

ANNE CARSON

# Eros the Bittersweet

*An Essay*



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*Anne Carson*

*EROS*

*THE BITTERSWEET*

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## *Gone*

Perhaps there are many ways to answer this. One comes clearest in Greek. The Greek word *eros* denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than wordplay. There is a dilemma within *eros* that has been thought crucial by thinkers from Sappho to the present day. Plato turns and returns to it. Four of his dialogues explore what it means to say that desire can only be for what is lacking, not at hand, not present, not in one’s possession nor in one’s being: *eros* entails *endeia*. As Diotima puts it in the *Symposium*, Eros is a bastard got by Wealth on Poverty and ever at home in a life of want (203b-e). Hunger is the analog chosen by Simone Weil for this conundrum:

All our desires are contradictory, like the desire for food. I want the person I love to love me. If he is, however, totally devoted to me he does not exist any longer and I cease to love him. And as long as he is not totally devoted to me he does not love me enough. Hunger and repletion. (1977, 364)

Emily Dickinson puts the case more pertly in “I Had Been Hungry”:

So I found  
that hunger was a way  
of persons outside windows  
that entering takes away.

Petrarch interprets the problem in terms of the ancient physiology of fire and ice:

I know to follow while I flee my fire  
I freeze when present; when absent, hot is my  
desire.

(“Trionfo d’Amore”)

Sartre has less patience with the contradictory ideal of desire, this “dupery.” He sees in erotic relations a system of infinite reflections, a deceiving mirror-game that carries within itself its own frustration (1956, 444-45). For Simone de Beauvoir the game is torture: “The knight departing for new adventures offends his lady yet she has nothing but contempt for him if he remains at her feet. This is the torture of impossible love ...” (1953, 619). Jacques Lacan puts the matter somewhat more enigmatically when he says “Desire ... evokes lack of being under the three figures of the nothing that constitutes the basis of the demand for love, of the hate that even denies the other’s being, and of the unspeakable element in that which is ignored in its request” (1966, 28).

It would seem that these various voices are pursuing a common perception. All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies. Let us return once more to the poem of Sappho with which we began. This fragment (LP, fr. 130), as it is preserved in the text and scholia of Hephaestion, is followed without a break by two lines in the same meter, which may be from the same poem:

Ἄτθι. σοὶ δ' ἔμεθεν μὲν ἀπήχθετο  
φροντίσδην, ἐπὶ δ' Ἀνδρομέδαν πόται

Atthis, your care for me stirred hatred in you  
and you flew to Andromeda.

(*LP*, fr. 131)

Who ever desires what is not gone? No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it.

## *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 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.

## *Archilochos at the Edge*

Archilochos is the first lyric poet whose transmission to us benefited from the literate revolution. Although evidence for the chronology of both poet and alphabet is uncertain, it is most plausible that, educated in the oral tradition, he encountered the new technology of writing at some point in his career and adapted himself to it. At any rate someone, perhaps Archilochos himself, wrote down these early facts of what it feels like to be violated by Eros:

τυῖος γὰρ φιλόπητος ἔρωσ ὑπὸ καρδίην ἐλυσθεις  
πολλὴν κατ' ἀχλὺν ὀμμάτων ἔχευεν,

κλέψας ἐκ στηθέων ἀπαλὰς φρένας.

Such a longing for love, rolling itself up under  
my heart,  
poured down much mist over my eyes,  
filching out of my chest the soft lungs—

(West, *IEG* 191)

The first word of the poem initiates a correlation. The word *toios* is a demonstrative pronoun meaning ‘such,’ which properly corresponds to the relative pronoun *hoios* meaning ‘as,’ so that a sentence beginning *toios* expects an answering clause with *hoios* to complete the thought. The poem sets out one half of this thought, then stops. Nonetheless, it has a perfect economy, as far as it

goes. Every word, sound and stress is placed for a purpose. The first verse describes eros rolled up in a ball beneath the lover's heart. The words are ordered to reflect the physiology of the moment, with *erōs* coiled dead center. A sequence of round *o* sounds (one long and five short) and bunched consonants (four pairs) gather the tension of the lover's desire into an audible pressure within him. Consonants seem to be chosen for their insinuating quality (liquids, sibilants and voiceless stops). The metrical pattern is an original mixture of dactylic and iambic units, combined in a way that imitates the action of desire: launched in an epic burst of dactyls and spondees as eros asserts its presence, the verse then dissolves into a spatter of iambs precisely at the point where desire reaches the lover's heart (*kardiēn*). The last word of the verse is a participle (*elustheis*) that has an epic past. "Rolled up in a ball under the belly of a ram" is the mode in which Odysseus escapes the Cyclops' cave (*Od.* 9.433). "Rolled up in a ball at the feet of Achilles" is the position from which Priam makes supplication for the body of his son (*Il.* 24.510). In both of these epic contexts, a posture of abject vulnerability is assumed by a genuinely powerful person, who then proceeds to work his will on the enemy confronting him. Hidden power is a traditional feature of Eros too, in poetry and art, as the innocuous *pais* whose arrows prove deadly. Archilochos places the overtone of menace quietly, setting his participle at verse-end just as it occurs in both Homeric passages.

Line 2 encloses the lover's eyes in mist from both sides. The poet's consonants soften and thicken with the fog to *l*, *m*, *n*, and *chi* sounds. These sounds are doubled and combined in a repeated pattern that comes down four times upon word-end in *n*, as if emphasizing the descent of the fog in four liquid streaks (-*lēn*, -*lun*, -*tōn*, -*en*). Fog is fused around the lover's eyes by the iambic rhythm of the verse, especially in the second metron (-*lun ommatōn*) where a caesura is dropped between eyes and mist.

Epic overtones of danger are again to be felt in the imagery for, in Homer, mist darkens a man's eyes at the moment of death (cf. *Il.* 20.321; 421).

With line 3 Eros completes his violation. One quick theft whistles the lungs straight out of the lover's chest. Naturally, this ends the poem: with the organ of breath gone, speech is impossible. The robbery is staged in a run of *s* sounds (five) and the verse breaks off without completing its metrical scheme (the dactylic tetrameter should be followed by an iambic metron, as in line 1). Most likely the break is a fault of transmission, rather than a factor of the poet's intention. Obviously the same explanation, namely the fragmentary condition of Archilochos' text, would account for the unfulfilled syntactical expectation set up by the correlative pronoun with which the poem begins (*toios*). On the other hand, it is a very careful poem, as far as it goes.

The *phrenes* of the lover are as far as it goes. I have translated this word 'lungs' and referred to it as 'the organ of breath.' What is breath? For the

ancient Greeks, breath is consciousness, breath is perception, breath is emotion. The *phrenes* seem to be roughly identifiable with the lungs in ancient physiological theory and to contain the spirit of breath as it comes and goes (Onians 951, 66ff). The chest is regarded by the Greeks as a receptacle of sense impressions and a vehicle for each of the five senses; even vision for, in seeing, something may be breathed from the object seen and received through the eyes of the seer (e.g., Hesiod, *Scutum* 7; cf. Arist., *Sens.* 4.437b23ff). Words, thoughts, and understanding are both received and produced by the *phrenes*. So words are “winged” in Homer when they issue from the speaker and “unwinged” when they are kept in the *phrenes* unspoken (cf. *Od.* 17.57). *Phrenes* are organs of mind. As Theognis says:

Ὄφθαλμοὶ καὶ γλῶσσα καὶ οὐατα καὶ νόος ἀνδρῶν  
ἐν μέσῳ στηθέων ἐν συννετοῖς φύεται.

The eyes and tongue and ears and intelligence of a quick-witted man  
grow in the middle of his chest.

(1163-64)

Such a conception is natural among people in an oral environment (see Onians, 1951, 68). Breath is primary insofar as the spoken word is. The conception has a solid psychological and sensual basis in the daily experience of these people. For the inhabitants of an oral society live much more intimately blended with their surroundings than we do. Space and the distances between things are

not of first importance; these are aspects emphasized by the visual sense. What is vital, in a world of sound, is to maintain continuity. This attitude pervades archaic poetry and is strikingly present as well in the perceptual theories of the ancient *physiologi*. Empedokles' celebrated doctrine of emanations, for example, maintains that everything in the universe is perpetually inhaling and exhaling small particles called *aporrhoai* in a constant stream (Diels, VS, B89). All sensations are caused by these emanations as they are breathed in and out through the whole skin surface of living beings (B 100.1). The *aporrhoai* are mediators of perception which allow everything in the universe to be potentially 'in touch' with everything else (cf. Arist., *Sens.* 4.442a29). Empedokles and his contemporaries posit a universe where the spaces between things are ignored and the interactions constant. Breath is everywhere. There are no edges.

The breath of desire is Eros. Inescapable as the environment itself, with his wings he moves love in and out of all creatures at will. The individual's total vulnerability to erotic influence is symbolized by those wings with their multisensual power to permeate and take control of a lover at any moment. Wings and breath transport Eros as wings and breath convey words: an ancient analogy between language and love is here apparent. The same irresistible sensual charm, called *peithō* in Greek, is the mechanism of seduction in love and of persuasion in words; the same goddess (Peitho) attends upon seducer and poet. It is an analogy that makes

perfect sense in the context of oral poetics, where Eros and the Muses clearly share an apparatus of sensual assault. A listener listening to an oral recitation is, as Herman Fränkel puts it, “an open force-field” (1973, 524) into whom sounds are being breathed in a continuous stream from the poet’s mouth. Written words, on the other hand, do not present such an all-persuasive sensual phenomenon. Literacy desensorializes words and reader. A reader must disconnect himself from the influx of sense impressions transmitted by nose, ear, tongue and skin if he is to concentrate upon his reading. A written text separates words from one another, separates words from the environment, separates words from the reader (or writer) and separates the reader (or writer) from his environment. Separation is painful. The evidence of epigraphy shows how long it takes people to systematize word-division in writing, indicating the novelty and difficulty of this concept.<sup>7</sup> As separable, controllable units of meaning, each with its own visible boundary, each with its own fixed and independent use, written words project their user into isolation.

That words have edges is an insight most vivid, then, for the reader or writer of them. Heard words may have no edges, or varying edges; oral traditions may have no concept of ‘word’ as a fixed and bounded vocable, or may employ a flexible concept. Homer’s word for ‘word’ (*epos*) includes the meanings ‘speech,’ ‘tale,’ ‘song,’ ‘line of verse’ or ‘epic poetry as a whole.’ All are breathable. The edges are irrelevant.

But edge has a clear relevance for Archilochos. His words stop in mid-breath. “A poet like Archilochos,” says the historian Werner Jaeger, “has learnt how to express in his own personality the whole objective world and its laws, to represent them in himself” (1934-1947, 1:114). From the flesh out, it seems, Archilochos understands the law differentiating self from not-self, for Eros cuts into him just at the point where that difference lies. To know desire, to know words, is for Archilochos a matter of perceiving the edge between one entity and another. It is fashionable to say that this is true of any utterance. “In language there are only differences” Saussure (1971, 120) tells us, meaning that phonemes are characterized not by their positive qualities but by the fact that they are distinct. Yet the individuality of words must be especially felt by someone for whom written phonemes are a novelty and the edges of words newly precise.

In the next section we will observe the Greek alphabet at very close range and consider how its special genius is linked to a special sensibility about edges. But, for the moment, let us view the phenomenon of the archaic writer from a wider angle. In Archilochos and the other archaic poets we see people struck by new ways of thinking about edges—the edges of sounds, letters, words, emotions, events in time, selves. This is apparent in the way they use the materials of poetry, as well as in the things they say. Contraction and focus are the mechanism of lyric procedure. The sweep of epic narrative contracts upon a moment of

emotion; the cast of characters is pared down to one ego; the poetic eye enters its subject in a single beam. The diction and meter of these poets seem to represent a systematic breakup of the huge floes of Homer's poetic system. Epic formulas of phrase and rhythm pervade lyric poetry, but they are broken apart and differently assembled in irregular shapes and joins. A poet like Archilochos shows himself master of such combinations, sharply aware of the boundary between his own and epic procedure: we saw how deftly he fastens dactylic to iambic units in the first verse of fragment 191, so that Eros hits the lover's heart just where the epic tetrameter breaks down in iambic dismay.

Breaks interrupt time and change its data. Archilochos' written texts break pieces of passing sound off from time and hold them as his own. Breaks make a person think. When I contemplate the physical spaces that articulate the letters 'I love you' in a written text, I may be led to think about other spaces, for example the space that lies between 'you' in the text and you in my life. Both of these kinds of space come into being by an act of symbolization. Both require the mind to reach out from what is present and actual to something else, something glimpsed in the imagination. In letters as in love, to imagine is to address oneself to what is not. To write words I put a symbol in place of an absent sound. To write the words I love you' requires a further, analogous replacement, one that is much more painful in its implication. Your absence from the syntax of my life is not a fact to be changed by written words. And it is the single fact that makes a difference to the lover, the fact

that you and I are not one. Archilochos steps off the edge of that fact into extreme solitude.

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<sup>7</sup> On word-division and related problems, see Jeffrey 1961, 43-65; Jensen 1969, 440-60; Kenyon 1899, 26-32.

*Read Me the Bit Again*

Read me the bit

again about the thing  
that is pure....  
read that bit, the thing  
we cannot turn our eyes to,

you begin it.

John Holloway, “Cone”

But Sokrates keeps insisting on the beginning. After Phaedrus has read Lysias’ speech to him once through, he asks him to reread the opening words:

*Ἴθι δὴ μοι ἀνάγνωθι τὴν τοῦ Λυσίου λόγου ἀρχήν.*

Come on, read me the beginning of Lysias’ speech.... (262d)

And then he asks him to reread it again:

*βούλει πάλιν ἀναγνώμεν τὴν ἀρχὴν αὐτοῦ;*

Please, will you reread his beginning one more time? (263e)

Phaedrus is politely reluctant. He knows there is no beginning to be found in it, and he says so:

*Εἰ σοί γε δοκεῖ ὁ μέντοι ζητεῖς οὐκ ἔστ’ αὐτόθι.*

Yes, I will if you like, but the thing  
you are looking for is not there. (263e)

The thing Sokrates is looking for is the ‘now’ of  
desire. But Lysias’ first sentence already puts the  
erotic relationship  
in the past tense. The nonlover starts off by saying  
to his boy:

Περὶ μὲν τῶν ἐμῶν πραγμάτων ἐπίστασαι, καὶ ὡς  
νομίζω συμφέρειν ἡμῖν γενομένων τούτων  
ἀκήκοας·

My business you know and, as to how I think these  
things that have transpired between us should turn  
out, you have heard. (230e7 = 262e2 = 263e7)

The fact that Sokrates cannot find the beginning of  
Lysias’ *logos*, or of Lysias’ eros, is crucial.  
Beginnings are crucial. Sokrates emphasizes in the  
most dignified language (245c-46) that everything  
in existence has a beginning, with one exception:  
the beginning itself. Only the *archē* itself controls  
its own beginning. It is this very control that Lysias  
usurps when he takes his pen and crosses out the  
beginning of eros for his nonlover. But this act is  
fiction. In reality the beginning is the one moment  
that you, as an unwitting target of winged Eros,  
cannot control. All that this moment brings, both  
good and evil, bitter and sweet, comes gratuitously  
and unpredictably—a gift of the gods, as the poets  
say. From that moment on, the story is largely up  
to you, but the beginning is not. In this realization  
lies the critical difference between Sokrates’ and  
Lysias’ erotic thinking. Sokrates has Phaedrus

search Lysias' *logos* for a beginning, in vain, to make a point. The beginning is not fictive. It cannot be placed in the control of a writer or reader. We should note that the Greek verb 'to read' is *anagnōskein*, a compound of the verb 'to know' (*gignōskein*) and the prefix *ana*, meaning 'again.' If you are reading, you are not at the beginning.

As Sokrates tells it, your story begins the moment Eros enters you. That incursion is the biggest risk of your life. How you handle it is an index of the quality, wisdom and decorum of the things inside you. As you handle it you come into contact with what is inside you, in a sudden and startling way. You perceive what you are, what you lack, what you could be. What is this mode of perception, so different from ordinary perception that it is well described as madness? How is it that when you fall in love you feel as if suddenly you are seeing the world as it really is? A mood of knowledge floats out over your life. You seem to know what is real and what is not. Something is lifting you toward an understanding so complete and clear it makes you jubilant. This mood is no delusion, in Sokrates' belief. It is a glance down into time, at realities you once knew, as staggeringly beautiful as the glance of your beloved (249e-50c).

The point of time that Lysias deletes from his *logos*, the moment of *mania* when Eros enters the lover, is for Sokrates the single most important moment to confront and grasp. 'Now' is a gift of the gods and an access onto reality. To address yourself to the

moment when Eros glances into your life and to grasp what is happening in your soul at that moment is to begin to understand how to live. Eros' mode of takeover is an education: it can teach you the real nature of what is inside you. Once you glimpse that, you can begin to become it. Sokrates says it is a glimpse of a god (253a).

Sokrates' answer to the erotic dilemma of time, then, is the antithesis of Lysias' answer. Lysias chooses to edit out 'now' and narrate entirely from the vantage point of 'then.' In Sokrates' view, to cross out 'now' is, in the first place, impossible, a writer's impertinence. Even if it were possible, it would mean losing a moment of unique and indispensable value. Sokrates proposes instead to assimilate 'now' in such a way that it prolongs itself over the whole of life, and beyond. Sokrates would inscribe his novel within the instant of desire. We should begin to keep an eye on this Sokratic literary ambition, because it will have a serious effect on the story Plato is telling in the *Phaedrus*. It will make it disappear.