



*The Tantric Teacher of Ancient Greece -
Diotima, Swedenborg, and the Path of Love*

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Sometimes when we look at our own time, we forget origins. We see the pool in the valley, and do not recall that these waters came down from mountains and that one can follow them back.

2400 years ago there was a woman from the ancient Greek Arcadian hills. To her student she was the “stranger woman.” He called her that because she was not Athenian - she came from deep in Greece, near Sparta. She came to Athens in her role as a priestess. She was involved in a sacrifice that delayed the great plague of Athens for ten years. And she taught a man of 30 years, a sometime soldier, the son of a stonemason and a midwife. She initiated him into the “The Mysteries of Love.”

Ah, translations! We are so in the hands of Victorian translators. The Greeks had many words for love. There is a word for the love of friendship, and another for the love for family, one for the selfless love of others - and there is erotic love. The stranger woman’s teaching was about erotic love - Eros in Greek as it is in English. It is one of the many kinds of love in our heritage, closer to the Latin *Amor* than it is to *Caritas*.

It was definitely sexual, but it was more than that. A Christian translator of a later disciple of hers called it Yearning, and I think that is a very good word. All desires for any kinds of good were part of Yearning. It was this she taught her soldier student. Easy to miss in the turbulent, bright glare of Eros is what the Greeks meant by “mystery.”

It was not a who-done-it or even an unknown thing in general. A mystery was a religious school, and a practice, and a ceremony. Part of the discipline was to keep secret what happened in the initiation and the ceremonies. The Eleusinian mysteries

initiated thousands of people over a millennium, and we only have fragments of information about it. Mysteries were kept secret, voluntarily, through centuries.

We do not know the practices that the stranger woman shared with her stonemason. But we do know something of her interpretation. Her student thought Yearning was a god. She said that No, Eros was not a god - for gods are immortal and can want nothing. Yearning was also not simply mortal like us. Eros or Yearning was midway between divinity and humanity, perhaps what Swedenborg would call a “mediating angel.” She said in the long ropy sentences the Greeks loved:

“He is a great spirit (daimon), and like all spirits he is intermediate between the divine and the mortal.

'And what is his power?' [asked her student]

'He interprets,' she replied, 'between gods and humankind, conveying and taking across to the gods the prayers and sacrifices of humans, and to humanity the commands and replies of the gods; he is the mediator who spans the chasm which divides them, and therefore in Eros all is bound together, and through him the arts of the prophet and the priest, their sacrifices and mysteries and charms, and all prophecy and incantation, find their way. For God mingles not with humankind; but through Yearning all the intercourse and converse of God with humanity, whether awake or asleep, is carried on. The wisdom which understands this is spiritual; all other wisdom, such as that of arts and handicrafts, is mean and vulgar.’”¹

¹ Plato. *Symposium*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. Raleigh, NC: Lulu.com, 2016.

I think the stranger woman is speaking of what Swedenborg would call the fluxes - the flow of God into humanity, for instance. And Yearning - Eros - is one of them. The child of the midwife and the stonemason scratched his head. He was direct, and brave. In a few short years he would be famous for his courage in the war between Sparta and Athens. So his question was direct and brave - and even sounds Swedenborgian:

'O thou stranger woman, thou sayest well; but, assuming Eros to be such as you say, what is the use of him to humankind?'

The stranger was teaching more than the mysteries of Yearning to her student. She was also teaching him a way of thinking. So she began by noting that while the word "lover" is given to those who desire the forms of humans, it should be applied to others - those who seek money, those who seek good government, gymnasts, philosophers. All of these are lovers as well. In saying so she brought much of human life into his question. But Yearning for what? In wanting a beloved, or money, or governance, what does one seek?

The good, she says. The beautiful. Like the Navajo in their ceremonies, the lover seeks to walk in beauty. More precisely, they need to *ascend into* beauty. Perhaps her student just stared at this point. It was a lot to take in, and sounded so abstract. One begins, she said, by loving the beauty of one. One clearly loves them and desires them physically, because it is the nature of Yearning to want the beautiful. Yet soon one finds that more than one person is beautiful.

We may now wonder if she is recommending infidelity. No, it is something else. One has been seeking *something* in the beloved, and one finds that it is present in many persons. One finds (the stranger woman went on) that the beautiful soul is even more beautiful than the beautiful body. One's passion leads one to let go of the obsession with a single beautiful form. One finds that the Beauty that one seeks is bigger and wider than the one person in whom we have been seeking it. As Swedenborg would say, all that is good comes from Divinity. One discovers beautiful water in one pool in the valley. Then one notices that it comes down the mountain, and one goes up the mountain to find where it comes from.

The stranger woman lowered her voice, I imagine, as she went on. "These are the mysteries of Yearning. But there are inner mysteries..."

Loving one person is a beginning, she says, but then

"...the lover is compelled to contemplate and see the beauty of institutions and laws, and to understand that the beauty of them all is of one family, and that personal beauty is a trifle; and after laws and institutions the lover will go on to the sciences, to see their beauty, being not like a servant in love with the beauty of one youth or person or institution, enslaved and mean and narrow-minded, but drawing towards and contemplating the vast sea of beauty."

This is an ascending practice. It begins rooted in that most intense of natural drives, sexual desire in the form the culture understands. But the yearning does not stay there. Like the tantras of Asia, which it so strongly resembles, what the the stranger-woman was teaching was a climb towards an essence, toward Beauty itself, using the power of yearning as a mediating angel to carry her higher. She said:

“...to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions one arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is... beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, one will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for one has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal human may. Would that be an ignoble life?’”²

Here, 2200 years before Swedenborg, we find the stranger woman teaching a mystical ascent from the desires of natural life to a high friendship with God. One begins in ordinary experience and climbs not with one’s intellect but with the strongest of feelings, Eros. One comes to the same desires one had in the beginning but in a higher form (as Jim Lawrence said in his sermon recently).

This story is one of the wellsprings of our western culture. It comes to us in writing from a 2400-year old text, the *Symposium* of Plato. The stranger woman was Diotima, a priestess of Zeus. The soldier she taught was Socrates, in his youth. This Mystery of Eros and her teachings set Socrates on his course. Socrates taught Plato, Plato taught Aristotle. The rest is history. The stream that begins (as far as we know) with Diotima went on through the Platonists, through Jewish Philo and Christian Dionysus, the Muslim Saint Rabia and her “pure unconditional love of God,” the Christian mystics of the Rhineland, Italy and Spain.

² Ibid.

It sounds like Swedenborg, but this is not to say that Swedenborg was derivative. The Sufi Idries Shah said it well: The fact that two cultures describe the sun, each in their own way, does not mean one has gotten the description from the other.^{3*} They may have both seen the same thing, from different vantage points. The stranger-woman shared with Swedenborg the sense that all good comes from divinity. She taught that spirits carry it down to us, and connect us upwards. She taught that one begins in the valley, but then must turn one's eyes toward the high places from which all good comes, and one must climb there. Like Swedenborg, she taught that it was the deepest love of the heart that carried one up, as long as that love was not for the things of this world, but for the good that came from above.

Socrates said, as he finished telling of her teaching:

“Such, Phaedrus--and I speak not only to you, but to all of you--were the words of Diotima; and I am persuaded of their truth. And being persuaded of them, I try to persuade others, that in the attainment of this end human nature will not easily find a helper better than Yearning: And therefore, also, I say that everyone ought to honour him as I myself honour him, and walk in his ways, and exhort others to do the same, and praise the power and spirit of Eros according to the measure of my ability now and ever.”⁴

And twenty-two hundred years later Swedenborg would begin *Divine Love and Wisdom* with *Amor*, a Latin word that means, among other kinds of love, Eros. He went on to say what Diotima would endorse: “Love,” he said, “is our life.”⁵ Or to quote

³ *paraphrased from a lecture by Shah I attended in the 70's

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Love and Wisdom*. Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

Diotima again, “and therefore in Eros all is bound together.” Musicians are drawn together by their love of music. Next week, drawn together by their love of football, many will be watching the Superbowl. Communities in Heaven, said Swedenborg, are drawn together by their shared loves.

Despite all its turbulence, “Love is our life.”