



An Amorous Example: From Virgil to Berlioz

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Once again following Plato—the one of the *Symposium* after the one of the *Republic*—we will show that amorous intensity too creates trans-temporal and trans-worldly truths, truths that bear on the power of the Two.

Democratic materialism, which constantly relies on historical relativism, has disputed the universality of love, reducing the form of sexed relations to entirely distinct cultural configurations. Take for instance the famous thesis by Denis de Rougemont, which portrays passion-love as a mediaeval invention. Recently, some have tried to deny the existence, in the world of ancient Greece, of an autonomous sexual pleasure associated with the man/woman relation, thus making pederasty into the only paradigm in that domain. Regarding this second point, even a cursory reading of the devastating subjective effects on men of their spouses' sexual strike, as imagined by Aristophanes in his *Lysistrata, or the Assembly of Women*, allows one to conclude straightaway—if it were necessary!—that so-called “heterosexual” desire and pleasure are universal. Regarding the first point, the poems of Sappho, figures such as Andromachus or Medea, the episode of Dido and Aeneas in the *Aeneid*—all provide ample indication that, beyond the forms of its declaration, which in effect vary considerably, love is an experience of truth and as such is always identifiable, whatever the historical context may be. Of course, equally decisive proofs may be adduced to this point, which are even more remote in space or time. Let us simply mention the Japanese testimonies of Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji*, or the melodramas of Chikamatsu. Even the objection according to which passion, for the Greeks or Romans, is an attribute of women alone cannot hold, considering the proliferation of literary testimonies that suggest the opposite. It suffices to read Virgil's descriptions of Aeneas, “groaning, his soul ravaged by his great love.”

Let us linger for a while with Virgil, and consider the traits that singularise the trans-temporal value of an amorous truth. In Book IV of the *Aeneid*<sup>1</sup> the poet stages the first night of love between Dido and Aeneas. To begin with, we reencounter here all the features of truths which we had extracted from our preceding examples (mathematical, artistic, political):

—material traces:

Lightning torches flare and the high sky bears witness to the wedding.

—subjective break:

Even now they [Dido and Aeneas] warm the winter, long as it lasts, with obscene desire, oblivious to their kingdoms, abject thralls of lust.

—the work of consequences:

This was the first day of her death, the first of grief, the cause of it all.

—excess over any particular language:

The flame keeps gnawing into her tender marrow hour by hour and deep in her heart the silent wound lives on. Dido burns with love—the tragic queen. She wanders in frenzy through her city streets.

—latent eternity:

DIDO: When icy death has severed my body from its breath, then my ghost will stalk you through the world!

AENEAS: I shall never deny what you deserve, my queen, never regret my memories of Dido, not while I can recall myself and draw the breath of life.

But we also find, in the density of the poem—as well as in its prosodic and musical metamorphosis, as invented twenty centuries later by Berlioz's genius in *The Trojans*—two other singular traits through which the discontinuous singularity of truth manifests itself: their infinity and the transfiguration into the Idea of the most banal, most anonymous, aspect of a situation. This is what I called, in *Being and Event*, the genericity of the True.

The artifice through which Virgil poetically conveys that true love, measureless love, is the sign of the infinite (in the ancient context: the sign of an action of the Immortals) is simultaneously mythological and theatrical.

It is mythological to the extent that Dido's passion for Aeneas is also a machination by Venus, who wishes to fasten her son Aeneas to Carthage in order to protect him from the plotting of Juno. We are thus told that the amorous scene, reflected as truth, is always vaster than itself. In the poem, it affixes the Two of lovers to the historical destiny commanded by the conflict of goddesses. This harrowing love is somehow framed by the action of the Immortals, but loses nothing of its independence (Dido is on her way to falling in love with Aeneas well before the arrival of Cupid, child and messenger of Venus). Rather, it thereby acquires a legendary force, an aura of destiny. This is an aura which, moreover, is already legible in the immediate love of the mortals. The meeting of Dido and Aeneas in effect juxtaposes two exceptional beauties, immanent to love. That of Aeneas:

His streaming hair braided with pliant laurel leaves entwined in twists of gold, and arrows clash on his shoulders. So no less swiftly Aeneas strides forward now and his face shines with a glory like the god's.

And that of Dido:

And there her proud, mettlesome charger prances  
in gold and royal purple, pawing with thunder-  
hoofs, champing a foam-flecked bit. At last she  
comes, with a great retinue crowding round the  
queen who wears a Tyrian cloak with rich embroi-  
dered fringe. Her quiver is gold, her hair drawn up  
in a golden torque and a golden buckle clasps her  
purple robe in folds.

These appearances elevate the Two of love to the height of the Immortal goddesses who prescribe its destiny. They initiate a theatricalisation, whose goal is also to signify the infinite excess over itself of love qua truth. This theatricalisation surrounds the episodes with a finely wrought décor, in which the amorous scene inscribes itself as the creation of a world. After divine infinity comes visible or cosmic infinity. The impact of the intensity of the sensible can be seen in the arrangement of a banquet offered to her heroic guest, Aeneas, by Dido, who is already in love with him:

Within the palace all is decked with adornments,  
lavish, regal splendour. In the central hall they are  
setting out a banquet, draping the gorgeous purple,  
intricately worked, heaping the board with grand  
displays of silver and gold engraved with her  
fathers' valiant deeds, a long, unending series of  
captains and commands, traced through a line of  
heroes since her country's birth.

But the cosmic exposure of the passionate Two is also nature itself, the scene of the hunt in the valleys ("Once the huntsmen have reached the trackless lairs aloft in the foothills"), which precedes the famous storm that envelops the lovers' quenched desire:

The skies have begun to rumble, peals of thunder  
first and the storm breaking next, a cloudburst  
pelting hail. [...] Dido and Troy's commander make  
their way to the same cave for shelter now.

With regard to this storm, it is notable that Berlioz's romanticism precisely matches Virgil's vision, bearing witness once again to the fact that the universality of truths allows itself to be recognized beyond the radical discontinuity of their advent into the logic of appearing. The love duet in Act IV of *The Trojans* is in fact preceded and almost propelled in the opera by a long symphonic

fragment, a kind of splendid overture which encapsulates the hunt and the storm in an orchestral style so innovative that its syncopations and percussive pulsations evoke Gershwin's usage of jazz. So it is that, in order to regain the power of the Roman poet's ellipses, the music of the nineteenth century, enlightened by the intuition of love, is obliged to presage that of the twentieth. Yet more proof that truths, beyond History, weave their discontinuities along the thread of a delicate alloy of anticipations and retroactions. This is indeed how Berlioz equals himself to Virgil in what concerns the encrustation of love's radiance in the cosmic décor which signifies love's power of truth.

As for the infinite virtuality of amorous intensity, Berlioz depicts it in the libretto by means of a powerful intuition, which is that of representing every love—and particularly that of Dido and Aeneas—as a metonymy of all other loves. The music will thus intertwine the tender praise of the Night—and we know what Wagner makes of this in *Tristan and Isolde*—with a long series of comparisons between this night and other nights of love.

On the side of nocturnal ecstasy:

Night of drunkenness and infinite ecstasy  
Blond Phoebe, great stars in her retinue,  
Shine upon us your blessed glow;  
Flowers of the heavens, smile upon immortal love.<sup>2</sup>

On the side of comparisons:

Through such a night, mad with love and joy  
Troilus came to wait at the feet of the walls of Troy  
For the beautiful Cressida.

Through such a night the chaste Dian  
At last shed her diaphanous veil  
Before the eyes of Endymion.<sup>3</sup>

The mixture of long interlaced chromatic melodies and vibrant evocations exhibits love in its excessive truth, in what it says about the power of the Two beyond the self-regarding enjoyment of each and every one.

The paradox of this type of truth is doubtless that love is both an exceptional infinity of existence—creating the caesura of the One through the eventual energy of an encounter—and the ideal becoming of an ordinary emotion, of an anonymous grasp of this existence. Who has not experienced that at the peak of love, one is both beyond oneself and entirely reduced to the pure, anonymous exposure of one's life? The power of the Two is to carve out an existence, a body, a banal individuality,

directly on the sky of Ideas. Virgil and Berlioz knew well this immediate idealisation of what has only existed in you, at your scale, and which counters infinite theatricalisation through the majesty of everyday life. This woman “reduced to tears, again, attempting to pray again, bending, again, beneath love, her beseeching fierceness” is by no means incompatible with the proud queen, golden on her ceremonial horse. Love is this disjunctive synthesis, as Deleuze would put it, between infinite expansion and anonymous stagnation. Ontologically, every truth is an infinite but also generic fragment of the world in which it comes to be. Berlioz voices it after his own fashion, from within the despair of the lover, again employing the motif of the night:

Farewell, my people, farewell! Farewell revered shore,  
You who once welcomed me, beseeching;  
Farewell, beautiful African sky, stars that I beheld  
In nights of drunkenness and infinite ecstasy,  
Never again shall I see you, my run is over.<sup>4</sup>

But the one who expresses it most intensely is without doubt Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*—superbly relayed by Visconti in the film of the same name. At the water’s edge, Aschenbach’s unpredictable passion for the young Tadzio attains this direct and sensible intuition of the Idea:

Separated from terra firma by a gulf of water,  
separated from his companions by his capricious  
pride, he ambled, his sight unfettered and perfectly  
aloof from the rest, his hair in the wind, down there,  
in the sea and the wind, upright before the misty  
infinite.

Through the separating power of the Two, love illuminates the anonymous existence harboured by this “unfettered sight”—in this case the gaze of the dying Aschenbach. This is what—in yet another diagonal connection, this time through the arts rather than through time or cultures—Visconti transcribes in cinema, by means of a kind of solar distance or calm bedazzlement, as though Tadzio, his finger aloft, pointed a dying Platonist, above the sea and through the sole grace of love, towards the horizon of his intelligible world.

## NOTES

- 1 All quotes are taken from Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 2006).
- 2 *Nuit d'ivresse et d'extase infinie / Blonde Phœbé, grands astres de sa cour, / Versez sur nous votre lueur bénie; / Fleurs des cieux, souriez à l'immortel amour.*
- 3 *Par une telle nuit, fou d'amour et de joie / Troilus vint attendre aux pieds des murs de Troie / La belle Cressida. / Par une telle nuit la pudique Diane / Lâissa tomber enfin son voile diaphane / Aux yeux d'Endymion.*
- 4 *Adieu, mon peuple, adieu! adieu, rivage vénéré, / Toi qui jadis m'accueillit suppliante; / Adieu, beau ciel d'Afrique, astres que j'admirai / Aux nuits d'ivresse et d'extase infinie, / Je ne vous verrai plus, ma carrière est finie.*