

Eros at the Temple Stream: Eroticism in the Poetry of Denise Levertov

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In his article “Why is Diotima a Woman?: Platonic Eros and the Figuration of Gender” which analyses Diotima’s role in Plato’s *Symposium*, David M. Halperin categorically concludes:

I have uncovered Diotima’s absence rather than her presence. Diotima has turned out to be not so much a woman as a “woman”, a necessary female absence occupied by a male signifier. (Halperin 295)

Plato, Halperin argues, has appropriated a feminist point of view with the aim of finding some legitimation for his own discourse on the eroticism of male culture. In Plato’s *Symposium*, femininity is a relative term always specified in connection with the male. According to Halperin, this turns women into mysterious voids “for ‘femininity’ must continue to remain a mystery so long as it is defined wholly by reference to ‘masculinity’—whether as a lack of male presence or as the presence of a male lack” (Halperin 295). Aristotle himself said that “the female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities”. I guess there is no need to tell in reference to whom those qualities are *lacking*.

For a man writing on the erotic poetry of a female poet, as is now my case, there is always the great risk of defining eroticism mainly in male terms as Plato did in his *Symposium*. Consequently, Levertov’s erotic poetry would not stand for itself in this article but for the lack of the male presence, as it happened with Diotima. This hypothesis is plausible especially if we bear in mind that the awareness of the risks involved, though it truly helps, does not make one immune to them whatsoever.

As the etymology itself reveals, love is undeniably at the basis of eroticism. *Erotic* means “pertaining to the passion of love”; *eroticism* derives from *eros*, the Greek noun for love for another person. Yet for Levertov eroticism not only demands the presence of *eros* but also the participation of *agape*, or spiritual, unselfish love for a god. Denise Levertov treats eroticism in her poetry

as mainly a sacred act performed in the presence of the divine. The lovers transcend their mortal souls to become enfolded by the god of love; this makes of the erotic a religious endeavor. Eroticism is also focused upon, in her poetry, as a source of knowledge through bodily contact. For many female writers, the erotic involves the experiencing of their sexuality and their organs of pleasure as non-centralised and multiple. This apprehension leads women to consider the sexual encounter not as a subjection to the centrality of the penis but as the fusion of two or more diffuse bodies. Through the partial dissolution of the selves, the lovers in the erotic act go beyond their mortal natures, thus yielding to nature's continuous cycle of birth and rebirth and, in turn, to immortal continuity. Finally, Levertov's "The Poem Unwritten" embodies the use of poetry as "verbal eroticism", such as Octavio Paz defines it in his last work *La llama doble* (10). Poetry, Paz argues, is language turned into exuberant rhythm and metaphor, whereas eroticism is sexuality transfigured; both eroticism and poetry would be then induced by the imagination. "The Poem Unwritten" advocates a transgression of the taboos on sexuality by means of the poem.

In Levertov's poetry, as has been stated, eroticism is imbued with a sacred and divine aura, for it includes both the *eros* and the *agape* principles. Submission to the latter implies an acknowledgement of the sacred character of the erotic. The cult of Eros in her poetics appears mainly as a religious attitude, that is, it requires the transcendence of the self's personal ambitions in order to be covered by the hovering presence of the god. In "Hymn to Eros", eroticism and religious submission to the god of love are equated:

O Eros, silently smiling one, hear me.
 Let the shadow of thy wings
 brush me.
 Let thy presence
 enfold, as if darkness
 were swadown.
 Let me see that darkness
 lamp in hand,
 this country become
 the other country
 sacred to desire.

Drowsy god,
 slow the wheels of my thought
 so that I listen only
 to the snowfall hush of
 thy circling.
 Close my beloved with me
 in the smoke ring of thy power,
 that we may be, each to the other,
 figures of flame,

figures of smoke,
figures of flesh
newly seen in the dusk.

In this invocation to her god, the author beseeches Eros to embrace her and her lover "in the smoke ring of thy power". Lover and beloved thus come under the pervasive influence of the divinity in order to transcend their mortal nature. As Psyche yearns to behold, lamp in hand, the face of her beloved Cupid that lay in absolute darkness, so does Levertov hunger to see this god of darkness: "Let me see that darkness / lamp in hand".

The darkness of Eros, however, is not an absence of knowledge. On the contrary, it dazzles us with the revelation of flamy figures of flesh "newly seen in the dusk". Darkness is the true realm of the erotic, since eroticism entails the revelation of a certain knowledge in the dark through physical exchange. In other words, the erotic is a source of knowledge of the self and the other through the body. Hence, according to Levertov, Psyche had no cause to feel grief; though she was not allowed to see the face of her beloved lying next to her, she was "blessed" to know him in the dark through her body. "Psyche / how blessed you were / in the dark, knowing him in your flesh" ("Psyche in Somerville"). Regardless of its divine basis, the erotic is also a self-conscious endeavor, a consciously intellectualised feeling, or a psychological principle. In other words, eroticism is mainly a human activity. So far, only men and women seem to have been able to turn their sexual and reproductive activities into erotic ones; only human beings have endowed their sexual activities with specks of emotion and imagination.

Eros, understood precisely in terms of psychic relatedness, partakes of the feminine principle of nature. The element of femininity, as has been portrayed in myth, underlies everything that, to men, appears irrational, incomprehensible, and unconscious in nature. Jung opposes the feminine *Eros* to the patriarchal *Logos* which has been traditionally correlated with rationality, "natural" understanding, logical discourse, and consciousness. As Esther Harding asserts, Eros is powerful and incomprehensible, not controlled by rational discourse; on the contrary, it leads us to the darkness of the irrational, "into the primordial slime from which life first emerged" (33). There we are confronted with the depths of the unknown: "In these depths are the dark, sinister, feminine beginnings, in a region ruled over, not by the bright Logos of intellect, but by the dark Eros of the feeling" (33). Not surprisingly then, this feminine principle or Eros has been classically symbolised by the moon, ruler of the night and the unconscious, whereas the male principle or Logos has been represented by the sun which holds sway over the day and conscious understanding.

Nevertheless, if we assume, as Audre Lorde does, that the erotic is a life instinct in women, "the nurturer or the nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" (286), an awareness of eroticism as power is raised. The erotic, viewed by

Levertov as a pathway to knowledge, acts as an empowerment that can supply the energy necessary to change the imposed *status quo*. Patriarchal discourse, on the other hand, tends to destroy this source of power through the establishment of a well-known system of binary oppositions: the bright rationality of the intellect versus the dark, deep irrationality of feelings.

Yet, both to the philosophical and the poetic tradition, Eros is oxymoronic. He lives in the shining darkness; Eros is Psyche's radiating lamp in the dark room. The divinity becomes an invisible presence to Levertov ("so that I listen only / to the snowful hush of / thy circling") for the same reason that Cupid was invisible to Psyche: the excess of light blinds the beholder.

... Eros es una divinidad que comunica a la obscuridad con la luz, a la materia con el espíritu, al sexo con la idea, al aquí con el allá. Eros es solar y nocturno. Todos lo sienten pero pocos lo ven. Fue una presencia invisible para su enamorada Psique por la misma razón que el sol es invisible en pleno día por exceso de luz. (Paz 27)¹

Octavio Paz depicts a double-folded Eros that ruptures the marked and unmarked terms of the binary oppositions. The god becomes both the self and the other: he himself embodies the dichotomy. The moon and the sun are carved on his wings. This philandrogynous Eros epitomises the feminine principle whereby the body and the mind are not split into unconnected parts. Thus, the feminine Eros starts to "think through the body", converting the physicality of the body, as Adrienne Rich foreshadowed, into both knowledge and power. The former will tell women that they possess billowy bodies brimful of fluids; the latter will empower women in order to extrapolate this knowledge to sexual relationships. Each erotic encounter will then be thought of as a never-ending merging of fluids. The lovers will come to learn that each erotic encounter should tend towards the continuous convergence of the streams of two or more diffuse bodies.

Hence, thanks to eroticism, we, as discontinuous beings ever yearning for our lost continuity, can dare to defy our fragmentary existence. If we think of it, there is a yawning abyss separating the various existences of beings in the world. Each being is markedly distinct from the others not only in terms of physical appearance but also, and what is more important, in terms of psychic configuration. The facts of his/her life may be of interest to others but he/she alone is engaged in them; he/she is born alone and dies alone too. The truth, however, is that this existential discontinuity has been constantly affecting us to the point that we could say that it has always been one of our overriding obsessions:

We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity ... Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a

sleek and
on fire

Levertov employs fire not only as the embodiment of “sexual excitement”, as Julian Gitzen reveals (128), but also as a symbol of immortality. Through the sacrificial rite of the immolation, the lovers show their willingness to subject themselves to the cathartic effects of the erotic flames in order to undergo a metamorphosis in their bodies and souls alike. Thus, they perform the same ritual of the asexual phoenix which burns in its funeral pyre to rise anew and live for another five hundred years. The lovers, burnt by the regenerating flames of eroticism, are ready to face up to death in their quest for a continuity of existence even beyond the immediate world. As Socrates defended in Plato’s *Symposium*, we yearn for immortality primarily because we are sexually desiring beings.

On the other hand, the transition in the poem from the “cool bodies” to those “sleek and / on fire” is continuous and gliding like the ebb and flow of the river. During the stage of erotic fusion of the bodies “the lovers are neither two nor one, neither different nor the same, but un-different (*indifférentes*)” (Rubin 13). This *indifférence* of the lovers marks many of Levertov’s poems on the erotic. For instance, in one of her poems, she marvellously describes the exultation of the erotic mingling as “... the joy / of two rivers / meeting in the depths of the sea” (“The Good Dream”). This different approach to sexual relations subverts the patriarchal stereotype that views sexuality in terms either of forceful penetration or of possession of the beloved. Levertov, like many other female writers and artists, propounds an ideal of sexuality based on the simultaneous interaction of multiple, ubiquitous pleasure organs. Therefore, the guiding principle of sexual relationships should lie on the multiple erotogeneity of the female body and not on the autocracy of the central phallus, since it is acknowledged that,

woman’s sexuality is not one but multiple, not based on the gaze that objectifies but on the touch that unites, not on the stiffness of strictly localized, free-standing forms but on the melting together of diffuse, multiple, functionally nondifferentiated elements. (Rubin 13)

Hilda Doolittle’s first lines of her celebrated “Leda” (120) echo Levertov’s treatment of sexual intercourse:

Where the slow river
meets the tide,
a red swan lifts red wings
and darker beak,
and underneath the purple down
of his soft breast

uncurls his coral feet.

H.D. transforms the myth of Leda's rape by Zeus into an encounter between the swan and the lily just at the point where the tide of the sea and the stream of the "slow river" meet. The erotic encounter between swan and lily replicates the Heraclitean continuity of the river. In the penultimate stanza, sexual intercourse between the "red swan" and the lily is embedded within the imagery of the mounting of the tide into the river: "where the slow lifting / of the tide, / floats into the river". Leda desires a "Dionysian swan", not an "Apollonian" Zeus.

Dionysus was identified with liquids—blood, sap, milk, wine. The Dionysian is nature's chthonian fluidity. Apollo, on the other hand, gives form and shape, marking off one being from the other. All artifacts are Apollonian. Melting and union are Dionysian; separation and individuation, Apollonian. (Paglia 30)

Poetry, however, is the place *par excellence* where the body and the mind are connected. In poetry alone, the emotional and the intellectual, the Dionysian and the Apollonian are prone to cohere. Historically, ever since the first philosophers, eroticism and poetry have always been linked. This association is not unfounded for they both tend towards the fusion of different elements and the transcendence of personal orientations for the sake of immortality and continuity. George Bataille asserts that "poetry leads to the same place as all forms of eroticism—to the blending and fusion of separate objects. It leads us to eternity, it leads us to death, and through death to continuity. Poetry is eternity" (25). Going even further, and as Octavio Paz wisely pointed out: "la relación entre erotismo y poesía es tal que puede decirse, sin afectación, que el primero es una poética corporal y que la segunda es una erótica verbal" (10).²

Denise Levertov's "The Poem Unwritten" epitomises this conception of poetry as "verbal eroticism". Levertov, however, regrets that the poem of the beloved's body has remained unwritten for too long. The subtle caresses of her hands upon his body, "from neck-pulse to breast-hair to level / belly to cock", have been left too long unaccounted for:

For weeks the poem of your body,
of my hands upon your body
 stroking, sweeping, in the rite of
 worship, going
 their way of wonder down
 from neck-pulse to breast-hair to level
 belly to cock—
for weeks that poem, that prayer,
unwritten.

The poem unwritten, the act
left in the mind, undone. The years
a forest of giant stones, of fossil stumps,
blocking the altar.

The erotic act left in the mind runs the risk of turning sour, “un-done”. Whenever silence imposes its autocracy, the erotic turns into a pagan country—not that other country “sacred to desire”—ruled by the tyrant. The terms, however, can be inverted; therefore, Levertov deliberately embarks upon the task of writing the unwritten, doing the undone. Through this performance she raises public awareness while, at the same time, she nullifies the risk that she announces.

Yet, there is still an ancient forest studded with prejudices and taboos about sexuality—“a forest of giant stones, of fossil stumps”. To redraw the situation, she must let the “stones” roll down and pave the way to the “altar” of verbal eroticism. In other words, she must transgress the canon(s). In “The Poem Unwritten”, transgression culminates precisely by means of the writing of it. Thus, Levertov seems to be wholly ascribing to Cixous’ “Write! Writing is for you, you are for you” (198), since:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. (Cixous 199)

L’écriture féminine, as Levertov shows, is deeply inscribed in the erotic. Every word turns into a palpitation of the body. Every sentence is a written score for the emotions. This writing, as Cixous asserts, “can only keep going without ever inscribing or discerning contours” (202). Not the flesh alone, but also the word is the nurturer of women’s deepest erotic desire:

The flesh
is delicate, we must nourish it:
desire hungers
for wine, for clear plain water,
good strong coffee,
as well as for hard cock and
throbbing clitoris and the
glide and thrust of
sentence and paragraph in and up to the
last sweet sigh of a
chapter’s ending. (Levertov, “Holiday”)

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Notes

1. "... Eros is a divinity that communicates darkness with light, the matter with the mind, the sex with the idea, the here with the there. He is felt by everyone yet few can see him. He was an invisible presence to his beloved Psyche for the same reason that the sun is invisible in daylight due to the excess of light".
2. "The relationship between eroticism and poetry is such that it could be said, without affectation, that the former is a bodily poetics while the latter is verbal eroticism".

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