

# EROS

THE BITTERSWEET



## Bittersweet

It was Sappho who first called eros "bittersweet." No one who has been in love disputes her. What does the word mean?

Eros seemed to Sappho at once an experience of pleasure and pain. Here is contradiction and perhaps paradox. To perceive this eros can split the mind in two. Why? The components of the contradiction may seem, at first glance, obvious. We take for granted, as did Sappho, the sweetness of erotic desire; its pleurability smiles out at us. But the bitterness is less obvious. There might be several reasons why what is sweet should also be bitter. There may be various relations between the two savors. Poets have sorted the matter out in different ways. Sappho's own formulation is a good place to begin tracing the possibilities. The relevant fragment runs:

Ἔρος δηῦτέ μ' ὀ λυσιμέλης δόνει,  
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον

Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me  
sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up  
(LP, fr. 130)

It is hard to translate. "Sweetbitter" sounds wrong, and yet our standard English rendering "bittersweet" inverts the actual terms of Sappho's compound *glukupikron*. Should that concern us? If her ordering has a descriptive intention, eros is here being said to bring sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: she is sorting the possibilities chronologically. Many a lover's experience would vali-

πόθω δ' ὑπερποντίας  
 φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνάσσειν·  
 εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν  
 ἔχθεται χάρις ἀνδρί,  
 ὀμμάτων δ' ἐν ἀχηγνίαις  
 ἔρρει πᾶς Ἀφροδίτα.

Because of his longing for something gone across  
 the sea  
 a phantom seems to rule the rooms,  
 and the grace of statues shaped in beauty  
 comes to be an object of hate for the man.  
 In the absences of eyes  
 all Aphrodite is vacant, gone.  
 (Ag. 414-19)

Love and hate furnish a subject for the Hellenistic epigram as well. Nicharchos' injunction to his beloved is typical:

Εἴ με φιλεῖς, μισεῖς με· καὶ εἰ μισεῖς, σὺ φιλεῖς με·  
 εἰ δὲ με μὴ μισεῖς, φίλτατε, μὴ με φίλει.

If you love me, you hate me. And if you hate me, you  
 love me.  
 Now if you don't hate me, beloved, don't love me.  
 (Anth. Pal. 11.252)

Catullus' epigram is perhaps the most elegant distillate we have of this cliché:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.  
 nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

I hate and I love. Why? you might ask.  
 I don't know. But I feel it happening and I hurt.  
 (Catullus 85)

The poets of the Greek lyric tradition sometimes conceptualize the erotic condition as starkly as this, but Sappho and her successors in general prefer physiology to

concepts. The moment when the soul parts on itself in desire is conceived as a dilemma of body and senses. On Sappho's tongue, as we have seen, it is a moment bitter and sweet. This ambivalent taste is developed, in later poets, into "bitter honey" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.81), "sweet wound" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.126), and "Eros of sweet tears" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.167). Eros knocks a lover flat with the shock of hot and cold in Anakreon's poem:

μεγάλῳ δηῦτέ μ' Ἔρωσ ἔκοψεν ὥστε χαλκεὺς  
 πελέκει, χειμερίῃ δ' ἔλουσεν χαράδρῃ.

With his huge hammer again Eros knocked me like a  
 blacksmith  
 and doused me in a wintry ditch  
 (PMG 413)

while Sophokles compares the experience to a lump of ice melting in warm hands (Radt, fr. 149).<sup>1</sup> Later poets mix the sensations of hot and cold with the metaphor from taste to concoct "sweet fire" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.63), lovers "burned by honey" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.126), erotic missiles "tempered in honey" (Anac. 27E). Ibykos frames eros in a paradox of wet and dry, for the black thunderstorm of desire drives against him not rain but "parching madnesses" (PMG 286.8-11). These tropes may have some basis in ancient theories of physiology and psychology, which associate action that is pleasurable, desirable or good with sensations of heat, liquidity, melting, and action that is unpleasant or hateful with cold, freezing, rigidification.

But no simple map of the emotions is available here. Desire is not simple. In Greek the act of love is a mingling (*mignumi*) and desire melts the limbs (*lusimelēs*, cf. Sappho fr. 130 above). Boundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs pro-

<sup>1</sup> See also the section on "Ice-pleasure" in the Sophoklean fragment below.

ceeds to break the lover (*damnatai*) as would a foe on the epic battlefield:

ἀλλά μ' ὀλυσιμελῆς ὤταϊρε δάμναται πόθος.

Oh comrade, the limb-loosener crushes me: desire.  
(Archilochos, West, *IEG* 196)

The shape of love and hate is perceptible, then, in a variety of sensational crises. Each crisis calls for decision and action, but decision is impossible and action a paradox when eros stirs the senses. Everyday life can become difficult; the poets speak of the consequences for behavior and judgment:

οὐκ οἶδ' ὅστι θεῶν δίχα μοι τὰ νοήματα

I don't know what I should do: two states of mind  
in me. . . .

(*LP*, fr. 51)

Sappho says, and breaks off.

ἔρέω τε δῆν τε κοῦκ ἔρέω  
καὶ μαίνομαι κοῦ μαίνομαι.

I'm in love! I'm not in love!  
I'm crazy! I'm not crazy!  
(*PMG* 428)

cries Anakreon.

ἐξ οὗ δὴ νέον ἔρνος ἐν ἡϊθέοις Διόφαντον  
λεύσσω οὔτε φυγεῖν οὔτε μένειν δύναμαι.

When I look at Diophantos, new shoot among the  
young men,  
I can neither flee nor stay  
(*Anth. Pal.* 12.126.5-6)

"Desire keeps pulling the lover to act and not to act" is the conclusion of Sophokles (*Radt*, fr. 149). Not only action founders. Moral evaluation also fractures under

pressure of paradox, splitting desire into a thing good and bad at the same time. The Eros of Euripides wields a bow that is "double" in its effect, for it can bring on a lovely life or complete collapse (*IA* 548-49). Euripides goes so far as to double the god of love himself: twin Erotes appear in a fragment of his lost play *Sthenoboea*. One of them guides the lover in a life of virtue. The other is a lover's worst enemy (*echthistos*) and leads him straight to the house of death (*Page* 1932, 3.128.22-25). Love and hate bifurcate Eros.

Let us return to the question with which we began, namely, the meaning of Sappho's adjective *glukupikron*. A contour has been emerging from our examination of the poetic texts. "Sweetbitter eros" is what hits the raw film of the lover's mind. Paradox is what takes shape on the sensitized plate of the poem, a negative image from which positive pictures can be created. Whether apprehended as a dilemma of sensation, action or value, eros prints as the same contradictory fact: love and hate converge within erotic desire.

Why?

## Ruse

Let no one enter here who is ignorant of geometry.

(inscription over the door of Plato's Academy)

There is something pure and indubitable about the notion that eros is lack. Moreover, it is a notion that, once adopted, has a powerful effect on one's habits and representations of love. We can see this most clearly in an example: consider Sappho's fragment 31, which is one of the best-known love poems in our tradition.

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὅττις ἐναντιός τοι  
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-  
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν  
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν,  
ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω θρόχε' ὡς με φώναι-  
σ' οὐδ' ἔν' ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλ' ἄκαν μὲν γλώσσα ἴεαγε λέπτον  
δ' αὐτίκα χρώ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,  
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἔν' ὄρημμ', ἐπιρρόμ-  
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἴεκαδε μ' ἴδρωσ ψῦχος κακχέεται ἰ τρόμος δὲ  
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας  
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω ἰ πιδεύης  
φαίνομ' ἴαι

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
who opposite you

sits and listens close  
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking  
is left in me

no: tongue breaks, and thin  
fire is racing under skin  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
grips me all, greener than grass  
I am and dead—or almost  
I seem to me.

(LP, fr. 31)

The poem floats toward us on a stage set. But we have no program. The actors go in and out of focus anonymously. The action has no location. We don't know why the girl is laughing nor what she feels about this man. He looms beyond the footlights, somewhat more than mortal in line 1 (*isos theoisin*), and dissolves at line 2 into a pronoun (*ottis*) so indefinite that scholars cannot agree on what it means. The poet who is staging the *mise-en-scène* steps mysteriously from the wings of a relative clause at line 5 (*to*) and takes over the action.

It is not a poem about the three of them as individuals, but about the geometrical figure formed by their perception of one another, and the gaps in that perception. It is an image of the distances between them. Thin lines of force coordinate the three of them. Along one line travels the girl's voice and laughter to a man who listens closely. A second tangent connects the girl to the poet. Between the eye of the poet and the listening man crackles a third current. The figure is a triangle. Why?

An obvious answer is to say that this is a poem about jealousy. Numbers of critics have done so. Yet, just as

many readers deny that there is any hint of jealousy here.<sup>2</sup> How is such blanket disagreement possible? Are we all operating with the same idea of what jealousy is?

The word 'jealousy' comes from Greek *zēlos* meaning 'zeal' or 'fervent pursuit.' It is a hot and corrosive spiritual motion arising in fear and fed on resentment. The jealous lover fears that his beloved prefers someone else, and resents any relationship between the beloved and another. This is an emotion concerned with placement and displacement. The jealous lover covets a particular place in the beloved's affection and is full of anxiety that another will take it. Here is an image of the shifting pattern that is jealousy, from more modern times. During the first half of the fifteenth century a type of slow pacing dance called the *bassa danza* became popular in Italy. These dances were semidramatic and transparently expressive of psychological relationships. "In the dance called *Jealousy* three men and three women permute partners and each man goes through a stage of standing by himself apart from the others" (Baxandall 1972, 78). Jealousy is a dance in which everyone moves, for it is the *instability* of the emotional situation that preys upon a jealous lover's mind.

No such permutations jeopardize Sappho in fragment 31. Indeed, her case is the reverse. Were she to change places with the man who listens closely, it seems likely she would be entirely destroyed. She does not covet the man's place nor fear usurpation of her own. She directs no resentment at him. She is simply amazed at his intrepidity. This man's role in the poetic structure reflects that of jealousy within Sappho's feelings. Neither is named. It is the beloved's beauty that affects Sappho; the man's presence is somehow necessary to delineation of that emotional event—it remains to be seen how. "Lovers all

<sup>2</sup> The two most recent commentators on this poem assemble scholarship for and against jealousy: Burnett 1983, 232-43; Race 1983, 92-101.

show such symptoms as these," says Longinus, the ancient critic to whom we owe preservation of Sappho's text (*De Sublimitate* 10.2). Jealousy may be implicit in the symptoms of love whenever they occur, but jealousy does not explain the geometry of this poem.

Another popular theory about fragment 31 is the rhetorical theory, which explains the man who listens closely as a poetic necessity (see note 2). That is, he is not to be thought of as a real person but as a poetic hypothesis, designed to show by contrast how deeply Sappho is affected in the presence of her beloved. As such he is a cliché of erotic poetry, for it is a common rhetorical maneuver to praise one's beloved by saying "He must be made of stone who could resist you." Pindar, for example, in a well-known fragment (Snell-Maehler, fr. 123) contrasts his own response to a beautiful boy ("I melt like wax as the heat bites into it") with that of an impassible observer ("whose black heart was forged of adamant or iron in a cold flame"). The rhetorical point may be reinforced by adding a comparison with divine impassivity, as in the Hellenistic epigram that says "If you looked upon my beloved and were not broken by desire, you are totally god or totally stone" (*Anth. Pal.* 12.151).<sup>3</sup> With this contrastive technique, the lover praises his beloved, and incidentally begs sympathy for his own suit, by aligning himself with normal human response: it would be an unnatural heart or supernatural heart that failed to be moved by desire for such an object. Is this what Sappho is doing in fragment 31?

No. In the first place, the register of normality is missing from Sappho's poem. Her record of erotic emotion is singular. We may recognize her symptoms from personal memory but it is impossible to believe she is representing herself as an ordinary lover. Moreover, praise of the beloved does not stand out as the principal purpose of this

<sup>3</sup> See Dover 1978, 178 n. 18; Race 1983, 93-94.

poem. The girl's voice and laughter are a significant provocation but she disappears at line 5 and Sappho's own body and mind are the unmistakable subject of all that follows. Praise and normal erotic responses are things that occur in the real world: this poem does not. Sappho tells us twice, emphatically, the real location of her poem: "He seems to me. . . . I seem to me." This is a disquisition on seeming and it takes place entirely within her own mind.<sup>4</sup>

Jealousy is beside the point; the normal world of erotic responses is beside the point; praise is beside the point. It is a poem about the lover's mind in the act of constructing desire for itself. Sappho's subject is eros as it *appears* to her; she makes no claim beyond that. A single consciousness represents itself; one mental state is exposed to view.

We see clearly what shape desire has there: a three-point circuit is visible within Sappho's mind. The man who listens closely is no sentimental cliché or rhetorical device. He is a cognitive and intentional necessity. Sappho perceives desire by identifying it *as* a three-part structure. We may, in the traditional terminology of erotic theorizing, refer to this structure as a love triangle and we may be tempted, with post-Romantic asperity, to dismiss it as a ruse. But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire. For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. When the cir-

<sup>4</sup> On seeming in this poem, see Robbins 1980, 255-61.

cuit-points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible. The ideal is projected on a screen of the actual, in a kind of stereoscopy. The man sits like a god, the poet almost dies: two poles of response within the same desiring mind. Triangulation makes both present at once by a shift of distance, replacing erotic action with a ruse of heart and language. For in this dance the people do not move. Desire moves. Eros is a verb.

## Finding the Edge

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between 'I love you' and 'I love you too,' the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can.

Infants begin to see by noticing the edges of things. How do they know an edge is an edge? By passionately wanting it not to be. The experience of eros as lack alerts a person to the boundaries of himself, of other people, of things in general. It is the edge separating my tongue from the taste for which it longs that teaches me what an edge is. Like Sappho's adjective *glukupikron*, the moment of desire is one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure. Pleasure and pain at once register upon the lover, inasmuch as the desirability of the love object derives, in part, from its lack. To whom is it lacking? To the lover. If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.

When I desire you a part of me is gone: my want of you

## Finding the Edge

partakes of me. So reasons the lover at the edge of eros. The presence of want awakens in him nostalgia for wholeness. His thoughts turn toward questions of personal identity: he must recover and reincorporate what is gone if he is to be a complete person. The *locus classicus* for this view of desire is the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*. Here Aristophanes accounts for the nature of human eros by means of a fantastic anthropology (189d-93d). Human beings were originally round organisms, each composed of two people joined together as one perfect sphere. These rolled about everywhere and were exceedingly happy. But the spherical creatures grew overambitious, thinking to roll right up to Olympus, so Zeus chopped each of them in two. As a result everyone must now go through life in search of the one and only other person who can round him out again. "Sliced in two like a flatfish," says Aristophanes, "each of us is perpetually hunting for the matching half of himself" (191d).

Most people find something disturbingly lucid and true in Aristophanes' image of lovers as people cut in half. All desire is for a part of oneself gone missing, or so it feels to the person in love. Aristophanes' myth justifies that feeling, in typical Greek fashion, by blaming the whole situation on Zeus. But Aristophanes is a comic poet. We might look, for a more serious exegesis, to more serious lovers. A feature of their reasoning will at once strike us. It is outrageous.



## Symbolon

Space reaches out from us and translates the world.

Rilke, "What Birds Plunge Through  
Is Not the Intimate Space"

We began our investigation of bittersweet Eros by countenancing a mistranslation of Sappho's *glukupikron*. We assumed that Sappho puts *gluku-* first because Eros' sweetness is obvious to everyone, his bitterness less so. We then turned our attention to the bitter side. These judgments were shallow, as we are now in a position to see. Eros' sweetness is inseparable from his bitterness, and each participates, in a way not yet obvious at all, in our human will to knowledge. There would seem to be some resemblance between the way Eros acts in the mind of a lover and the way knowing acts in the mind of a thinker. It has been an endeavour of philosophy from the time of Sokrates to understand the nature and uses of that resemblance. But not only philosophers are intrigued to do so. I would like to grasp why it is that these two activities, falling in love and coming to know, make me feel genuinely alive. There is something like an electrification in them. They are not like anything else, but they are like each other. How? Let us consider whether the ancient poets' conception of *glukupikrotēs*, as we have come to understand it, has any light to shed on this matter.

"All men by their very nature reach out to know," says Aristotle (*Metaph. A* 1.980a21). If this is so, it discloses something important about the activities of knowing and

## Symbolon

desiring. They have at their core the same delight, that of reaching, and entail the same pain, that of falling short or being deficient. This disclosure may be already implied in a certain usage of Homer, for epic diction has the same verb (*mnaomai*) for 'to be mindful, to have in mind, to direct one's attention to' and 'to woo, court, be a suitor.' Stationed at the edge of itself, or of its present knowledge, the thinking mind launches a suit for understanding into the unknown. So too the wooer stands at the edge of his value as a person and asserts a claim across the boundaries of another. Both mind and wooer reach out from what is known and actual to something different, possibly better, desired. Something else. Think about what that feels like.

When we try to think about our own thinking, as when we try to feel our own desire, we find ourselves located at a blind point. It is like the point where the observer of Velazquez' painting *Las Meninas* stands as he views the painting. This is a painting of Velazquez painting the king and queen of Spain. But the king and queen are not part of the picture. Or are they? There are many people, including Velazquez, in the painting but none seem to be the king and queen, and all are gazing steadily out at someone else beyond the picture frame. Who? As we meet the looks of these people we imagine at first that they are gazing at us. Then we notice some faces in a mirror at the back of the room. Whose are the faces? Our own? No. These are the king and queen of Spain. But now, just where are the king and queen located? They seem to be standing precisely where we are standing as we gaze into the painting at their reflection there. Then where are we? For that matter, who are we?

We are no one in particular and we are standing at a blind point. Michel Foucault has analyzed Velazquez' painting and its blind point in his study of the archaeology of human knowledge, *The Order of Things*. Foucault calls the blind point "that essential hiding place

into which our gaze disappears from ourselves at the moment of actual looking" (4). We cannot see that point, as we cannot think thought or desire desire, except by a subterfuge. In *Las Meninas* we see the subterfuge just coming into focus in a mirror at the back of the room. In Foucault's terms this mirror provides "a metathesis of visibility" because around it the painting organizes a deliberate vacancy: "The lines that run through the depth of the picture are not complete; they all lack a segment of their trajectories. This gap is caused by the absence of the king—an absence that is an artifice on the part of the painter" (16).

Velazquez' artifice triangulates our perception so that we all but see ourselves looking. That is, he has arranged his painting in such a way that a haunting fact gradually dawns on us as we observe it. Namely the fact that the vacancy recorded by the mirror is not that of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. It is our own. Standing like understudies in the place where the king and queen would be, we recognize (vaguely disappointed) that the faces looming from the mirror are not our own and we all but see (if the angle did not keep jumping out of focus) that point where we disappear into ourselves in order to look. A point lying in the gap between ourselves and them. Attempts to focus on that point pull the mind into vertigo, while at the same time a particular acute delight is present. We long to see that point, although it tears us. Why?

There is no stillness at that point. Its components split and diverge each time we try to bring them into focus, as if interior continents were wrenching askew in the mind. It is not a point upon which we can gaze in such a way as to peacefully converge with the king and queen in one image there, one noun. That point is a verb. Each time we look at it, it acts. How?

Let us keep these questions in mind as we consider another point on the landscape of human thinking, a point which is also a verb—moreover a verb that triangulates,

haunts, splits, wrenches and delights us each time it acts. Let us consider the point of verbal action called 'metaphor.'

"To give names to nameless things by transference [*metaphora*] from things kindred or similar in appearance" is how Aristotle describes the function of metaphor (*Rh.* 3.2.1405a34). In current theory, this process of thought may best be regarded as an interaction between the subject and the predicate of the metaphorical sentence. Metaphorical sense is produced by the whole sentence and works through what one critic calls a "semantic impertinence" (Cohen 1966), that is, a violation of the code of pertinence or relevance that rules the ascription of predicates in ordinary use in the language. The violation allows a new pertinence or congruence to emerge, which is the metaphorical meaning, from the collapse of the ordinary or literal meaning. How does the new pertinence emerge? There is in the mind a change or shift of distance, which Aristotle calls an *epiphora* (*Poet.* 21.1457b7), bringing two heterogeneous things close to reveal their kinship. The innovation of metaphor occurs in this shift of distance from far to near, and it is effected by imagination. A virtuoso act of imagination brings the two things together, sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to recognize the previous incongruence through the new congruence. Both the ordinary, literal sense and a novel sense are present at once in the words of a metaphor; both the ordinary, descriptive reference and a novel reference are held in tension by the metaphor's way of looking at the world.

Thus, tension of an acute and unresolvable kind informs this mental action. It demands of the mind a "stereoscopic vision" (as Stanford 1936 puts it) or a "split reference" (in Jakobsen's terms), that is, an ability to hold in equipoise two perspectives at once. Paul Ricoeur calls this condition of mental tension a state of war wherein

the mind has not yet reached conceptual peace but is caught between distance and proximity, between sameness and difference. Such warfare marks the landscape of all human thought, according to Ricoeur:

We may speak with Gadamer of the fundamental metaphoricity of thought to the extent that the figure of speech that we call 'metaphor' allows us a glance at the general procedure by which we produce concepts. This is because in the metaphoric process the movement toward genus is arrested by the resistance of the difference and, as it were, intercepted by the figure of rhetoric. (Ricoeur 1978, 149)

An act of arrest and interception that splits the mind and puts it in a state of war within itself is the act called 'metaphor.' Let us compare with this act our experience of *Las Meninas*. At the core of the act called 'metaphor' our minds reach toward an identification: "to give names to nameless things" as Aristotle says. Velazquez' artifice, in its turn, provokes us to try to give a name to that object at which all the eyes looking out of the painting are looking. For a moment we imagine they are all looking at us. Then we see the faces in the mirror. Our movement toward naming those faces is arrested by the difference between the two species (ourselves, the king and queen) who are candidates for that genus. The arrest occurs with a wrench that splits our vision, divides our judgment and is not resolved no matter how often we return to it for, each time we look, our moment of delighted self-recognition is intercepted by two dimly royal faces in the glass. Aristotle pinpoints such a moment of interception in metaphorical thinking, when the mind seems to say to itself: "Well how true! I was quite wrong after all!" He calls it a paradoxical element (*ti paradoxon*) and judges it one of the essential pleasures of metaphor (*Rh.* 3.2.1412a6).

Eros also has "something paradoxical" at the core of his power, at that point where bitter intercepts sweet. There is a shift of distance that brings up close what is absent and different. "Absences of eyes in the statues" present Helen to Menelaos as he stands in his empty hall, at the blind point between love and hate (Aesch. *Ag.* 414-19). "They love him and they hate him and they long to possess him" says Aristophanes of the love affair between the Greek *dēmos* and its favorite Alkibiades (*Ran.* 1425). "I'm in love, I'm not in love! I'm insane, I'm not insane!" cries out Anakreon (413 *PMG*). Something paradoxical arrests the lover. Arrest occurs at a point of inconcinnity between the actual and the possible, a blind point where the reality of what we are disappears into the possibility of what we could be if we were other than we are. But we are not. We are not the king and queen of Spain. We are not lovers who can both feel and attain their desires. We are not poets who need no metaphor or symbol to carry our meaning across.

The English word 'symbol' is the Greek word *symbolon* which means, in the ancient world, one half of a knucklebone carried as a token of identity to someone who has the other half. Together the two halves compose one meaning. A metaphor is a species of symbol. So is a lover. In the words of Aristophanes (in Plato's *Symposium*):

ἕκαστος οὖν ἡμῶν ἐστὶν ἀνθρώπου σύμβολον, ἅτε τετμημένος ὡσπερ αἱ ψῆτται, ἐξ ἐνὸς δύο· ζητεῖ δὴ ἀεὶ τὸ αὐτοῦ ἕκαστος σύμβολον.

Each one of us is but the *symbolon* of a human being—sliced in half like a flatfish, two instead of one—and each pursues a neverending search for the *symbolon* of himself. (191d)

Every hunting, hungry lover is half of a knucklebone, wooer of a meaning that is inseparable from its absence. The moment when we understand these things—when

Symbolon

we see what we are projected on a screen of what we could be—is invariably a moment of wrench and arrest. We love that moment, and we hate it. We have to keep going back to it, after all, if we wish to maintain contact with the possible. But this also entails watching it disappear. Only a god's word has no beginning or end. Only a god's desire can reach without lack. Only the paradoxical god of desire, exception to all these rules, is neverendingly filled with lack itself.

“Sappho drew this conception together and called Eros *glukupikron*.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> So says Maximus of Tyre, a Sophist and itinerant lecturer of the second century A.D. (18.9; Sappho *LP*, fr. 172).

*A Novel Sense*

Nature has no outline, but Imagination has.

William Blake, *Notebooks*

Imagination is the core of desire. It acts at the core of metaphor. It is essential to the activity of reading and writing. In the archaic lyric poetry of Greece, these three trajectories intersected, perhaps fortuitously, and imagination transcribed on human desire an outline more beautiful (some people think) than any before or since. We have seen what shape that outline took. Writing about desire, the archaic poets made triangles with their words. Or, to put it less sharply, they represent situations that ought to involve two factors (lover, beloved) in terms of three (lover, beloved and the space between them, however realized). Is this outline just a fetish of the lyric imagination? No. We have looked at tragedians and comic poets and epigrammatists concerned with the bittersweetness of desire. We have discovered the roots of the notion in Homer's Aphrodite. We have seen Plato turn the problem over. There is something essential to eros here.

The lyric poets caught its outline with sudden sharpness, and left that in writing. ‘What does the lover want from love?’ is the question to which the lyric evidence led us. But now we should consider the matter from another side, for the nature of the lyric evidence cannot be separated from the fact of its transcription, and that fact remains mysterious. I mean by this that the lyric poets present a borderline case, living as they did in the first

where your reason is viewing itself—or almost viewing itself. Why? We have come round to this blind point before, when contemplating Velazquez' *Las Meninas* and considering the paradoxical action at the heart of metaphor. Novels give us another, and broader, access onto the blind point, for they sustain the experience of paradox over many pages, by means of many ruses. Let us see what we can read from the ruses of the novelists about the blind point and its desirability.

### Something Paradoxical

Critics of the novel find paradox to be “a principle of the genre” and note the frequency with which the romances speak of situations as “new and strange” (*kainos*) or “against reason” (*paralogos*), or “unthought of” (*adokētos*) (Heiserman 1977, 77 and 226 n. 4). Techniques of paradox enrich these stories at all levels of plot, imagery and wordplay. Paradox is especially essential to their emotional texture. This can surprise no one familiar with the lyric precedents of erotic fiction. “I’m crazy! I’m not crazy! I’m in love! I’m not in love!” said Anakreon in the sixth century B.C. (413 *PMG*). “I don’t know what I should do. Two states of mind in me . . .” said Sappho (*LP*, fr. 51). Characters in novels luxuriate in such moments of emotional schizophrenia, when the personality is split into two warring factions. Novelists expand these moments into full-scale soliloquies of the soul, so that a character may debate his erotic dilemma with himself, usually at length and to no purpose. But emotional schism is not the exclusive property of heroes and heroines in novels. All who observe their fortunes, within and without the text, are programmed to respond in this way.

Take, for example, the ending of Xenophon's *Ephesiaca*. As the heroine Anthia falls into her lover's arms, the townspeople standing around are stirred by “pleasure, pain, fear, memory of the past, apprehension of the future, all mixing in their souls” (5.13). So too at the end of Heliodoros' *Aethiopica*, the lovers' union is witnessed by their fellow citizens, in whom:

... ὑφ' ἧς καὶ τὰ ἐναντιώτατα πρὸς συμφωνίαν  
ἠρμόζετο, χαρᾶς καὶ λύπης συμπεπλεγμένων, γέλωτι  
δακρύων κεραυννυμένων, τῶν στυγγοτάτων εἰς ἑορ-  
τὴν μεταβαλλομένων

... absolute contrarieties were fitted together as one  
sound: joy interwoven with grief, tears mixed with  
laughter, total gloom turning into festive delight.  
... (10.38.4)

Earlier in Heliodoros' novel a certain character named  
Calasiris records his reaction to the erotic sufferings of  
the heroine:

... ἡδονῆς δὲ ἅμα καὶ λύπης ἐνεπλήσθην. καὶ πάθος  
τι καινότερον ὑπέστην, ὁμοῦ δακρύων καὶ χαίρων

... at the same time I was filled with pleasure and  
pain: I found myself in quite a novel state of mind  
[*pathos ti kainoteron*] weeping and rejoicing simul-  
taneously. . . . (4.9.1)

As readers we too are meant to feel this paradoxical  
mix of feelings, if the novelist is in proper command of  
his ruses. So Chariton implies when he turns to us, at a  
particularly brilliant moment in the action of his plot,  
and demands:

Ποῖος ποιητῆς ἐπὶ σκηνῆς παράδοξον μῦθον οὕτως  
εἰσήγαγεν; ἔδοξας ἂν ἐν θεάτρῳ παρεῖναι μυρίων  
παλῶν πλήρει. πάντα ἦν ὁμοῦ δάκρυα, χαρὰ,  
θάμβος, ἔλεος, ἀπιστία, εὐχαί.

What poet ever produced such a paradoxical sce-  
nario [*paradoxon mython*] on the stage? You must  
have thought you were sitting in the theater filled  
with a thousand emotions, all at the same time:  
tears, joy, amazement, pity, disbelief, fervent pray-  
ers! (*Chaereas and Callirhoe* 5.8.2)

To create pleasure and pain at once is the novelist's  
aim. We should dwell on this point for a moment. It is of

some importance that, as readers, we are typically and  
repeatedly drawn into a conflicted emotional response  
which approximates that of the lover's soul divided by  
desire. Readership itself affords the aesthetic distance  
and obliquity necessary for this response. The reader's  
emotions begin from a privileged position of knowledge.  
We know the story will end happily. The characters  
within the story do not seem to know this. So we stand at  
an angle to the text from which we can see both the nar-  
rated facts of the case and also what the characters be-  
lieve to be the facts of the case: two levels of narrative  
reality float one upon another, without converging, and  
provide for the reader that moment of emotional and  
cognitive stereoscopy which is also the experience of the  
desiring lover.

We saw Sappho construct this stereoscopic moment in  
fr. 31 as a three-point circuit of desire joining herself, her  
beloved and "the man who listens closely." The verbal  
action of eros in fr. 31 allows our perception to jump or  
shift from one level of desire to another, from actual to  
possible, without losing sight of the difference between  
them. In Sappho's poem the shift of view is momentary,  
a vertigo and sudden sense of being very close to the core  
where feelings form. In the novel this technique of shift-  
ing distance is taken over as the permanent attitude from  
which the reader views the action. Novels institutional-  
ize the ruse of eros. It becomes a narrative texture of sus-  
tained incongruence, emotional and cognitive. It permits  
the reader to stand in triangular relation to the characters  
in the story and reach into the text after the objects of  
their desire, sharing their longing but also detached from  
it, seeing their view of reality but also its mistakenness. It  
is almost like being in love.

Realist

edges of the things you love, whose inconcinnities make your mind move. And there is Eros, nervous realist in this sentimental domain, who acts out of a love of paradox, that is as he folds the beloved object out of sight into a mystery, into a blind point where it can float known and unknown, actual and possible, near and far, desired and drawing you on.

Ice-pleasure

We cannot really say that time 'is' except in virtue of its continual tendency not to be.

Augustine, *Confessions* 11.14.17

Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.

W. H. Auden, "One Evening"

The blind point of Eros is a paradox in time as well as in space. A desire to bring the absent into presence, or to collapse far and near, is also a desire to foreclose then upon now. As lover you reach forward to a point in time called 'then' when you will bite into the long-desired apple. Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as 'then' supervenes upon 'now,' the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone. You cannot want that, and yet you do. Let us see what this feels like. ]

Below is a fragment of a satyr play by Sophokles entitled *The Lovers of Achilles*. The fragment is a description of desire. It turns eros subtly, permitting different aspects of its perversity to come to light. At the center is a cold, original pleasure. Around the center move circles of time, different kinds of time, different dilemmas set by time. Notice that this poem is an analogy. Neither its pleasure nor its various kinds of time are to be identified with eros, but the way they intersect may feel like eros to you.

τὸ γὰρ νόσημα τοῦτ' ἐφίμερον κακόν  
ἔχοιμ' ἂν αὐτὸ μὴ κακῶς ἀπεικάσαι.

ὄταν πάγου φανέντος αἰθρίου χεροῖν  
 κρύσταλλον ἀρπάσῃσι παῖδες εὐπαγῆ,  
 τὰ πρῶτ' ἔχουσιν ἡδονὰς ποταινίους·  
 τέλος δ' ὁ θυμὸς οὐθ' ὅπως ἀφῆ θέλει  
 οὐτ' ἐν χεροῖν τὸ κτῆμα σύμφορον μένειν.  
 οὕτω δὲ τοὺς ἐρώντας αὐτὸς ἕμερος  
 δρᾶν καὶ τὸ μὴ δρᾶν πολλάκις προίεται.

This disease is an evil bound upon the day.  
 Here's a comparison—not bad, I think:  
 when ice gleams in the open air,  
 children grab.

Ice-crystal in the hands is  
 at first a pleasure quite novel.  
 But there comes a point—  
 you can't put the melting mass down,  
 you can't keep holding it.

Desire is like that.  
 Pulling the lover to act and not to act,  
 again and again, pulling.

(fr. 149 Radt)<sup>9</sup>

Much is left unsaid in this poem, as in any formulation of desire, yet you may feel you know exactly what is meant. No direct reference is made, for example, to desire as desirable. Here desire is a “disease” and an “evil” from the first line. Within the comparison (ll. 2-7) desire turns out to be pleasurable, but its pleasure is that of holding ice in your hands. An acutely painful pleasure, one would think, yet again no direct mention is made of the painfulness of ice. Here ice gives a novel kind of enjoyment.

<sup>9</sup> Not inadvertently, the first line of the translation departs from Radt's emended text (*ephimeron*) in favor of the MS reading (*ephēmeron*). Since Arsenius, the codices' *ephēmeron* (“bound upon the day”) has been changed to *ephimeron* (“lovely, desirable”) on alleged grounds of sense: Why would Sophokles begin his description of desire by binding it into time? I believe, and hope to show, that it makes compelling sense. *Ephēmeron* is the evil with which we must begin.

The absence of these predictable attributes of ice and of desire surprises you, like a missing step, but you climb on through the poem anyway. And suddenly you find yourself on a staircase rendered by Escher or Piranesi. It goes two places at once and you seem to be standing in both of them. How does that happen?

At first the poem looks like a simple ring composition, for the whole structure is a simile whose *comparandum* (desire, ll. 1 and 8) neatly encircles its *comparatio* (grabbing a handful of ice, ll. 2-7). So, desire forms a ring around the small universe of its victims: the poet who strives to represent it, the children fascinated by its analog, the lover pinned in its compulsion. But that universe does not form the outer circle of the poem. You keep climbing, for the staircase continues to spiral. The desire at the beginning of the poem is desire as transience—it is an “ephemeral evil” (*ephēmeron kakon*), bound to the day that flickers over it. The desire at the end of the poem is desire as repetition—exerting its pull “over and over again” (*pollakis*). So time forms a ring around desire. Now, as you peer down through concentric circles of time, you see at the heart of the poem a piece of ice, melting. The startling likeness of ice drops into your perception with a shock like what the children must feel in their hands. The poem places you for shock, at an interface between two kinds of time, each of which spirals with its own logic upward through the structure of the poem, and through the psychology of desire. They seem to fit one within the other, yet there is a point where the perspectives become incompatible.

The desire for ice is an affair of the moment, transparently. But not only physical time threatens it: here ice-pleasure is a *novelty*. A pleasure “quite novel” says the poet, using an adjective (*potainious*) that is applied by other poets to an innovative scheme (Bacchylides 16.51), an original and unexpected form of torture (Aesch. PV 102), a bizarre clattering sound not heard before (Aesch.



Sept. 239). The adjective denotes something fresh and untried, perhaps newfangled. With this adjective Sophokles realigns your sensibility to ice and makes clear that he wishes to depict eros, not just as a difficulty, but as a paradox. Ice, as physical substance, cannot be said to be delightful *because* it melts; but if “melting” is itself a metaphor for the aesthetic consideration of novelty, a paradox begins to come into focus. Novelty, by definition, are short-lived. If ice-pleasure consists, to some degree, in novelty, then ice must melt in order to be desirable.

So as you watch the ice melt, your solicitude for it is distracted by a different kind of care. The ice may lose favor even before it changes state. Its “pleasure” may cease to be “quite novel” and so cease to be pleasure. Suddenly here the laws of physics, which govern events like melting ice, are intersected by certain vaguer psychological laws governing our human enslavement to novelty in moods and styles. Novelty is an affair of the mind and emotions; melting is a physical fact. Each is measured out on a scale that we call temporal, although two different kinds of time are involved. Where does the dilemma of a novelty intercept that of a piece of ice? What should a lover want from time? If you run backwards down the staircase of a day, can you make novelty grow? Or freeze desire?

Let us be subtle about how Sophokles contrives to draw us into these questions. The simile of ice is a delicate and insidious mechanism. It sets up a condition of suspense at the center of the poem that pulls our minds and emotions, as well as our senses, into conflict. We hang upon the physical fate of the melting ice; it is, in a way, the protagonist of the simile and we are watching it perish. At the same time, we care for the hands of the children. Ice is cold and the longer you hold it, the colder your hands get. But this care reminds us of another. The longer you hold it, the more it melts. So would it not be

more reasonable to put the ice down, sparing hands and ice? But holding onto ice delights children, for that is a novelty. At this point in our reasoning, time coughs from the shadow, as Auden says. Time is the condition of delightfulness and of perishing both. Time brings the nature of ice into fatal conjuncture with human nature, so that at a critical moment the crystal glamor of ice and the human susceptibility to novelty intersect. One kind of time (that of aesthetic events) intersects another (the time of physical events) and dislocates it.

Our suspense has a sensual side as well. Sophokles' image of time is a piece of ice melting. It is an image selected not only for its dramatic and melodramatic potential but for its history. As readers of Greek lyric poetry we recognize here a familiar erotic *topos*, for the poets frequently imagine desire to be a sensation of heat and an action of melting. Eros is traditionally “the melter of limbs” (*lusimelēs*). One vivid example from many of this conventional imagery is a fragment from Pindar:

ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τὰς ἑκατι κηρὸς ὡς δαχθεῖς ἐλα  
 ἱρᾶν μελισσᾶν τάκομαι, εὖτ' ἂν ἴδω  
 παίδων νεόγνιον ἐς ἥβαν

. . . but I am like wax of sacred bees  
 like wax as the heat bites in:

I melt whenever I look at the fresh limbs of boys.

(Snell-Machler, fr. 123.10-12)

Conventionally, as we see from Pindar, to melt is in some degree desirable, its context one of delicious heat. Sophokles subverts the image. As we watch his melting ice, all our conventional responses to the melting experience of desire are dislocated. As a conventional lover, you relish the sensation of melting, in your bittersweet way. As an observer of ice, your feelings about melting are different, more complex. You can almost bring those feelings into focus against the screen of the conventional image, but

not quite. Eros is in between. Eros' connection with the conventional image of melting, and at the same time with this novel image of it, pulls your mind into vertigo.

Sophokles pulls you, in vertigo, back to the problem of time. His simile unfolds as a paradox of sensations: the uneasy image of hot ice almost comes into focus. The simile involves you in a conflicted response: to save the ice, you must freeze desire. You cannot want that, and yet you do.

Sophokles pulls you, in time, back to the problem of the blind point. Time encircles desire in this poem and the melting ice is an image of the way desire rotates within time. It rotates on an axis of ephemerality: contingent upon the day (*ephēmeron*) it will melt with the day. But days recur. It rotates on an axis of novelty: as lover you are pulled into vertigo "over and over again." You cannot want that, and yet you do. It is quite new every time.

There are different kinds of knowledge, Heisenberg has demonstrated, that cannot be held simultaneously in the mind (for example, the position of a particle and its velocity). The likeness of desire to ice in Sophokles' poem pulls you into such knowledge, a pull that splits your mental vision, much as the lover is split by the paradox of desire. Your moment of stereoscopy on the staircase, as you try to understand this poem, is no bad imitation of that erotic division. A while before Heisenberg, Sophokles appears to have recognized that you can only go so far into thinking about time, or about desire. There comes a point where dilemmas arise, staircases reverse: Eros.

## Now Then

Endlessly I sustain the discourse of the beloved's absence; actually a preposterous situation; the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory. This singular distortion generates a kind of insupportable present; I am wedged between two tenses, that of the reference and that of the allocation: you have gone (which I lament), you are here (since I am addressing you). Whereupon I know what the present, that difficult tense, is: a pure portion of anxiety.

Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*

The experience of eros is a study in the ambiguities of time. Lovers are always waiting. They hate to wait; they love to wait. Wedged between these two feelings, lovers come to think a great deal about time, and to understand it very well, in their perverse way. ]

Desire seems to the lover to demolish time in the instant when it happens, and to gather all other moments into itself in unimportance. Yet, simultaneously, the lover perceives more sharply than anyone else the difference between the 'now' of his desire and all the other moments called 'then' that line up before and after it. One of those moments called 'then' contains his beloved. That moment pulls at his attention, vertiginously, by love and hate at once: we can feel something like this vertigo in the poem of Sophokles about melting ice. The lover's real desire, as we see in that handful of ice, is to elude the certainties of physics and float in the ambiguities of a space-time where absent is present and 'now' can include 'then' without ceasing to be 'now.' From his special vantage

point “wedged between two tenses” as Barthes says, the lover looks at ‘now’ and ‘then’ with a calculating eye and a sinking heart. How he would love to control time! Instead, time controls him.

Or rather, Eros makes use of time to control the lover. The lover in Greek poetry views with singular candor and a degree of irony his own subjection to time. He sees himself pinned in an impossible double bind, victim of novelty and of recurrence at once. There is one very clear sign, throughout the Greek lyric poets, that these authors were concerned with the perversities of time. It consists of a single word which itself presents, in microcosm, the temporal dilemma of eros. It is the adverb *dēute*. No one who reads Greek lyric poetry can fail to be struck by the frequency and poignancy with which this adverb is used. The poets of love prefer it to any other designation of time (cf. Alkman fr. 59(a)1; Sappho, *LP*, frs. 1.15, 16, 18; 22.11; 83.4; 99.23; 127; 130.1; Anakreon, 349.1; 356(a)6; 356(b)1; 358; 371.1; 376.1; 394(b); 400.1; 401.1; 412; 413.1; 428.1 *PMG*). What point in time does *dēute* denote?

The adverb represents a ‘*crasis*’ or ‘mingling’ of two words that have been contracted into one for euphonic reasons. *Crasis* is a common phenomenon in Greek, but *crasis* in this case produces an uncommonly stereoscopic effect: each of the two words that make up *dēute* has a different vantage point on time. Their intersection creates something of a paradox.

*Deute* combines the particle *dē* with the adverb *aute*. The particle *dē* signifies vividly and dramatically that something is actually taking place at the moment (Denniston 1954, 203, 219, 250). The adverb *aute* means ‘again, once again, over again’ (LSJ). The particle *dē* marks a lively perception in the present moment: ‘Look at that now!’ The adverb *aute* peers past the present moment to a pattern of repeated actions stretching behind

it: ‘Not for the first time!’ *Dē* places you in time and emphasizes that placement: *nou*. *Aute* intercepts ‘now’ and binds it into a history of ‘*thens*’.

A complex word like *dēute* can create a complex tone. A note of powerful, alert emotion is struck by the particle *dē* itself, which can waken a range of overtones from urgent pathos through various degrees of scorn. Some shade of irony or skepticism is often noticeable (Denniston 1954, 203-206). This is a word on which the eyes open wide in sudden perception, then narrow in understanding. The adverb *aute* closes over that understanding like two hands joined in acquiescence, with a deep nod: again and again.

When the lyric poets insert *dēute* in their love poems, what is its effect? Let us consider first an example with which we are already familiar. We began this essay with a fragment of Sappho (*LP*, fr. 130):

Ἔρος δῆντέ μ' ὀ λυσιμέλης δόνει,  
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὄρπετον

Eros—here it goes again! [*dēute*]—the limbloosener  
whirls me,  
sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing  
up

The untranslatable adverb *dēute* comes like one long, rather wild sigh at the beginning of the poem, as the lover perceives her attacker and understands that it is (oh no!) already too late (not again!) to avoid desire. In another poem Sappho addresses a lover and says:

.]. ε .[. . .].]. . . κ]έλομαι σ.[  
. .]. γυλα.[. . .]ανθι λάβοισα α.[  
. .]κτιν, ἄς σε δῆντε πόθος τ.[  
ἀμφιπόταται  
τὰν κάλαν· ἄ γὰρ κατάγωγος αὐτὰ[  
ἐπτόαις ἴδουσαν,

. . . I bid you take your [lyre] and sing of [Gongyla]  
 while desire flies round you again now [*dēute*]  
 for her dress made you  
 lose your breath when you saw it . . .  
 (LP, fr. 22.9-13).

The Spartan poet Alkman gives us this example:

Ἔρως με δηῦτε Κύπριδος Φέκατι  
 γλυκὺς κατεῖβων καρδίαν ἰαίνει.

Eros—yes again! [*dēute*—for Kyrpris' sake  
 the sweet one is melting me down,  
 is making my heart grow warm  
 (fr. 59(a) PMG).

Each of these poems is a stark evocation of the present moment intersected by an echo from the past. The lover who can stand apart from her own experience and assess it in these terms is one who has learned to take up a certain vantage point on time, telescoping 'then' upon 'now.' Sappho is adept at doing so, as are the other lyric poets of this period. The technique gives their poems an unusual force, as moments cut out of real time. How did they come to evolve this technique?

These poets so fascinated by the perversities of time were probably, I believe, among the first Greeks to absorb and employ skills of reading and writing in their poetic composition. Literacy can make a difference to one's view of time. Let us consider how.

We habitually describe time in metaphors of passage. Time passes. Time is a stream that flows past, a track that unwinds, a road down which we walk. All our events and actions and utterances are part of the passage of time. Language, especially, is embedded in this moving process and the words we speak are gone when the time is gone—"on wings" as Homer says. "Language if grasped in its true nature is constantly and at every moment transient" (Humboldt 1848, 6:8). An act of speech,

then, is an experience of temporal process: when you pronounce the word 'transient,' the second syllable is not present until the first has ceased to be (cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 11.27). An act of reading and writing, on the other hand, is an experience of temporal arrest and manipulation. As writer or reader you stand on the edge of transience, and hear from the shadows the sound of an ambiguous cough. The word 'transient' stares back at you from the page, poignant as a piece of melting ice. And it does not pass away. Temporally, the word stands to you in a somewhat perverse relation, permanent and transient at once as it is. Mastery of this relation is part of the study of letters. It gives the reader or writer a taste of what it would be like to control time.

When you read or write you seem to achieve that control which the lover craves: a vantage point from which the dilemmas of 'now' and 'then' may be viewed with detachment. When desire is the subject of a text you are reading, you can open it anywhere and end when you like. If Eros is something written on a page, you can close the book and be shut of him. Or go back and reread the words again and again. A piece of ice melts forever there. What is written in letters "stays immovable and remains the same" says the fifth-century orator Isokrates (*Against the Sophists* 12). Plato ponders the matter of writers and their attitude to writing in his *Phaedrus*. "Writing has this strange power," he says: people who learn the art of letters come to believe in their own ability to render things "clear and fixed" for all time (*Phdr.* 275c; cf. 277d). It can be a dangerous belief. For it would be a remarkable power.

What difference would such power make to someone in love? What would the lover ask of time if he were in control? These are questions relevant to our investigation of eros since, in general, we are trying to see what the passion of love has to teach us about reality. And love is an issue of control. What does it mean to control another

human being? to control oneself? to lose control? The ancient poets provide data for answering such questions in their descriptions of desire. The philosophers go beyond description. If we follow these questions through the poets to Plato we come, in his *Phaedrus*, to a prescription of what the lover should ask of love and of time and of control itself. The prescription is especially interesting to us because Plato projects these questions upon philosophic worry about the nature of reading and writing.

Why do reading and writing worry Plato? His worry seems closely tied to "this strange power" that writing has. Delusion resides within it, a delusion persuasive enough to be worrisome because it is introduced into the soul of a reader or writer by a mechanism he cannot resist: Eros. Sokrates' interlocutor in the *Phaedrus* is a young man who has fallen in love with a written text. As Phaedrus and Sokrates talk about that love, in the course of the dialogue, they unfold a blind point where lovers and letters intersect. It is a point in time, as well as in space, for Plato formulates his worry specifically in the light of our mortal situation in time. If we focus on this blind point, the question of control may begin to come into focus.

## *Erotikos Logos*

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

Phaedrus is in love with a text composed by the sophist Lysias. It is an "erotic *logos*" (227c), the written version of a speech delivered by Lysias on the subject of love. Its thesis is a deliberately repugnant one. Lysias argues that a beautiful boy would do better to bestow his favors on a man who is *not* in love with him than on a man who is in love with him, and he enumerates the ways in which a nonlover is preferable to a lover as erotic partner. Desire stirs Phaedrus when he gazes at the words of this text (*epethumei*, 228b) and visible joy animates him as he reads it aloud to Sokrates (234d). Phaedrus treats the text as if it were his *paidika* or beloved boy, Sokrates observes (236b) and uses it as a tool of seduction, to draw Sokrates beyond the city limits for an orgy of reading in the open countryside (230d-e; cf. 234d). The reading elicits from Sokrates an admission that he himself is a "lover of *logos*" (*andri philologō*, 236e; cf. *tōn logōn erastou*, 228c). *Eros* and *logos* are fitted together in the *Phaedrus* as closely as two halves of a knucklebone. Let us see what meaning is being composed.