

EROS

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How do we interpret the word ‘erotic’ in our contemporary society? It usually conveys a sexual allure, a physical attraction, a suggestion of passion and exoticism. But do we connect it with spirituality, or a sense of divinity? Not usually. In our secular world the sacred is not accessible through sex. We have separated human sexuality from religious experience, yet surely everyone can testify to the tremendous emotional power of the “longing for the beloved” and probably most have sensed what feels like an immeasurable distance between the ideal of love, the perfect beauty, and the person sitting next to them at breakfast.

How then to bridge that gulf, to see the world of nature and human beings as reflections of divinity, to understand passion and longing as a movement of the soul that may go much further than physical desire, yet which also may endow that desire with the potential for spiritual transformation? We must return to the ancient Greeks, who saw Eros as a divine being of awesome power, a “mighty daemon”. His raw, ruthless influence over the hearts of men demanded taming, the force of erotic love and attraction needed directing towards creativity and intellectual understanding lest it wreak havoc with civilised norms of behaviour. The Greeks also knew how to give Eros his due, in the orgiastic rituals of Dionysus, but it was Plato who was the first to suggest that the experience of falling in love, the ‘madness’ that ensued from passionate erotic longing for the beloved, might in fact be the first stage of the soul seeking to free itself from the bonds of its earthly existence and begin its journey back to union with its divine source. In Plato’s famous dialogue *Symposium*, the priestess Diotima talks of love in terms of initiation into the mysteries, and describes the process of falling in love as the first stage in the ritual. You must, she says, be captivated by the physical beauty of a particular person, and from there proceed to the love of all beautiful bodies. This will engender love of the “beauties of the soul”, and longing for soul-connection with another. From there will develop the contemplation of the beauty of laws and institutions, of philosophy, of universal values. Eventually the “final revelation” will be of Beauty itself, the immortal, unchanging quality of the gods, in the face of which the human lover becomes herself changed, realising her own divine nature.

Diotima is careful to emphasise that such a realisation can only take place through starting with the sensual world, with fully acknowledging the erotic stirrings of physical attraction. In another dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato develops this spiritual journey further in the colourful myth of the charioteer. He describes in detail the arousal of the soul as it meets its human beloved, the longing for the beloved’s presence, the kindling of love in the beloved’s soul and the painful effort of taming the wild horse of lust in order to direct the erotic energy into achieving a three-way union between the lovers and God. Of course the sexual mores of Plato’s society were firmly homoerotic, initiation through love being solely the province of the older man and the younger boy. The purpose of erotic love in this sense was not conjugal relationship—indeed it was considered to be superior to heterosexual union since it engendered spiritual, rather than physical, offspring. Plato undoubtedly offers an uncompromising and unfashionable context for erotic attraction, but it is also worth asking ourselves whether he may be right about one thing—that Eros

is indeed not of this world. If he is not honoured as a god, if human relationships are not understood as “ritual” containers for his more-than-human power of creation and destruction, then he becomes reduced to mere sex, physical gratification, pornographic display. Eros is far more than this.

In Renaissance Italy, the revival of the ancient Greek gods took place in Florence, through the ritual invocations of Marsilio Ficino and his Platonic Academy. At no other time in history is the influence of Eros on art and culture so evident. For the first time since antiquity artists began painting mythological rather than Christian subjects, sculptors carved the gods in human form, and man became elevated to the status of a god. “A miracle is man!” was the battle cry of the heroic intellectual genius, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, because he had the power to be self-determined, to walk with beasts or fly with angels. Eros infused Renaissance man with the desire to create as God creates, to ascend to spiritual knowledge through a renewed understanding of Plato’s theory of Love. In fact Ficino was the first to coin the term “Platonic love”, and it was he who inspired the artist Sandro Botticelli to make an image of it for posterity in his famous evocations of Venus, now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence: the *Birth of Venus* and the *Primavera*.

Primavera was dedicated to a young member of the Medici family who was about to be married, and undoubtedly depicts Ficino’s Christian-neoplatonic interpretation of Eros as a divine force of creation, issuing forth from God into nature, becoming transmuted and tempered through the beauty of Venus and her three Graces, and finally being spiritualised through the mediating role of Mercury who pierces through the clouds of the material world with his magic caduceus. Ficino lived in a different era from Plato. Marriage and love between the sexes was now viewed as a literal enactment of the union of souls—physical love and physical offspring were to be understood as earthly images of divine truths. Indeed the heavenly Venus, emerging out of the sea in the *Birth of Venus*, is no longer separated from her earthly counterpart but is clothed, taken into the wooded groves of the *Primavera* where she becomes the divine principle in the heart of nature, directing the dance of human erotic attraction. She is the archetypal feminine, as much Isis or Mary as Aphrodite, and Eros is here shown as her cherubic son about to fire his arrow of desire into the breast of the Grace called Beauty. She meanwhile is gazing in rapture at Mercury, for she longs for him to unite with her. But no earthly love is for him—he looks up, fulfilling his role in the dynamic spiritual circuit of Love and redirecting her passion back to the heavens with his wand. How interesting that the word ‘desire’ derives from the Latin *desidere*, literally meaning ‘from the stars’! No wonder our deepest longings will never be fulfilled through earthly pleasures.

Then the cycle will begin all over again, and on the far right of *Primavera* Botticelli gives us the shocking image of the dark, primeval, untamed Eros as the west wind, bursting into the world and ravishing Chloris as the bare earth. But as a result, Chloris is transformed into Flora, the goddess of the Spring, and Eros begins his process of transformation through the vitalising of nature and the quickening of human love. Love is born from the Good and returns to the Good, in the Platonic vision, and human beings have their part to play in that return.

Perhaps such a vision may help us to make sense of the intensity of our longing for what is forever beyond our reach, to understand the madness of erotic love as a divine intervention in our carefully ordered lives, rather than a pathological upset. Perhaps it

may also give us an image of creative purpose, of erotic energy deepening the connection of our own imagination to what the Platonists called the soul of the world. For we are talking here of a reality which is accessible to us through our dreams, visions and works of art, not through the mode of rational thinking which dominates our education. Ficino and Botticelli knew that images reached deeper than words, and that the lessons of Eros could only be learnt through the wounding of the heart, not by thinking or conceptualising. “It is useless to praise a girl in the ears of a boy, or describe her with words, if you want to arouse him to love”, says Ficino. “Point, if you can, to the fair maiden herself with your finger, and no further word will be needed.” There is an anecdote from ancient Greece that a man stole into the sanctuary of Aphrodite to look at the marvellous statue of the goddess by the master Praxiteles, and was so overcome by desire that he tried to make love to the marble image. There could hardly be a more graphic way of conveying the futility of directing Eros towards the material world at the expense of the spiritual—for had the poor man only recognised that earthly images are symbols, conveying eternal truths through sensual forms, he might have been able to perceive in the statue the divine life of the goddess herself, and unite his soul with hers. That would have been far more satisfying.

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