

Diagosfera
Incroci di letterature e culture anglofone

Il termine deriva dal greco *diágo* (condurre attraverso/oltre, trasportare, vivere) e *sphaira* (palla, sfera, globo, terra). Con questo neologismo, che richiama da vicino il concetto di semiosfera inteso da Juri Lotman come spazio privilegiato del dialogo interculturale, si vuole delineare un programma di lavoro, di edizione, traduzione e interpretazione critica di testi letterari e saggistici che consenta al lettore e allo studioso di attraversare i confini culturali e linguistici e di promuovere incontri fra civiltà e forme di espressione artistica. Particolare rilievo assume in questo senso il processo traduttivo, inteso come operazione eminentemente transculturale in grado di rispettare le specificità linguistiche e antropologiche e di restituire alle voci provenienti da concretissimi “altrove” la loro carica innovativa, ad un tempo sperimentale e mitopoietica.

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Love-sickness from Plato to Alice Munro

Edited by
Héliane Ventura

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Introduction

Héliane Ventura

Love is a complex and mysterious experience that continues to generate questions. The philosophers from Antiquity who started interrogating its significance have lent it opposite characteristics: according to the neo-platonic model, it is envisaged as a spiritual force; according to the stoic model on the contrary, it is a disease directly affecting the individual and causing him harm.

At the end of Book 4 of *De Rerum Natura* [1030-287], Lucretius provides a famous description of the lover's malady. It manifests itself by a "dreadful craving" [*dira libido*, 1046] leads to painful consummation, and from there, ominously, to "chilling anxieties" [*frigida cura*, 1060].¹ It is first compared to "a sore, *ulcus* or a wound or blow *vulnus, ictus*". The lover himself experiences two contrasting moods: "one passive and miserable, and characterized by terms like *miser, dolor, vinctus*. The second is more active and wild and is denoted by *insania, demens, rabies* and *furor*. When under the influence of the second of these two moods, the lover is also described as "lost", literally "wandering" [*errans* or *vagans*]."²

Thus, falling in love is contemplated as a disturbance that brings about physical and psychological ruin. According to Jackie Pigeaud,³ the classical psychopathology of love, as represented in Antiquity, falls into three classical cases:

- first a case of "phrenitis", an acute delirious condition attributed to an affection of the "phrenes";
- a "mania", which the latin called "furor" and corresponds to "a violent incoherent, aimless behavior";
- finally, melancholia, traditionally attributed to the black bile and manifested through fear and sadness.

Love is accused of being responsible for preventing the individual from achieving euthymia, a normal tranquil state of mind, and condemning him to dysthymia, a mood disorder.

Love as anathema is a recurrent motif that can be traced throughout the history of ideas in the Western world. During the Middle Ages, in the elaborate world of courtly poetry, the question of unrequited love or that of the impossibility of

¹ Rothaus Caston (2006: 275).

² *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³ Pigeaud (1981: 71, 100, 122).

reaching felicity in either profane love or marriage has re-emerged in a notable manner. As pointed out by Lacan, who leaned on the authority of German thinkers: “the beginning of courtly love, as expressed by one of those who highlighted its characteristics at the beginning of the 19th century in Germany, is meant to be a scholastic of unhappy love”.⁴

The pain brought about by unhappy love has medical consequences that are exhaustively analyzed in mediaeval medical books. The etiology or *causa*, the manifestations or *signa*, and the remedies or *cura* are to be found for example in a volume by Bernard de Gordon or Bernardus Gordonius entitled *The Lilium Medicinæ* dating from 1305, which became extremely successful and was translated in different vernacular languages, becoming thus accessible to other people than physicians. For example, a complete translation into Irish of this volume appeared in 1400, through which different types of cures were recommended to the general public of the time:

As to the cure, if the afflicted one is otherwise a rational person, an *ecnaidh* (wise man) is recommended to reason or frighten him out of his infatuation. If he is an irrational youth, the first remedy suggested is a good sound whipping. Ovid’s cure for such cases – continuous hard work – is mentioned, as also that of Pythagoras – travel, change of country and scene. If none of these avail, the last remedy recommended is to introduce to the demented one a ragged ugly old hag who is to revile his *inamorata* to her heart’s content. Should this final effort fail, the man must be possessed of the devil, and his case is hopeless.⁵

The hopelessness of the lover’s malady is remarkably illustrated by a novel that stands out in world literature at the end of the 18th century: one that brings the plight of the unfortunate lover to a tragic termination and contains what is probably the most famous suicide in literature. It is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novel entitled *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* [1774]: it tells of an unhappy romantic infatuation for which there is no other issue than suicide. As suggested by Belinda Jack, one of the numerous ironies of this novel lies in the fact that it simultaneously brought a number of readers to final despair but allowed its author to regain happiness and tranquility of mind. According to Goethe, the effect of the novel was devastating: “My friends...thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in real life and, in any case, shoot themselves; and what occurred at first among a few took place later among the general public...”.⁶ Although this was never demonstrated conclusively,

⁴ Lacan (1986: 175). My translation from the original French: “*Le départ de l’amour courtois, comme l’a exprimé l’un de ceux qui, en Allemagne au début du XIX siècle, ont mis en évidence ses caractéristiques, est d’être une scolastique de l’amour malheureux*”.

⁵ Michie (1937: 306).

⁶ Jack (2014: 18).

there remains that Goethe himself was rid of his suffering thanks to the writing of the novel. In the words of Belinda Jack “when he completed *Werther*, he likened his mood to one experienced “after a general confession, joyous and free and entitled to a new life”.⁷

The narration of painful emotions has a curative effect: it is capable of healing love wounds and restoring man to sanity, as well as enforcing self-knowledge and the dispelling of harmful illusions. The cathartic effect of performance on stage of tragic occurrences is not to be demonstrated: Aristotle’s insight on the purgation of passion has never been superseded or surpassed. The therapeutic and liberating effect of words has also been demonstrated at the end of the nineteenth century with the story of Bertha Pappenheim alias Ana O. During the eighteen months of her daily interaction with her physician, Breuer, she herself coined the expression “talking cure” and her life story testifies to her recovery, first achieved through the act of speaking, and later brought about through her activities in charity societies. According to Henry Ellenberger, Anna O.’s story has been represented as “the prototype of the psychoanalytical cure and one of the fundamental events which led Freud to the creation of psychoanalysis”.⁸ The psychoanalytical cure is founded on the narration of the painful emotions that paralyze the subject physically or emotionally. It also hinges on the power of sublimation, as conceptualized by Freud. According to the definition proposed by Chemama and Vandermersch, sublimation is “the unconscious psychic process which accounts for the aptitude of the sexual drive to replace a sexual object with a non sexual object (connoted with certain values and social ideals) and to exchange its sexual goal for another non sexual without losing its intensity”.⁹ The creative process provides individuals with the possibility of sublimation. They profitably redirect the sexual drive towards a non sexual one. The therapeutic use of unconscious forces, as revealed during analysis, lies in the possibility of tapping the energies of passion and redirecting them towards creation rather than destruction.

Studying the humanities provides the individual with the capacity to try and understand the destructive passions that are evoked through the arts, it provides him or her with the capacity to empathize with those who are sick at the same time as it ensures a critical distance from the disease. Martha Nussbaum states in the plea she writes in defense of the humanities:

We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance
[. . .] I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely

⁷ Jack (2014: 19).

⁸ Ellenberger (1970: 696).

⁹ Chemama and Vandermersch (2009: 552).

to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the nature of democratic self-government: a world-wide crisis in education.¹⁰

Nussbaum goes as far as declaring that the survival of humanity lies in a reassessment of our systems of education:

Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive. If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements. The future of the world's democracies hangs in the balance.¹¹

The skills that are needed, she says, are the faculties of thought and imagination that make us human and make our relationships "rich human relationships, rather than relationships of mere use and manipulation".¹² The study of literature is propaedeutic and consolatory. As stated by Jackson: "Literature enables us to come to terms with traumatic experiences in fantasy before or after we have to cope with the real thing".¹³

This volume started as a small conference that gathered friends, students, and colleagues, at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès to question the resurgence of the universal phenomenon of love-sickness through the ages. Its aim is pedagogical in the sense that it means to foster the understanding of love-sickness, so that we eventually become capable of compassionate concern, of a sense of sympathy, and of a widened and imaginative approach to the emotional suffering of others.

The volume moves along a chronological vector, and is divided into three parts. The first one starts with a reconsideration of Plato's *Symposium* by Dr Éric Le Toulec, and investigates the meaningfulness of *agalma* for the understanding of love-sickness. According to the dictionary of psychoanalysis, *agalma* comes from *agallein*, "to decorate, to honour". Lacan brings it nearer to the roots of *agaomai* "to admire" and *aglaé* "the brilliant".¹⁴ Thus, the word *agalma* designates a certain number of objects that are precious and brilliant. In archaic Greece these objects were real objects, the treasures that were concealed in the depths of the rooms reserved for women; some of them were ceremonial dress, others heteroclit objects such as the Golden Fleece or Polycratus' ring. At the time of Plato's *Symposium*,

¹⁰ Nussbaum (2010: 1-2).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³ Jackson (2014: 60).

¹⁴ Chemama and Vandermerch (2009: 33).

the *agalmata* are not real objects, they are symbolic ones, those brilliant and admirable qualities that Alcibiades believes to be lodged in Socrates and that he is the only one to perceive because he takes it for granted they are concealed behind the old man's unappealing appearance. Every lover endows the beloved with the possession of *agalmata*, this is what Socrates and Lacan tell us, but the lover may very well be disappointed when he realizes that the outstanding brilliance that he attaches to the love object may simply originate from his own desire. Thus, it may very well be that disappointment is at the origin of love-sickness or necessarily attached to it.

Cristina Noacco's paper, which revisits Dante's itinerary, proposes his exemplary spiritual journey as the remedy to the disappointment brought about by love or the loss of the beloved. The new function that can be attributed to love is a spiritual one that allows the poet to raise himself to the contemplation of God and to save his soul.

Biancamaria Rizzardi reflects on love-sickness from seventeenth-century England to the contemporary findings of neurosciences and shows that, at no point in its long history, could the disease be envisaged solely from the medical perspective. It is necessarily compounded with the history of the arts, the history of philosophy, and the literary history of the world.

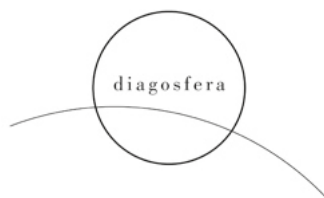
The second part is devoted to two exemplary cases of love-sickness in the 20th century: the first one entails an examination of two poems by Ted Hughes and the second one an interpretation of the psychological collapse of the female protagonist in "Labor Day Dinner" by Alice Munro. They may be intertextually linked if only because of an oblique reference made by Alice Munro to the poem by Sylvia Plath entitled *The Elm*. A remarkable example of prosopopoeia, this poem finishes with a visionary line that anticipates the end of the poetess's life: "the faults that kill, that kill, that kill". Adultery or betrayal may be the faults that are referred to in Plath's poem as they are in Edith Wharton's novel *Ethan Frome*. It is against an elm tree that Ethan Frome attempts unsuccessfully to end his life and that of his beloved Mattie. Ethan's wife is physically handicapped and he is not free to marry Mattie. Munro's story begins under the ominous shadow of two elm trees but presents a vision of love-sickness that is less pessimistic than Wharton's or Plath's. Her story ironically finishes under shaggy pine trees that may very well mark the end of pining away.

The third part hinges on a case study entirely devoted to a single story of Munro's, "The Bear Came Over the Mountain", envisaged from the point of view of its filmic adaptation by David Roche and from two different perspectives that complement each other, the philosophy of care for Lucile Bentley, and the new function of hypotexts for Héliane Ventura.

Thus, the volume is based on connecting love disorders and the suffering they engender from antiquity to contemporaneity, straddling time and space, articulating aesthetics, ethics and therapeutics to propose a diachronic panorama of unhappy affects deployed in poetry, fiction and film through emblematic examples. It is geared towards trying to cast a simultaneous empathetic and analytical gaze on our common vulnerability and underpinned by the tenet that human creativity and imagination are the ultimate remedies, because they are endowed with unique cathartic and sublimatory powers.

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