SŁAWOMIRA ŻERAŃSKA-KOMINEK (Warszawa)

The Venusian Triad: Love, Music and Death

We accept as evident and natural the kindred nature of music and love, sensing keenly the commonality of their expressive-emotional potential. This occurs in great measure thanks to literary and iconographic conventions, which frequently employ musical metaphor to express love and to describe erotic experience. (One typical manifestation of such convention is the image of the lover singing a serenade beneath his beloved's window.) However, the genesis of the affinity between music and amorous feelings, to which philosophy, art and literature make very frequent reference, is neither obvious nor, much less, easy to elucidate. A certain role is played here by the semantic polyvalence of music, by dint of which it is deemed the most excellent language of sentiment. The verbal expression of erotic experience, meanwhile, is practically impossible, as the Polish philosopher Stanisław Lem discussed in *Filozofia przypadku*:

> The specific problem from the field of literary studies that we would like to examine is whether literature can penetrate the realm of culture to its very limits, or does it fall short? The limits of literature coincide with the limits of language. The question is thus whether language has the right of unhindered access to the core of all cultural phenomena, or do there remain certain preserves that lie beyond its bounds? The fact is that man [...] can experience certain events only tacitly, according to the facts which present themselves and are consciously experienced or perceived, but not according to some kind of articulation. We explain this phenomenon in terms of that area of behaviour within which the phenomenon is particularly well exposed. These are situations of intimate sexual contact. The superficial supposition that only considerations of censorship or of prudery have prevented literature from the adequate representation of sexual incidents overlooks far weightier impediments to the complete realization of such a portrayal.[1]

No such semiotic restrictions exist, however, for music, which as a bearer of symbolical meaning can penetrate spheres inaccessible to lan-

[1] Stanisław Lem, *Filozofia przypadku* [The philosophy of chance] (Kraków, 1975), 55.

guage, and can provide a culturally adequate 'description', exemplification and commentary to them.

Whilst the advantage of music over verbal language in expressing amorous feelings and describing erotic experience can be accepted as fact, it would appear to explain only part of the problem, touching merely the surface of a phenomenon that appears on the level of man's profound psychological and existential enquiry. Some aspects of this enquiry are revealed to us by the figure of Orpheus, the great musician and lover who, out of his love for Eurydice, took the path leading to the underground realm of death, sacrificed his life, and conquered death with a magical song. The best known version of the Orpheus myth comes from Virgil and Ovid. Orpheus' beloved, Eurydice, is bitten by a snake and dies; trusting in the power of his art, the poet descends into the land of death to recover his betrothed. Moved by his wondrous song, the gods of the underworld allow Eurydice to return to the land of the living, on condition that Orpheus not look back to see her on their return journey. But Orpheus forgets their injunction, turns around and loses Eurydice, who must now remain in the land of the dead forever. Music, love and death are the principal elements of this myth, whose meaning is realized in the relations between love and death, love and music, and music and death. Orpheus' love for his departed beloved signifies at once both the power of music and the power of love to overcome death.

A strikingly similar mythical structure, yet one elaborated in much more detail, can be found in one of the tales from an epic cycle exceptionally popular throughout Central Asia whose eponymous hero is Görogly – Son of the Grave. An expansive narrative entitled 'Harman Däli' relates how the Son of the Grave won the hand of Princess Harman Däli. The beautiful Harman swore that she would wed the knight who could defeat her in wrestling and in song. All those who lost, meanwhile, would be beheaded. Knightly singers travelled from all over the land to face the princess in combat; none, however, passed the tests of strength and musical prowess, and so all lost their heads. When no-one remained in all the realm who could face up to the girl in combat, Harman Däli summoned the brave djigit Görogly, a brilliant singer and musician, in order to confront him in wrestling and song. Görogly accepts the challenge and arrives at the court, yet he loses the fight. Harman Däli does not behead him, however, as was her custom, but promises him marriage if the young hero can perfect his musical talents. In order to receive the gift of wisdom and creative inspiration, Görogly makes his way to the spiritual master, the pir Ashik Aydin, and travels the path of spiritual instruction. After passing through a lengthy process of initiation and a symbolical death, the hero is reborn as a true master of song and defeats his betrothed in a musical duel. She keeps her word and marries him.

The principal theme of this tale is the sexual maturing of the young hero, who, crossing successive thresholds on the way to his beloved's bed, attains the plenitude of existential maturity. Through love and in love he becomes aware of the transience of life, receives poetico-musical inspiration, and masters the art of the bakhshi. The passage through successive degrees of instruction in the world of love and music bears all the hallmarks of a religious initiation, which we define as 'an experiential complex of an "initiatory death", leading to "the birth of a new man", open to a reality other than that which is manifest in ordinary waking, personality-filled, consciousness'.[2]

The Son of the Grave, similarly to his Thracian counterpart, incarnates a profound unity of erotic and musical experience, which manifests itself solely in respect to the existential problem of transience and of openness to eternal life. And only within this context is it possible to arrive at a proper interpretation of the link between music and the erotic, the essence of which remains the equipollence of man's inner experience. Both love and music lead to states which transcend the normal human condition, projecting the individual into a liberating unity with the spiritual world.

Since the earliest times the patroness of the triad of music, love and death has been Venus, who revealed the sacred character of elementary sexual drive, and who showed sexuality as transcendence and as a mystery constituting one of the most profound sources of religious experience. The principal function of the Venusian goddess Inanna, the most important deity of the Sumerians *c.* 3000–2100 BCE, is sex. Inanna is not only the patroness of prostitutes but is herself a prostitute, who transforms her own temple into a haven for unbridled sex. The Babylonian Ishtar is also a guardian of carnal love, and in *Gilgamesh* the huge number of her lovers is emphasised. One day, Gilgamesh reproaches her: 'What lover [of thine] is there who can please [thee for all time]?' He goes on to enumerate a series of lovers, from Tammuz and a shepherd, to a lion and a horse, whose harsh fate the goddess procures. Goddesses of sexual passion included the Phoenician Astarte and the Roman Venus, who is also considered to be the patroness of prostitutes. In all corners of the ancient Near East, the cult of Venusian goddesses was linked to ritual prostitution, since the hierodule represented the goddess or were her incarnation.[3]

---

[2] Andrzej Wierciński, *Przez wodę i ogień. Biblia i Kabała* [Through water and fire. The Bible and Cabbala] (Kraków, 1978), 19.

[3] James George Frazer, *Złota gałąź*, trans. Henryk Krzeczkowski (Warsaw, 1978) [Eng. orig. *The Golden Bough*, 1890], 270; see also Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago, 1978).

The divine guardian of sex and the erotic was also the mistress of war and violence. One goddess of war was Inanna, who treated human skulls as playthings. In the epic poem of Enheduanna, daughter of Saragon I, the first known poetess (*c.* 2300 BCE), Inanna is a dragon, who destroys cultivated fields with fire and water, fills rivers with blood and terrifies people. In the epic poem *Gilgamesh*, the Babylonian Ishtar is also a patroness of war, as are her later Semitic equivalents, Astarte and Anat, the latter being particularly cruel and bloodthirsty.

Bleak and menacing properties were displayed by the Greek goddess Aphrodite, who was known as Melaina (the black), Androphonos (killer of men) and Tymborychos (the gravedigger). As Epitymbidia, Aphrodite was She upon the Graves, as Persephone, Queen of the Underworld. The Roman Venus as the goddess of death and funerals was called Libitina, and was identified with Aphrodite-Epitymbidia, or occasionally with Persephone. Plutarch explains the identity of the goddess of love and of death, Libitina and Venus, by the fact that the same goddess had dominion over birth and death.[4]

War and its inevitable corollary, death, constitute, as one might imagine, the opposite of love and eroticism. However, those researchers who believe that the graphic descriptions of the cruelties inflicted by Venusian goddesses are a metaphor for the danger and destruction inherent in love may perhaps be correct.[5] According to Georges Bataille, the sphere of eroticism is fundamentally a violent domain, since the erotic act constitutes the most profound negation and violation of one's own personality, the utter dissolution within us of individual being. The severance of individual identity corresponds with the act of death, which according to Bataille can occur in three dimensions: of the body, the heart and the sacred. In the carnal dimension, eroticism constitutes the most intense and mortal negation of our established identity. Bataille writes that, 'the principle behind every erotic act is the destruction of the closed structure that is one's playing partner in a normal state'. The extension of the bodily fusion of lovers in the spiritual sphere is the eroticism of the heart; this, however, is accompanied by the aura of death, since spiritual fusion with another person signifies the violation, tantamount to death, of individual isolation. Yet only through this death does there appear such an image of the beloved being which for the lover carries the sense of everything that exists. Through his own annihilation the lover perceives in the beloved the plenitude and verity of existence, perceives of existence as sacred. In the sacred dimension, eroticism manifests itself as

[4] Plutarch, *Roman Questions*, in *Moralia*, vol. 4, trans. Frank C. Babbitt (Loeb Classical Library No 305), 23.

[5] Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, 15.

the desire for immortality, assuaged through a mystical love and a fusion with the sacred, identical to God.[6]

Venusian goddesses who incarnate death in its erotic aspect and eroticism in its mortal aspect are generally guardians of music and poetry, and their cult is accompanied by a rich musical setting. The Sumerian-Babylonian priestesses Ishtar, known as the *kedeshot* (lit. 'the dedicated'), were trained singers, musicians and dancers. Their heiresses in the Achemenian era (sixth century BCE) were the *kinati* (later the Arabian *qainat*), i.e. prostitutes, singers and dancers in one, on whom the Prophet Muhammad declared unconditional war. The instrument of these sacred Venus worshippers was the *mazhar*, i.e. the tambourine. The word *mazhar* derives from the verb *zahara*, meaning 'to glow brightly, shine'. This bright light referred to Venus, known in Arabic as Zuhra, i.e. 'brightly glowing' or 'shining'.[7] In the temples of the Phoenician Astarte, rites, dancing and music were under the care of countless hosts of prostitutes (*ambubiae*), and their favourite instruments were the *'abub* (an oboe-type reed pipe) and the *trigonon* (a small, triangular harp).[8]

In Jewish tradition, prostitution was forbidden. Despite this, the Old Testament is filled with references to the daughters of Venus. Adorned in ornate robes they burned incense and sang lewd songs, accompanying themselves on the lyre, harp or drum, or else dancing to the strains of double flutes.[9] It is they who are referred to in a quite familiar extract from the Book of Isaiah:

> Take an harp, go about the city,
> Thou harlot that hast been forgotten;
> Make sweet melody, sing many songs,
> That thou mayest be remembered (Isa. 23.16)

In the Greek world, the sign of Aphrodite gave rise to *auletrides*, flautists hired to serve male banquets. These were hugely popular, as were the Roman *tibicinae*, i.e. flautist-prostitutes and dancers most commonly brought from foreign climes.[10] One special kind of Roman worshipper of the Venusian Libitina were the *bustuariae*, i.e. cemetery prostitutes who wandered amidst the graves (*busta*) day and night, also fulfilling the role

---

[6] Georges Bataille, *Erotyzm*, trans. Maryna Ochab (Gdańsk, 1999) [Fr. orig. *L'Érotisme*, 1957], 24 ff.

[7] Henry George Farmer, 'The Music of Islam', in *The New Oxford History of Music*, vol. 1, ed. Egon Wellesz (Oxford, 1960), 423.

[8] Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York, 1969), 55.

[9] William W. Sanger, *History of Prostitution* (New York, 1937), 48.

[10] F.S. Pierre Dufour, *Historia prostytucji*, trans. Antoni Baniukiewicz (Gdynia, 1997) [Fr. orig. *Histoire de la Prostitution* 1851], vol. 1, 200.

of mourners. Yet their essential task was to amuse the men preparing pyres and burning corpses, the gravediggers and cemetery guards.[11]

In many archaic cultures the importance of music and poetry in attaining states of ecstasy linked to sexual and religious arousal is indisputable. Playing and singing always constituted a key element in religious ritual, and the emotions evoked by music were attributed, as were the effects of narcotics, to direct divine inspiration. In early Greek lexis, there was a close link between erotic seduction and seduction through poetry.[12] The word *thelgein*, 'to charm or enchant', expresses the magical song of the Sirens, the erotic power of Circe from the *Odyssey*, and also the influence over people that was enjoyed by poets.[13] Calypso employed verbal and erotic charm in an attempt to keep Odysseus on her distant island: 'and ever with soft and wheedling words she beguiles him that he may forget Ithaca'.[14]

In Sophocles' *Trachinian Women*, the magical power of language, the power of love and the magic potion made from the blood of the Hydra are treated interchangeably, and not as metaphors but as real, mutual equivalents. Later poets often describe poetry as *pharmakon* or medicine, which can invoke both death and amorous dolour. In *Praise of Helen*, the Sophist Gorgias notes a close link between the power of language and the power of Eros.[15]

In archaic Greek poetry the word for 'song', *aoide*, is related to the word *ep-aoide*, meaning 'enchantment'. Chant-like effects of repetition, alliteration, assonance, etc. impart a magical quality to song. Sappho's *Ode to Aphrodite* makes deliberate use of incantation, not only to summon Aphrodite, but also to imitate the hypnotic rhythm of amorous vows. Even Pindar, writing towards the end of the archaic era, saw poetry as 'enchantment'. Songs, or *aoidai*, are the 'sagacious daughters of the Muses', and possess the power to 'break the spell' (*thelgein*) of pain, just as a physician, who in early Greece treated ailments by means of spells (*epaoidai*). Pindar gives us the most vivid testimony of the poetic magic used by Orpheus. In a partially preserved ode, he describes how the golden Sirens (lit. 'the enchanting', *keledones*) charged with the care of the temple of Apollo at Delphi so enchanted passers-by with their sweet music that they forgot about their wives and children and failed to return to their homes. Eventually, the gods resolved to conceal the temple in the ground.

---

[11] Ibid., 211.

[12] Charles Segal, *Orpheus. The Myth of the Poet* (Baltimore, 1989), 10.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Homer, *The Odyssey*, ed. A. T. Murray (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), vol. 1, 56.

[15] Segal, *Orpheus*, 11.

The Venusian union of eroticism, music and death, very well documented in the mythology and poetry of various pre-industrial cultures,[16] is deeply rooted in the commonality of musical-poetic and erotic experience leading through a symbolic death to immortality and eternity. The Western cultural conception of a deeply spiritual love, derived from this archaic union, was realized in refined forms of literature and art. The sublimation of the powers of carnal passion in a subtle, poetical myth of love and death pervades the poetry of the troubadours of Provence; the *fin' amors* extolled by the troubadours found its consummate artistic expression in the image of the garden of Venus, where music-making and dance became a metaphor for the erotic, a medium for a peculiar stylization of amorous play. In the *Roman de la Rose*, the most popular novel of love from the thirteenth century, the action centres upon a garden in which the God of Love deals death with his arrows,[17] and beautiful young couples give themselves over to music and dance:

> There he enjoyed himself, and with him he had people so fair that, when I saw them, I did not know where people so beautiful could have come from, for, in absolute truth, they seemed winged angels. No man born ever saw such beautiful people. These people of whom I tell you were formed into a carol, and a lady called Joy was singing to them. She knew how to sing well and pleasingly; no one presented her refrains more beautifully or agreeably. [...] Then you would have seen the carol move and the company dance daintily, executing many a fine farandole and many a lovely turn on the fresh grass. There you would have seen fluters, minstrels, and jongleurs.[18]

In the garden of love, music and dance accord with the harmony of nature; they are the instrument by means of which man participates in life, uniting with nature in the fight against death.

Translated by John Comber

---

[16] Cf. Joseph Campbell, 'The Ritual Love-Death', in *Primitive Mythology. The Masks of God* (New York, 1991), 170–216.

[17] Charles Dahlberg, *The Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun* (Princeton, 1971), 1690–1695.

[18] Ibid., 727–743.