful. In their view, the power of Eros lies in his ability to persuade men towards certain ends through the love of, or desire for, the beauty he embodies. Thus, Phaedrus and Pausanias highlight the usefulness of love for moral improvement due to its ability to make men strive toward what is good and recoil from what is degrading (178-d). Eryximachus sees the power of love as a force operating not only in the realm of humans, where it figures in medicine, physical training, farming, astronomy, music and all the arts of men, but also as one fundamental to the growth of all living organisms and to order and harmony throughout the cosmos. Through the myth of Er, Aristophanes equates love with desire for the completeness that can come only when one finds his unique and singular "other half." Although Aristophanes does not make the distinction between good and bad Eros as the others do, he does differentiate between simply sex and "that other desire which the soul cannot express" (192). In moving from the benefits of love towards a conceptualization of what love itself is, and in introducing the element of the soul, Aristophanes leads the way for Socrates.

Before we get to that point, however, we hear the youthful and brilliant Agathon, the very image of the god himself, who gives a description of the qualities embodied in Eros rather than those he inspires in men. Ostensibly bringing a focus on the connection between Eros and literary and artistic creativity, as well as wisdom, Agathon's pretty speech is a mere repetition of the conventional platitudes tossed off about Eros. His youth, beauty, and reputed intelligence are in stark contrast to Socrates's age, satyr-like appearance, and claims of ignorance. The fact that he directly precedes Socrates is Plato's way of setting us up for the ensuing discussion which will separate the truth from appearances, and Socrates wastes no time in poking holes through the "hyperbole and rhetoric" in Agathon's comments. Employing his systematic and logical process of questioning, Socrates makes clear his intent to give an "honest appraisal" of love and to show how Eros is "only always noble and fine in the eyes of the ignorant" (193).

Socrates begins with the myth of the origins of Eros as child of Poverty and Resource, which he employs to connect Eros with wisdom. Inhabiting the middle ground between need and plenty, between folly and wisdom, Eros is never in possession of beauty and the good but always seeking it. Thus, Eros is not what is loved, but rather the lover of beauty and the good and, by extension, wisdom because wisdom is beautiful. Socrates takes it a step further to show how Eros leads men to be seekers of wisdom as well. As lover of beauty, Eros desires always to possess it because it will make him happy. In like manner, all men want to be happy, and lacking what is good they will endeavor to possess it. Thus, Eros embodies that which drives men to seek the good, to seek wisdom (204).

Having established Eros as love or desire for the permanent possession of what is beautiful or good, Socrates next explains how this love leads men to ultimate truth and even immortality. Guided by Eros, men ascend a kind of ladder beginning with particular examples of beauty, then moving to a love of all physical beauty; from physical beauty they move to beauty in various subjects of study, and from these they arrive finally "at that branch of knowledge which studies nothing but ultimate beauty." In this way they reach the realm where beauty "exists for all time by itself and with itself, unique" and understand "what true beauty is." In searching for wisdom, then, there is no better "ally

than Eros," and for Socrates it is the only way to "earn the friendship of the gods" and attain immortality. (211, 212).

Thus Socrates ends his lesson on love, but of course by the time we reach this point we realize that Socrates's voice has been replaced by Plato's, and, as Harold Bloom suggests, "love turns out to be another name for philosophy" (129). We are now in Plato's transcendent realm of eternal forms and it is this element of transcendence that gives Plato the edge on tragedy as a way to understand the human condition, to reconcile ourselves with the fact of pain, suffering, chaos and death. This is connected to what Walter Kaufman is getting at in *Tragedy and Philosophy* when he observes that Plato is to tragedy as Christianity is to Judaism (2). Kaufman is referring to the historical and philosophical appropriation of the concerns about the human condition that had been the domain of the tragic poets until their eclipse by the philosophers from Plato on. Just as Christ's teachings of love and forgiveness displaced the Judaic God of wrath with the promise of transcendence through love and virtue, so Plato's philosophy, with its message of transcendence over the temporal world of particulars, of corruption and death, of chaos and change, sounded the death knell for the tragic world view. It would seem after all, then, that Plato is not the "spiritual brother" of Sophocles as Segal would have us think. Plato's view of the human condition has transcended that of the tragedies. If Plato is the spiritual brother of anyone, in the *Symposium* he is the spiritual brother of Christ.

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