

The Problem of Love and Distance in Anne Carson

Rafael Saldanha

Abstract: The present paper aims to present the re-articulation of the problem of love in the work of the classicist and poet Anne Carson. In her book *Eros, the bittersweet*, Carson reconstructs the problem of love in the Hellenistic tradition. The operation, however, is not restricted to a mere historical reconstruction, since the author's conceptual elaborations end up placing the problem of love as a type of situation that has its singularity precisely in the transcendence of particular conditions. We will analyze, therefore, how Carson conceives the contours of the dynamics of love as a relationship between lover, beloved, and the distance between them, starting from the works of Sappho of Lesbos. We will then discuss in the article how, from this conception of love, the author elaborates, through a reading of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, the unfoldings of the problem of love in the question of the composition of subjects (i.e., redefining "what a subject is" from the point of view of the problem of love) and in the experiences of time and space. In the end, we seek to demonstrate how Carson's work provides us with a renewed view of the problem of love.

Keywords: love; Eros; Anne Carson; Plato; Sappho; distance

We would like to develop here the notion of love elaborated by Anne Carson in her *Eros, the bittersweet* which was published in 1986. If this book interests us, it is because it presents us with a way to *rethink the problem of love in philosophy*. A problem that, we believe, has been somewhat forgotten in philosophical circles, but that has not ceased to be elaborated in related disciplines. In psychoanalysis, for example, the relations between love, desire and sex are a central theme¹. In the social sciences, on the other hand, there is no lack of research that seeks to analyze the meaning of love in social life and its countless cultural variations². And in philosophy? Well, in philosophy it seems that, apart from some occasional or isolated exceptions³ (which become even smaller if we consider the longevity and breadth of the history of philosophy), we are condemned to repeat the question *Phaedrus* asks at the beginning of the *Symposium*: "Eryximachus," he says, 'isn't it an awful thing! Our poets have composed hymns in honor of just about any god you can think of; but has a [b] single one of them given one moment's

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1 cf. Freud 2007 and Lacan 2017.

2 cf. Bauman 2003 and Eva Ilouz 2012.

3 Although the problems of desire, sex, passion and friendship appear frequently in the history of philosophy, it is curious that the problem of love always appears subordinated to this field of problems, almost as a footnote, a corollary that should be mentioned without giving it much centrality.

thought to the god of love, ancient and powerful as he is?"⁴ It is strange to the point of sounding almost foreshadowing that, already at the origins of philosophical thought, the problem of love is presented as a sidelined discussion. Even the fact that Plato — the most influential philosopher in the history of philosophy — placed the theme at the center of his thought in dialogues such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*⁵, does not seem to be enough to remove love from the position described by the character Phaedrus in the *Symposium*. Carson's book interests us, therefore, because it restores the philosophical dignity of the problem of love.

That said, in this work we will present the author's position and discuss the implications of her conception of love. But this will not be done by an analysis of the content of her text. What interests us, even to mark the specificity of the Carsonian reading, is to highlight as well *how* she produces this reading, something that appears above all in the peculiar way she reads the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*. The author is not satisfied with reconstructing the theses elaborated in the *Phaedrus*, but rather seeks to rearrange the very events of the dialogue in order to shed light on certain themes and problems that previously did not appear as clearly. With this gesture, however, the author also seems to dramatize the very theses she builds in her re-reading of the *Phaedrus*, since one of the elements that is highlighted is the intimate connection between the problem of love and the transformation of love into an object of thought.

First of all, it should be noted that Carson's book presents itself as an elaboration of the general features of the problem of love in Greek (and occasionally Roman) antiquity. The analysis of this *topos*, which ranges from the poetry of Sappho to Plato's dialogues, is not limited, however, to merely describing a type of feeling that would exist in classical Greek culture. What Carson seeks to do in her historical reconstruction is to show the emergence of a field of problems related to the experience of love. If this reconstruction *needs* to be historical, it is because, as the author shows, the appearance of love as a problem in Greek culture would be intimately linked to the transformations in the Greek world that occurred in this period. But it is precisely for this reason that the book, despite having a certain historical scope, goes beyond the reconstruction of a finished past. Love is not simply thought of as a strictly historical phenomenon, but as an event that aspires to overcome the conditions of finitude.

This is why, even if it is possible to read this book as a work that

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4 Plato 1997, 177a-177b

5 As Socrates himself states at the beginning of the *Symposium*, this is the only subject he really knows. This is why, when it comes time to decide the topic to be discussed, Socrates states without hesitation that "No one will vote against that, Eryximachus [and his proposal to discuss love]. [...] "How could I vote 'No,' when the only thing I say I understand is the art of love?" (Plato 1997, 177d). Cf. D'Angour 2019.

merely reconstructs the concept of love in a certain historical period, I believe that this underestimates both Carson's work and also the conceptual implications that appear in her reconstruction of the problem of love. The first way to avoid this historicizing reading is to remember that this field of problems that was developed in antiquity continues to appear as a concern to us — even if altered by time. This is possible because the type of experience described does not correspond to a feeling that exists in a particular culture. Love, as discussed by Carson, is an experience that, in its very essence, calls into question the distinctions between the particular and the universal because of the way it deals simultaneously with time and eternity (which would explain the lovers' abilities to transcend the moment in which their encounter takes place). If Carson's work presents itself as historical, then it is precisely to try to understand the emergence of a type of event that has the characteristic of detaching itself from its finite and historical ground towards an infinite and eternal dimension.

This experience of love is summarized by the author already at the beginning of the book, drawing on two elements that appear in Sappho's poetry. First, *Eros* (i.e., love)⁶ is always bittersweet (*γλυκύπικρον*), as we see in fragment 130: "Eros the melter of limbs (now again) stirs me — sweetbitter unmanageable creature who steals in"⁷. But what kind of experience is this? It is, at first, the experience of desiring what one does not have. That there is a component of bitterness in this experience is not surprising. After all, as in hunger, that which we lack is bound to cause discomfort, suffering. But what makes love appear as an issue — what makes it weird — is that this experience has a sweet, pleasant quality. In love, the very *aspiration* for the beloved object contains something that is savored, so that love would be a kind of lack that also fills us — but with what?

It is to account for this confusion between the sweet and the bitter that Carson highlights the second element that would delimit the structure of the experience of love: its triangular character. In fragment 31, Sappho draws this structure as being composed of a lover, a beloved, and an obstacle. What is important to note, however, is that the obstacle is not the cause of failure, but rather it is the condition of the bittersweet

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6 It is necessary to keep in mind that the discussions, the mentions, and the praises of love are not just comments that present a misunderstanding between the mythical figure of Eros and the experience of love. Something that can be observed in the Symposium itself, which has in its first two speeches (by Phaedrus and Pausanias) praises to the gods, and only afterwards the discussion deals with the feeling of love. There is, therefore, in Carson's book, an ambiguity in the use of the word "eros," between a usage that refers to the mythical figure and another that indicates the experience of love (marked by the lower case). Although the emphasis of which sense predominates in the use of the term can be pointed out by the use of an uppercase spelling (to refer to the god) or lowercase (to refer to the experience), it is important to keep in mind that, even with the emphases, both senses are present in the use of the term.

7 Carson 2003, p. 265

experience of Eros itself. Here is the fragment:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty⁸

What makes this structure necessary — and what makes the obstacle not a failure but a condition — is that the desired object only *appears as desired* to the extent that it is, in some sense, separated from us. It is the presence of an edge that makes it visible as a love object. At first one might think that this is not very different from other situations in which we desire something. If, however, it is believed that love is not just any desire, it is because this separation does not only concern a body that is different from mine. What is distant from the lover, and what produces one of the anxieties that usually consume lovers, is the opacity of the other's desire. If their desire were like that of the lover, no mystery would exist, the lovers' bodies would be attracted to each other, and everything could be resolved more easily. The edge that one finds in the experience of love (and which shows up through the lover's uncertainties) is a sign of a distance between the lover's desire and that of the beloved.

In the case of the fragment quoted above, the object of Sappho's love appears only through the man with whom she talks ("whoever he is who opposite you / sits and listens close / to your sweet speaking"). The beloved does not speak to Sappho, does not direct her charms to her, but rather to the man. Since it is not to her that the beloved turns, but

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⁸ Carson 2003, p. 63

to the man with whom she speaks, a distance and a possible mismatch between the desire of lover and beloved is revealed. Sappho is able to perceive her beloved — and to feel how distant she is — by seeing her through an intermediate. But this does not amount to a merely frustrating experience. As Sappho herself describes, there is an ambivalence. For in the same degree that one desires the beloved, one is separated from her ("and dead — or almost / I seem to me"); there is also a pleasure in the attractive laughter that "puts the heart (...) on wings" and a "thin fire" that runs under Sappho's skin. It is within the distance that love is allowed to experience itself out of a bittersweet sensation. Hence the vital importance of the third element for Carson.

But it is important to make clear that the third element doesn't have to be someone (it doesn't have to be a third person, the object of jealousy⁹). The "third element" can be anything as long as it simultaneously connects and separates lover and beloved. A case that allows us to think of other forms of distance would be Liev Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. In this book, the protagonist Anna Karenina and Count Alexei Vronsky not only love each other, but they also know of each other's love. At one point they even flee their worlds in order to live together. Inverting the traditional structure of love stories in which the content of the narratives is the overcoming of all obstacles that keep lovers from living their love, what Tolstoy depicts are the distances that exist *even when lovers are together*. In this book what prevents love from being fully realized, and what figures as a third element between the lovers, are the social and moral constraints of Anna Karenina and Vronsky's world. She was married, wealthy, and older than Vronsky, and even though she abandoned her family and social status in the name of her love, the kind of life they lead together soon proves to be unbearable for her. Love brings the lovers together, but its effects on their lives drive them apart. Anna Karenina ends up preferring suicide than having to live the implications of that love. What we see in this case is a distance that is constantly pushing them apart whilst they keep on trying to overcome it.

As Carson says: "the third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros."¹⁰ Returning to Sappho, this is visible in her fragment 31, since it is through the connection mediated by the man, it is through him that Sappho absorbs and experiences the presence of her beloved. At the same time, since the beloved turns to him and not to her, the lover is separated from the beloved.

With this in mind, Carson will say that it is an experience in which

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9 As is the classic case in the proustian *recherche*.

10 Carson 1998, p. 16

we come face to face with the limits of ourselves from the feeling that something (someone) is lacking. We perceive our existence, we exist, as did Sappho in the fragment 31 referenced above, when the absence of our lover makes us appear to ourselves ("and cold sweat holds me and shaking / grips me all, greener than grass / I am and dead—or almost / / *seem to me*"). The movement of attraction combined with an experience of limits constitutes the edges of a self that must be overcome in order to fulfill love. At the same instant in which the lover appears as something we desire, a lack is outlined in us and simultaneously outlines us as subjects. It is on account of this structure that love is a dangerous experience: to love implies being willing to overcome our limits (to lose the self) at the very time when such limits (that is, the edges of our subjectivity) are most clearly outlined.

But before continuing, it is necessary to better explain what this "lack" means. It is not that eros points to an absence, a void within us. Rather, it is an excess of the subject that loves. If he is confronted with his limits, it is because, paradoxically, he sees some form of self-realization in the other. This is why the attention to one's own limits that appears in the experience of love ends up also becoming an "awareness" of the heterogeneous composition of the lovers. When loving, a subject has the experience of being more than an atomic structure closed in on itself. If he loves, it is because, at the same time, there is something in the other that hooks and concerns the lover. He is constituted through lack, but that which is lacking is only his excess.

The experience of *eros* depends on its constitutive incompleteness. This ends up implying within the dynamics of love, as Carson illuminates, a temporal dimension:

As a lover you reach forward to a point in time called 'then' when you will bite into the long-desired apple¹¹. Meanwhile you are aware that as soon as 'then' supervenes upon 'now,' the bittersweet moment, which is your desire, will be gone.¹²

But what is this disappearance of desire *in time*? It is certainly not the end of a relationship —or rather, it might be, but this end is not the cause of the disappearance of desire, but rather its consequence. The point that Carson alludes to seems to be associated with the problem of novelty. If love is typically portrayed in movies as an overcoming of obstacles, it seems that the problem of time appears when these movies end. After the barriers are cleared, love enters a new dynamic: it is no longer a matter

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11 This is a reference to Sappho's fragment .n 105a: "as the sweetapple reddens on a high branch / high on the highest branch and the applepickers forgot — / no, not forgot: were unable to reach" (Carson 2003, p. 215)

12 Carson 1998, p. 111

of simply finding your beloved, but of making that encounter last. The philosopher Alain Badiou, in his reflections on love, presents the problem in a similar way. For him, there is a temporal dimension in love, which concerns the challenges of its persistence:

One has to understand that love invents a different way of lasting in life. That everyone's existence, when tested by love, confronts a new way of experiencing time. Of course, if we echo the poet, love is also the "the dour desire to endure". But, more than that, it is the desire for an unknown duration. Because, as we all know, love is a re-invention of life. To reinvent love is to re-invent that re-invention.¹³

In the case of love, this temporal question appears, above all, associated with the dimension of novelty — of the approximation of an unknown element that, with time, becomes known. In the classic case of romantic couples, this takes the form of an approximation that leads to the dreaded *routine*. Thus we can say that part of the pleasure of love is associated with the relationship to something new or unknown. This is something very close to the experience of the ice that melts when we hold it in our hands, as described in the fragment from Sophocles that follows below:

This disease is an evil bound upon the day.
Here's a comparison—not bad, I think:
when ice gleams in the open air,
children grab.
Ice-crystal in the hands is
at first a pleasure quite novel.
But there comes a point—
you can't put the melting mass down,
you can't keep holding it. Desire is like that.
Pulling the lover to act and not to act,
again and again, pulling.¹⁴

This melting of the ice in the fragment is, like the experience of love, conflictual. On the one hand, the pleasure comes from the initial feeling one gets from squeezing the ice; on the other hand, keeping the ice squeezed in one's hands causes it to melt, so that at some point, the ice itself disappears completely. This is a paradoxical situation that brings us a question: how do we deal with something where the pleasure depends on proximity, but where the very proximity ends up, in a second moment, suppressing the condition for that pleasure? We see here the same

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13 Badiou 2012, p. 33

14 Radt, 1977 apud Carson 1998, p. 112

problems we find in the dynamics of love. Our pleasure comes from the approximation to the beloved, but the radical fulfillment of this desire can end up destroying love itself (since this would erase the distance that constitutes love).

It is in order to deal with this conflicting dynamic that Carson will use the concept of shame to consider the ethics of love. Echoing problems that arise in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* (and that will not be contradicted by Socrates), the undoing of distances, the merging of lovers, would be more of an unbridled *hybris* than a fulfillment of love. In this speech, he claims that human beings had in the past a "doubled" form. Because of their strength in that doubled-form, these humans defied the gods, seeking to upend them. Following this episode, to punish the humans, Zeus decided to split the human beings in half, thus creating their current form. The lack generated by the loss of their other half would explain the emergence of love in human beings. After analyzing the troubles of love, Aristophanes ends his speech with a plea for caution in the face of love. He implores us not to seek in love a kind of fusion that would make us full of *hybris* again; that causes, just as in the original act of Zeus, further splits. To void the distance is to void the very subject that is *constituted through the distance*. But that is not all, since the persistence of a difference between the loving subjects in their attempt to merge ends up producing, at most, an extreme proximity between lover and beloved without them being merged. The result of this attempt to undo the distance between the lovers is a situation in which, because of their closeness, they become unbearable to each other. And they become frustrated both by not being able to merge, and by having their limits (each with its "self") threatened by the extreme contiguity of an other who is never effectively incorporated. Instead of the desired fusion, there is only the hope that a fusion is actually possible. For the lovers, any action that does not produce the desired result is seen as a sign of insufficient love; any attention to a third party can only be read under the sign of jealousy. If the fusion that Aristophanes feared is, in practice, impossible, the belief that this is the right way to love —through the *absolute* undoing of distances —is enough to generate immense suffering for the lovers, to the point of jeopardizing their own love.

With this in mind, Carson proposes the feeling of shame [αἰδώς] as something that generates the careful keeping of distance that drives away the desire for two to become one. Shame, however, wouldn't be a mere fear of being rejected by the lover. It is the point at which the lover realizes the nature of *eros* and he himself interposes a distance between him and the beloved: "a sort of voltage of decorum discharged between two people approaching one another for the crisis of human contact, an instinctive and mutual sensitivity to the boundary between them. [...]"

the shared shyness that radiates between lover and beloved."¹⁵ Here, however, we are faced with a circle (but is it virtuous?). For if the end of love is what produces fear, shortening distances too quickly with the beloved to experience love can end up exhausting the lovers (through boredom, paranoia, frustration, and even the discovery of things in the beloved that would be better received with time) and rendering this experience fleeting. Love takes place in the imbalance between a closeness that is desired and the dangerous consequences of getting too close. Shame and decorum towards the beloved would be a way to avoid this fleetingness. There arises, then, the need for a complex approach that brings to light the intimate relationship between love and time. One cannot get too close to the beloved, because one might get tired of him (or he might get tired of the lover). On the other hand, moving too far apart can generate forgetfulness of the beloved, which leaves the lover permanently distant from his or her love. Even though the lovers' movement is always towards getting nearer to their beloved, it takes distance to love, since the end of distance is the exhaustion of love. In this way, just as space is the condition of *eros* — because it is from the spatial distance between lover and beloved that love appears —, time is its inverse condition, that which constantly threatens its dissolution — because getting too close to the beloved too fast can cause an acceleration of the relationship that results in the exhaustion of love before its time. Love, in order to last in time, needs some distance between the lovers.

If it is possible to speak in terms of a solution, Carson will say that lovers not only live these distances (spatial and temporal) but, in the name of love, perpetuate them, enlarge them. Without the creation of obstacles — now by the lovers themselves, who go out of their way to multiply the space of novelty — love would have no occasion to be experienced in a lasting way. In a curious twist, time and space are generated from the needs of *eros*

It is in order to deal with this structure that Carson undertakes a strange reconstruction of the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*. What the author finds in the figure of Socrates is someone who epitomizes the acceptance of the infinite character of love. If at the beginning of the dialogue Socrates agrees with Lysias on the harmful character of love, they diverge with regard to the solution.

Lysias, as we know from the speech read by Phaedrus, sees the bittersweet dynamic of love as something *pathological*, something that only produces frustration and suffering for the lovers¹⁶. He is unwilling to enter into the game of distances in which we risk losing our limits, in

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15 Carson 1998, p. 20-21

16 cf. Platão, 1997, 230e-234c.

which we are subjected to countless pains and sufferings. This is why, as Carson stresses, he seeks to jump over all the temporal distance that exists in love. To prevent "the ice from melting," one loves when there is no more love. Meaning that he only gets involved with people he does not love, but likes dispassionately (without leaving himself). "Lysias sidesteps the whole dilemma of *eros* in one move. It is a move in time: he simply declines to enter the moment that is 'now' for the man in love, the present moment of desire."¹⁷ To love without loving is the solution, to become involved with someone for whom one nurtures no more than a pleasant appreciation. One avoids the dynamic of distance by nullifying it from the outside in. By positioning himself outside of love, Lysias thinks he has solved the problem of love by avoiding all the suffering inherent in the game of desire, by avoiding all the work of love in maintaining the game of distances.

What happens next unfolds as follows: first Socrates gives a speech recognizing the complicated nature of love, its problems, and its risks. Out of shame for his speech, since he cannot accept that love can be something negative, he then delivers another speech. It is at this point that Socrates effectively delivers a tribute to love. But Carson does not just follow in Socrates' footsteps. She inverts the structure of the Platonic dialogue, rearranges its parts, and, going from one part of the dialogue to another, rearranges the various images evoked throughout the text to reinforce the problematic character of the "escape from time" proposed by Lysias.

The rearrangement of the text by the author can be seen as a figuration of what she discusses in the chapter "Damage to the living"¹⁸, where Carson focuses on the praise of writing at the end of the *Phaedrus*. And even though commenting on Plato's criticism of writing with a tone of disappointment has become a standard in French continental philosophy since Jacques Derrida, Carson reminds us that, in the Platonic dialogue, the criticism of writing¹⁹ is directed at texts that have lost any semblance of life. If the *logos* is associated with speech, this is done to the extent that

in its spoken form is a living, changing, unique process of thought. It happens once and is irrecoverable. The *logos* written down by a writer who knows his craft will approximate this living organism in

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17 Carson 1998, p. 126

18 Carson 1998, p. 130-133

19 "You know, *Phaedrus*, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offsprings of painting stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever." (Plato 1997, 275d)

the necessary ordering and interrelation of its parts: 'organized like a live creature with a body of its own, not headless or footless but with middle and end fitted to one another and to the whole.' (264c)²⁰

Not surprisingly, the author herself sets out to reorganize the order of the Platonic discourse to reveal the problem that concerns her: the relationship between love and time.

We must remember that Lysias and Socrates share the same problem. Both start from the negative effects that the dynamic of distance produces in lovers, in the sufferings they experience *in the name of love*. As we have seen, it is a concern that puts the experience of time at the center²¹. But one must also admit that this problem does not appear immediately in the dialogue. If, as Socrates and Carson point out, good writing has an *order*, it is only as an effect of the Carsonian rearrangement of the *Phaedrus* that the relation of time to love seems to surface. This will be done from a sequential repurposing of three images that, in the running form of the dialogue, are scattered at different points. These images are reorganized in a way that they end up indicating different strategies for dealing with the problem of love. Even if all these strategies fail, for reasons explained by Carson, what results from this operation, however, is the perception that there is more to the dialogue than one usually reads into it. If one usually considers this text based on the problem of love and writing—but always with a difficulty in understanding the integration of these two problems in the context of the dialogue—, Carson makes the dialogue appear in a renewed way when she reveals the centrality of the problem of time in its essential relationship with love²². It is as if we were looking through new eyes at an old flame, reproducing in this gesture the same kind of temporal negotiation that lovers must face in order for their love not to exhaust itself.

In the Carsonian rearrangement, the first of these strategies is considered from the story of the inscription that would have been written on the epitaph of the tomb of Midas²³. What will be noted from the highlighting of this image are the problems in Lysias' discourse. In the dialogue, Socrates compares the lifeless structure of Lysias' speech to what is inscribed on Midas' epitaph. In it, the verses can be placed

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20 Carson 1998, p. 132

21 "Both theories observe that the conventional *erastēs* responds to this problem with certain tactics, attempting to block the natural currents of physical and personal development that are moving his beloved through life. These tactics are damaging, Sokrates and Lysias concur; they do not concur at all on what tactics are preferable." (Carson 1998, p. 137)

22 Not to mention that by putting the problem of time at the center of the dialogue, Carson manages to tie the problem of writing with that of love, an integration that has always been a huge challenge for readers of this text.

23 Plato 1997 264c-264e

in any order without any different sense being produced, indicating not only lifelessness but meaninglessness, so that "like Lysias' nonlover, the words of the inscription stand aloof from time and declare their difference from the world of ephemeral beings."²⁴ If Lysias' writing is dead, it is because the order makes no difference, as in the example mentioned. The inscription of Midas appears, therefore, as an image of a type of strategy in love affairs that seeks to resolve the suffering of time by situating oneself outside of time. This equivalence between absence of order and departure out of time, however, makes clearer what is meant by the concept distance. Love is not only made up of a distance that one seeks to overcome; it is also a journey that gains meaning in a specific duration, in contact with certain obstacles and in certain trajectories — just like the good logos, which organizes itself as a living being. Love is thus something that is given and is made as a story. So that if it makes no difference, if there is no distance that marks the space between the lovers, there is no loving relationship, there is only a false movement in which one stays within the limits of the "self" that can, at most, give a pleasant stability to the lovers. And it is precisely this kind of difference that Carson stresses when rearranging the Phaedrus. She not only shows that this book changes according to its order, but also manages, as we have talked about, to present something different about the problem of love from this rereading.

The second image deployed also appears very briefly after Socrates' long second speech on love, but before the image of Midas' tomb: the myth of the cicadas. Carson's aim in bringing out this passage is to present a second strategy for dealing with the problems of love. In this case, she explores the possibilities for lovers to fully inhabit the "now moment" of love, which the partisans of Lysias and Midas shy away from²⁵.

After Socrates' speech in praise of love and Phaedrus' compliments on this speech, there is a transition that moves from the discussion of the topic of love to an analysis of writing and rhetoric. But if this transition is short (occupying no more than a few pages), there are some elements in it that, once made explicit, allow us to see to what degree this seemingly casual image would be playing with the subject of love as it relates to time.

In this case, the shift in subject occurs after Phaedrus commends the literary quality of Socrates' speech. Moving on to a comment on good and bad speeches, Socrates will ask:

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24 Carson 1998, p. 135

25 "They are creatures pulled into confrontation with time by their own desire. They enact a nobler version of this dilemma than Midas did, for their passion is musical, and they offer a new solution to the lover's paradox of 'now' and 'then.' The cicadas simply enter the 'now' of their desire and stay there." (Carson 1998, p. 139)

So what distinguishes good from bad writing? Do we need to ask this question of Lysias or anyone else who ever did or will write anything—whether a public or a private document, poetic verse or plain prose?²⁶

Ao que o Fedro responde: “Pergunta se temos necessidades? E em vista de que alguém viveria, por assim dizer, se não por prazeres desse tipo?”²⁷. Sócrates responde a isso falando “Há tempo para o ócio, ao que parece”²⁸. Ele observa então as cigarras e se pergunta sobre o que elas achariam do que eles fazem e emenda com um suposto mito de origem delas. O que há de interessante nesse mito sobre como se originaram as cigarras é (como sublinha Carson) que elas provêm de seres humanos que decidiram viver no “agora”, do amor às artes, a ponto de esquecerem de se alimentar e de se hidratar. Em troca, como um presente, as Musas fizeram que deles nascesse uma raça de animais, as cigarras, que passam a vida sem nunca precisar se preocupar com alimentação ou bebidas, cantando até morrer às suas Musas, até que, após a morte, “para junto das Musas vão anunciar a cada uma por quem são honradas aqui”²⁹.

To which Fedro replies, "You ask if we need to? Why else should one live, I say, if [e] not for pleasures of this sort?"³⁰. Socrates answers this by speaking "It seems we clearly have the time."³¹. He then notes some cicadas and wonders what they would think of what they were doing, and follows it up with a supposed myth of their origin. What is interesting about this myth about how the cicadas originated is (as Carson stresses) that they came from human beings who decided to live in the "now," out of love for the arts, to the point of forgetting to nourish and hydrate themselves³². As a gift in exchange, the Muses caused a race of animals to be born from them, the cicadas, who spend their lives without ever having to worry about food or drinks, singing their Muses until they die, upon which, after death, "they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her."³³.

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26 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

27 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

28 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

29 Plato 1997, 259c

30 Plato 1997, 258d-258e

31 Plato 1997, 258e

32 "When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed [c] with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it." (Plato 1997, 258e-259b)

33 Plato 1997, 259c

The second strategy discussed by Carson would therefore be a kind of explicit sacrifice directed at the enjoyment of the now. For while the non-loving Lysias "sacrifices the intense and transient pleasure of the lover's 'now' in return for an extended 'then' of consistent emotion and predictable behavior."³⁴, the cicadas, on the other hand, "choose the opposite sacrifice, investing their whole lives in the momentous delight of 'now.' Passing time and its transitions do not affect them. They are stranded in a living death of pleasure."³⁵. In short, if in a sense they do not refuse the paradoxes of love, in another, they can only choose it to the extent that they have been graced by the gods. For as Carson says, "they are creatures who were once men but who preferred to decline from human status because they found man's condition incompatible with their desire for pleasure. [...]. It is not a choice open to human beings, nor to any organism that is committed to living in time."³⁶. What this means is that the cicadas' choice is one that removes them from this temporal dynamic based on the game between a "now" and an "after". By giving up this dialectic in favor of one of its poles, one renounces what would constitute the loving subject. That is, a subject would be precisely constituted through the distances enacted in the loving relationship, a here and a there, or a now and a then. In the absence of these poles, it would not be possible to speak of love, but at most of a desire, because love is precisely the experience that appears within this paradox. By avoiding the paradox, as in the case of these two first strategies, one also avoids love.

But there is something else to be said about this interlude. Even if the strategy of the cicadas cannot be adopted by us, since we have not been graced with this divine gift (and nor would we like to be, since it would mean that we would not exist as we do), there is something in it that allows us to begin to understand how it is possible to better negotiate the distances of love. If we go back to the beginning of the story (which we purposely went through too fast), we can observe that Socrates notices the cicadas because he is curious as to what they would think of them spending their time discussing philosophy:

Besides, I think that the cicadas, who are singing and carrying on conversations with one another [259] in the heat of the day above our heads, are also watching us. And if they saw the two of us avoiding conversation at midday like most people, diverted by their song and, sluggish of mind, nodding off, they would have every right to laugh at us, convinced that a pair of slaves had come to their resting place to sleep like sheep gathering around the spring in the

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34 Carson 1998, p. 139

35 Carson 1998, p. 139

36 Carson 1998, p. 139-140

afternoon. But if they see us in conversation, steadfastly navigating [b] around them as if they were the Sirens, they will be very pleased and immediately give us the gift from the gods they are able to give to mortals.³⁷.

They would misjudge men in case they were resting. But if they were talking about philosophy, it was possible that the cicadas would give men the gift they had been granted by the gods, namely, that of being able to live wholly off their art.

Here, however, there is something ambiguous. For it is obvious that the life of cicadas is not fully desirable, since living that way is what shortens their lives. On the other hand, philosophy, and the other arts, appear as things so desirable that shortening one's life by making them one's sole focus of attention could actually result in humans being honored by the Muses. Philosophy appears, therefore, as a kind of luxury, a supplement, but a supplement that dignifies life, even if it comes at the cost of damaging it.

Even if we cannot live on philosophy (such were once the cicadas, who, in order to continue living on it, moved on to another kind of life, as Carson points out), doing philosophy would be the moment in which we somehow enter into the grace of the gods, even if we cannot bear this way of life endlessly. To be close to this divine element is, therefore, in some way to be touched by the figure of the eternal, of what is outside the time of our duration, without being crushed by it and losing the limits that compose us as subjects³⁸. We see here a way to deal with the problem of love and time that will be further developed by Carson since, for her, in the impossible demands of love lies the very problem of our relationship with eternity, that is, with something that transcends our finitude. So if love is a problem, dealing with it would also involve negotiating with the impossible demands and distances of the eternal from the point of view of finitude. Not only of what our finitude allows us to understand, but of what it is capable of handling without losing itself in the face of the infinite.

The third image summoned by Carson in the rearrangement of the Platonic dialogue is the image of gardening rituals in honor of the god Adonis, an image that appears at the end of the text when the critique of writing takes place. Plato compares writing to these gardening rituals that would cause seeds to germinate *out of season* in just a few days. Even if one can speed up the germination process, it does not come without a cost. Sewn into pots and without roots, these seeds, as soon as they blossomed, would be dead the day after the festival was over. From this image we can see the third strategy that Carson outlines for dealing

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37 Plato 1997, 258e-259b

38 But also without being, as in the case of the "non-lover," someone who avoids suffering by simply refusing to enter the game of love.

with the problems of love. This kind of lover tries to accelerate time itself, "which starts where it should end and achieves its rhetorical and conceptual purposes by a violent shortcut through the beginning stages of love."³⁹ But how does this work in practice? How would this strategy avoid the dramas of love if one is still crossing the "now" over into the "after"? The answer to this lies in the characterization of the festival as a "joke," since an experienced gardener, interested in the sustainability of his garden, would only perform such gardening "as an amusement and in honor of the holiday"⁴⁰. The third type of strategy, therefore, would only be possible by not being a *serious* love affair. As Carson says, "so Sokrates describes the manipulative tendencies of the conventional erastēs [lover]. This lover prefers to play his erotic games with a partner who has neither roots nor future."⁴¹ This is what allows the more seasoned lovers to act manipulatively —and this is what ends up taking place in the romantic relationships criticized in the dialogue (both by Sokrates and Lysias). In order for them to be coldly manipulable relationships, free of frustration, they must lack something that makes distances *relevant*. That is, *eros* is missing, as that which makes those distances between a "now" and an "after" not just any distances, but ones that have meaning.

In all these images and strategies evoked, there is an attempt to unravel the paradoxes of love. In the first image one tries to avoid time by rejecting the "now" for the sake of the "after". In the second image we see the opposite, the "after" is rejected in favor of the "now". In both cases the temporal dynamic is dissolved through the choice of one of the poles. In the case of this third image, the very link that unites the two lovers and gives meaning to these distances is missing, since it is experienced only as a game. All we have is the connection between a "now" and an "after" but where the two poles have been rendered meaningless.

The passage through these images allows us to better understand what is at stake in the attempts to deal with love and why Lysias is an opponent worthy of being confronted (to the point of having so much space in the dialogue, even if through a speech riddled with holes). If Sokrates is concerned about Lysias' position, it is because he promises the very thing that we do not have when we are taken with love and that appears as the cause of countless sufferings: *control*⁴². By choosing to position himself outside of time, what he promises the lovers is an experience that helps them avoid the delusions of love. We would remain masters of ourselves, we would not be enslaved by passions. But again,

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39 Carson 1998, p. 143

40 Plato, 1997, 276b

41 Carson 1998, p. 144

42 "Lysias' text offers to its readers something that no one who has been in love could fail to covet: self-control." (Carson 1998, p. 147)

this is only possible because Lysias ignores the very beginning of the experience of love.

This is the reason why Socrates will deliver not one, but two speeches. Lysias' experience lacks something that his speech also lacks, the initial moment, the moment when love *appears* and makes someone into a lover. That is, the moment when someone falls in love. No wonder, as Carson points out in her assessment of the beginning of Lysias' speech, Socrates asks *three times* for Fedro to repeat his beginning, "Come, then—read me the beginning of Lysias' speech."⁴³ "Will you read its opening once again?"⁴⁴ and "Read it, so that I can hear it in his own words."⁴⁵ This insistence is not only a criticism of Lysias' poor speech, but of the fact that the element that gives meaning to the love is absent. If Lysias manages to speak of an "after," this is possible only because he avoids the element of love that eludes our grasp: the fact that we do not choose to fall in love. If we don't choose to fall in love, it is not possible to decide to position oneself outside of its temporal dimension. This is why the three strategies mentioned can at most be false solutions to a false problem, since to *solve* the paradoxes of love they choose to dissolve love itself.

After this rearrangement of the platonic dialogue, we can better understand Socrates' own position. Being a supporter of Eros, he sees love as the occasion when the infinite imposes itself between the lovers to the point of giving meaning to a story, a moment when distances appear as *relevant distances that must be dealt with*—even if they are insurmountable in an absolute sense (that is, without being able to be annulled). With this in mind, there is no possibility of positioning oneself in the "after", the "before" and not even just "playing at love", because these distances only truly appear when we fall in love. And when we fall in love it is already too late. "As Sokrates tells it, your story begins the moment Eros enters you. That incursion is the biggest risk of your life. How you handle it is an index of the quality, wisdom and decorum of the things inside you"⁴⁶. But beyond that, there is something divine in this relationship, as Socrates' own speech says, when he calls love a *divine madness*, because

for Sokrates, the moment when *eros* begins is a glimpse of the immortal 'beginning' that is a soul. The 'now' of desire is a shaft sunk into time and emerging onto timelessness, where the gods float, rejoicing in reality.⁴⁷

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43 Plato 1997, 262d

44 Plato 1997, 263e

45 Plato 1997, 263e

46 Carson 1998, p. 152

47 Carson 1998, p. 157

The divine, however, is not here simply a reference to a specific theo/mythological content. The divine is precisely the space in which the eternal/infinite intersects the temporal/finite. Love, by taking us out of ourselves toward the other, allowing us to see the distances that make up the beloved and the lover, would be just such an occasion.

If time and space are generated from love, this implies that for Carson love is not of this world. It is that which appears to mess up our sense of location of these coordinates in a way that makes them actually matter. Time and space would be products of an awareness of love as distance between lovers—that is, time and space perceived, understood, felt in their singularity to the extent that they constitute an erotic zone that links lovers. Love, by taking our ordinary experience off balance, gives meaning to time, gives it an order, constitutes a story. In the same way that a good text depends on its order, life itself is ordered *through love*. The time spent waiting for the beloved to return from a trip is what makes it a lived time. One could say that time starts to be organized from the mess that is a love that erupts without being called.

This does not mean, however, that everything is settled. For if *eros* is the irruption of the infinite in the finite, this does not automatically make us infinite, gods. We are, still, mortal. And this implies an opacity that prevents us from understanding this force that runs through us. Nor is it the case to say that the experience of *eros* is lost in the infinite⁴⁸. For, as finite beings, this infinity is bound to be at some point finitized by the experience of love. If love has meaning, it is because at some point (invisible to those who are crossing these distances as lovers) this infinite virtuality collapses into the actuality of a loving relationship that takes place in a finite time period⁴⁹.

This opacity is further discussed when Carson comments on a couple of verses quoted by Socrates in his second discourse on love:

τὸν δ ἦτοι θνητοὶ μὲν Ἔρωτα καλοῦσι ποτηνόν,
ἀθάνατοι δὲ Πτέρωτα, διὰ πτεροφύτον ἀνάγκην.

“Now mortals call him winged Eros
but immortals call him Pteros, because of the wing-growing
necessity”⁵⁰

This difference between the names of mortals and gods is not just a difference in predicates, although this difference exists. The language of the gods would itself be *realer* than human language, since it not

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48 I would like to thank Gabriel Tupinambá for this idea.

49 Which reveals in its inverse a pathology: the belief that a finite being can sip this infinite experience without finite mediation.

50 Plato, 252C apud Carson 1998, p. 161

only describes an experience (as is the case with human language), but also gives an account of the reason for the being of that experience (its cause). In the aforementioned case a semantic gain is visible in the passage from "Eros" [Ἔρωτα] to "Pteros" [Πτέρωτα] even though this difference is not fully intelligible.⁵¹

The semantic difference appears at the cost of breaking the rhythm of the second verse. In this verse, it is precisely the presence of 'Pt' [Πτ], as a marker of the difference between human and divine language, that disrupts the metrics in a way that even Socrates admits is "quite indecent and does not scan very well"⁵². The verse, a dactylic hexameter, scans perfectly, except in the word "of" [δέ], as Carson⁵³ points out. This conflict appears on account of the rules of Greek prosody. If the word that follows "δέ" were Ἔρωτα [Eros], the syllable would be short and simple, respecting the requirement that in that place there should be a short syllable, thereby respecting the meter. The problem is that according to these rules, short syllables become long when they are followed by two consonants, which is the case of the "Πτ" that exists at the beginning of the word Πτέρωτα [Pteros]. This "Πτ", however, is exactly what marks the difference between divine and human language. This messiness is not by chance. So there is a dilemma in the structure of these verses: "*de* cannot be both a long syllable and a short syllable at the same time, at least not in reality as we see it."⁵⁴. The mess in the metrics can be read, then, as the moment when the divine element appears to us. Not as a harmony, but precisely because it points to a kind of harmony that could only be visible to the divine itself, since in the divine language it must be possible for the syllable to be long and short at the same time in this verse⁵⁵. For us there is only a sort of opacity that is not resolvable.

Why is this important? Because, from the point of view of finitude, love is a problem; "falling in love, it seems, dislocates your view of what is significant. Aberrant behavior ensues. Rules of decorum go by the wayside. This is the common experience (*pathos*) of lovers, Sokrates

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51 "The translation is inept because the translator does not know what it means. This phrase ostensibly supplies us with a divine aitia for the true name of Eros. But whose are the wings and whose is the necessity? Does Eros have wings? Does Eros need wings? Does Eros cause others to have or to need wings? Does Eros need to cause others to have wings? Does Eros need to cause others to need to have wings? Various possibilities, not incompatible with one another, float out from the epic quotation. It is arguable that in their enhancing way the gods mean to imply all the possibilities at once when they use the name Pteros. But we cannot know that." (Carson 1998, p. 163)

52 Plato 1997, 252b

53 Carson 1998, p. 162)

54 Carson 1998, p. 162

55 "Eros wings mark a critical difference between gods and men, for they defy human expression. Our words are too small, our rhythms too restrictive." (Carson 1998, p. 163)

says, to which men give the name *Eros*. (252b)¹⁵⁶. From the point of view of finitude, love can only appear as troublesome. By invoking a verse with irregular metrics, Socrates could be pointing to an opaque dimension in love itself. There is a strangeness brought about in this irruption of the infinite, but because of its infinite nature, we cannot adequately dimension it. What seems to happen is that this intrusion generates the process of awareness of distances that become distances, as we described above. Love is, in a sense, the very movement of attention to distances.

But, we must remember, the verses are written, the words are read (without the strangeness of the infinite language of the gods being completely tamed). In such a way that two positions are occupied at the same time in the experience of love: one in which the story takes place in a temporal duration (the duration of life, in which we move not always knowing what moves us) and another in which it indicates its eternal aspect. We don't always understand what is happening in this domain, what makes lovers persist (because, from an terrestrial point of view, frustrations can build up). But it is possible to say that what encourages us to continue playing the game of amorous distances, even when there seems to be no clear reason to press on, it is precisely the eternal side of love that determines us as *lovers*. This second aspect of love remains strange, because it is opaque. We cannot fully inhabit this second perspective that opens up in love, since we are finite, but the experience of love is precisely the experience of this impulse that transcends our finitude and that is the reason for the start of any love story. This, then, is the way Socrates seems to deal with —and not solve —the paradoxes of love.

This opacity, however, is not blindness. It is an effect of our finite constitution. But this is also where the relationship between love and philosophy, which brings Carson close to Plato, becomes visible. If love is a certain form of attention to distance, it becomes clearer to what extent the movement toward knowledge relates to love. The condition of philosophy is ignorance, the existence of a certain zone of unknowing that drives knowledge (as Plato describes it in the *Symposium*). It is not an absolute ignorance, however. Hence the importance of astonishment and the fact that opacity initially presents itself as opacity. It is always a question of an ignorance that presents itself as an ignorance, that raises awareness of the distance between a lack of knowledge and knowledge and drives us to travel this distance: "we think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them."⁵⁷. As Carson points out, this would be precisely Socrates' love and wisdom: "a

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56 Carson 1998, p. 160

57 Carson 1998, p. 171

power to see the difference between what is known and what is unknown constitutes."⁵⁸.

But wouldn't this "ignorance" be precisely the distance (strange, divine) that interposes itself in the erotic situation? The irruption of the infinite in the finite is precisely that which at the same time escapes us (and which, as finite beings, we cannot account for), and hooks us into an intimate relationship. We are captured by our excesses, which are made visible in the distance that appears between a lover and his beloved. Philosophy and erotics would be, therefore, inevitably intertwined, without, however, being the same thing. It is not surprising that the very relationship between philosophy and love is also a performance of Eros.

Love ends up being precisely that which allows us some degree of clarity by placing us before the eternal. This happens because, if love depends on the distances between lovers, one can say that the moment they become relevant, that they present themselves as obstacles, is simultaneously the moment they become visible, that they become the object of sensation and perception. But as we have seen, these distances are themselves products of love, that is, of something from another world. This is why it can be said, as Carson states, that lovers are enveloped in "a mood of knowledge [that] floats out over your life. You seem to know what is real and what is not."⁵⁹. The love of wisdom and the wisdom of love are confused, for what is known is precisely the space between the lovers, that which truly matters and which we must learn to negotiate with.

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58 Carson 1998, p. 172. The quote continues: "A thinking mind is not swallowed up by what it comes to know. It reaches out to grasp something related to itself and to its present knowledge (and so knowable in some degree) but also separate from itself and from its present knowledge (not identical with these). In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference." (Carson 1998, p. 171)

59 Carson 1998, p. 153

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