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For Students of Love: Encomium

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In accordance with the purposes of publishing The Comparative Humanities Review, perhaps it is necessary to continue, in this second installment, to laud the many struggles and intellectual forays of (and I say this as one not long ago freed from the status) the undergraduate student. The conference which engendered this issue of The Comparative Humanities Review began, as many ambitious notions do, on a cunning intellectual whim which was ironically intersected by the normalcies of co-ed undergraduate life. I say this because the conference, entitled “Symposium: A Gathering of Students of Love,” took place in the midst of the notorious Bucknell House Party weekend – to say the least, the most anticipated bunch of days on the university’s social calendar for current students and alumni alike. I do not mean to suggest that would-be academics (as, ideally, that is what student scholars strive to be) remain in their rooms and develop an eye-twitch and a sickly, sun-starved complexion. Not so. Even Plato’s speechgivers in *Symposium* could temper a hangover with the best of them. The word of Plato’s symposium, however, was moderation: as the speakers promise “not to overdo it” (Plato 176B) and send away the flute-girl, so too did our conference participants drag themselves out of bed after the first night of House Party (its after-effects not quite erased from their visages) to give their own speeches and opinions on the ever-elusive nature of

Eros.

For those who are not familiar with Plato's *Symposium*, it is a dramatic work of philosophy which details a banquet of semi-inebriated individuals who proclaim their opinions on love. Some speakers render love as a god, others reflect on its effects, and others attempt to distinguish specific elements that love encompasses. All speakers attempt to answer the question: What is love? The premise of the conference was to present the applicability of this concept, over time, across genres, and even in varied literary forms. It is my aim in this introduction, however, to examine the role of love in the academic life of an undergraduate student. As all students know, there comes a time when we wonder, why in Zeus' name do we exert so much effort on this industry of knowledge? I answer that our efforts to obtain and understand knowledge, manufacture it into a presentable manifestation of original thought, and then accept an excellent or poor job done is in itself a labor of love.

In the first installment of The Comparative Humanities Review, my colleague asserted, "Without the scholarly hardware of our professors, we undergraduates are forced to reconcile our status as children, as 'consumers' of knowledge, left wondering what exactly our essays, presentations, and theses are?" Here we are reminded of the lover/beloved relationship, within the context of the *Symposium*, which "ideally, involved the lover in the role of ethical and intellectual teacher and the boy in the role of his student" (Nehamas & Woodruff xv). Barring the more taboo cultural aspects (at least, in most of the modern world) of these lover/beloved relationships, our professors, at the basest level, serve as the "lovers" of their respective branches of knowledge as we student scholars occupy this dichotomous role of beloved/student. One of the aims of The Comparative Humanities Review is, indeed, to make a step towards the student's transformation from "consumer" to "producer," and in the *Symposium's* terms, from beloved to lover.

In *Symposium*, Socrates claims that Diotima corrects his view of love, saying, "you thought Love was *being loved* rather than *being a lover*" (Plato 204C, emphasis in the translated text). This statement implies that the beloved recognizes that he or she must make the transition into becoming the lover. Socrates' implied passivity, as the object of love, is remedied by occupying the active role of love: "being" a lover. This incitement to activity, perhaps, is similarly involved in the students' role-shift; the

appearance of these essays in this collection shows a desire to be 'produced,' or as Diotima supposedly argues, a move toward preservation – immortality. As a publication solely committed to the distribution of undergraduate scholarship, *The Comparative Humanities Review* provides a venue for the student as beloved-would-be-lover to speak in an effort to gain this form of 'immortality'.

This is not to say, however, that the student aggressively pursues their so-called immortality; ideally, we are not "vulgar lovers" of texts (181E). Most undergraduate students remember the moment of receiving their first graded college essay back, saturated with red ink – what had we done wrong? As explained in Diotima's speech, the mystery of Love is acquired by "[going] always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs" (211C). As one continues with his or her ascending journey for/with knowledge, its subtleties become more obscure but, to the student of love, are more enjoyable to find. Here, I recall Roland Barthes: "The space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning" (Barthes 1469). Much like Pausanias' distinction between Common and Heavenly Aphrodite, so too must we, as students of love, think that "the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies" (Plato 210B); a text is not "pierced," or loved in the "common" way, its basest meaning extracted from the words. Rather, it is "ranged over" – loved for its substance, and not its literality; thus, a student must apply love to his or her 'craft' – this 'industry' of knowledge.

I am speaking, of course, in terms of the most ideal student of Love; needless to say, the undergraduate university is not exactly the place to seek a surplus of virtue. I end with Rainer Maria Rilke, who says,

...young people, who are beginners in everything, are not yet capable of love: it is something they must learn... Loving does not first mean merging, surrendering, and uniting with another person (for what would a union be of two people who are unclarified, unfinished, and still incoherent--?), it is a high inducement for the individual to ripen, to become something in himself, to become world... (Rilke 69)

We are unripened lovers; thus, we cannot yet “give birth in beauty” (206B) because our offspring too is underdeveloped – such is the case with undergraduate scholarship. The ‘offspring’ we present in this issue are not yet wholly ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’ or ‘virtuous’ (does it *ever* really become so?); they strive, however, to elevate themselves toward something higher. We take sips, as it were, from the proverbial cup of ‘immortality’ through reproduction of our ideas, however half-formed, and disseminating them. For is this not the groping, uncertain, and exhilarating journey of any student, after all?

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I have attempted to present the essays in this installment in a semi-grouped, though undivided, whole. I did not choose to show the original panel divisions, in an attempt to retain a semblance of continuity and unity – of voices speaking sporadically between small swallows (or gulps, in some cases) of wine, perhaps.

The first four essays deal directly with Plato’s *Symposium*; the original panel was called “Plato’s *Symposium*: Love and Sexuality.” The first essay, by Kang Tchou, entitled “Purificatory Hermeneutics of Desire,” examines the possibility of alleviating the modern biases of the term ‘homosexuality.’ In the essay, Tchou defines the word ‘*homo*’ both in its Greek and Latin contexts: the former meaning “love of the same sex,” and the latter as “love of humanity,” while considering the complexities of Greek sexuality and emphasizing the marked difference between “coarse” and “noble” sexual intercourse.

Joseph Schwartz, on a different vein, makes an argument for the equalization of heterosexuality with homosexuality in his essay, “Plato’s Validation of Heterosexuality in *Symposium*.”

Next, Nicholas Rockower (not included in the original conference panel), in “Love, Laughter, and the Harmony of Opposites in Plato’s *Symposium*” discusses the *Symposium* from the classicist perspective. Using instances of humor in the original Greek (his own translations included), he examines the theme of the harmony of incongruous concepts at the multiple narrative levels present in the text.

Bryan Kim-Butler, in “The Politics of Transsexual Love: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and Plato’s *Symposium*,” deals with the controversial issue of transsexuality in the film and recalls the

“John/Joan” case of David Reimer, showing that the power structure of knowledge and truth intersect with the concept of love.

We move on, here, to the next panel in the conference, originally called “After Plato: Classical and Medieval Love.” Lauren Rutter’s essay, “Ovid’s Military Metaphor and Gender Transgression in *Amores*,” analyzes the military metaphors present in a selection of Ovid’s poetry as a means of displaying its strange gender confusions, despite the presence of traditional binary sexuality.

In “‘A Light, Formed in the Heavens, Moves You’”: Art and Sight in Dante’s *Purgatorio* as an Intermediary to Free Will and Love,” Joey McMullen asserts that for Dante, art and sight are a form of truer reality that leads to genuine feeling and an experience of love that is “pure,” freely chosen and understood.

Lauren Forsythe’s essay, “Platonic Models of Love, Honor, and Responsibility in Spanish Courtly Love Literature,” weaves sentimental novels of medieval Spain, *Prison of Love* and *The Spanish Bawd*, with Plato’s *Symposium*, and discusses the concept of honor and responsibility between lovers within the context of both Spanish courtly love and Platonic discourse.

Moving into the era of English Romanticism, Diana Koretsky begins the next panel of essays (“After Plato: Love and Modernity”) with “I’m NO Byron: Lermontov, Love, and the Anxiety of Byronic Influence,” which gives a reading of a selection of works by Mikhail Lermontov in conjunction with his struggle with ‘Byron-mania,’ its curious effects on his art, and the tumultuous conflict between idol, artist, and art.

To continue the trend of obsessive love, Allison Rittmayer’s “The Cow, The Rhinemaiden, and ‘The Supreme Primal Uterus’: Love, Worship, and Tribute Language in William Faulkner’s *The Hamlet*,” was developed from a chapter in her undergraduate honors thesis. Rittmayer analyzes three characters as objects of worship with respect to humor, overt female sexuality, and the so-called “curse” of the American South.

Nick Kupensky, whose essay also stemmed from his undergraduate honors thesis, examines Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* as a response to Plato’s *Symposium*: an act of reading and transfer that represents a labor of love, of sorts, in “‘Don’t Steal Rolls’: Tolstoy’s Symposium on Love, Literature, Women, and Wine.”

The final panel of the conference, “After Plato: Symposium as Narrative,” was focused on the symposium as a creative agent.

Steven McClellan's essay, "*Symposium* as Metanarrative" gives a historical reading of the *Symposium*, arguing that Plato wished to lend functionality and legitimacy to philosophy as a way of life.

Michelle Gallagher's essay, which was the final assignment in her first-year seminar, is her own version of the symposium which brings together a true 'meeting of the minds,' across time and disciplines. Plato, Dante, and Sigmund Freud come together to talk about their notions of love in "An Unconventional Symposium on Love."

Finally, we close the essays with Soohyun Alexander Lee's rendering of a Socratic dialogue on Forms, "The Illusion of Forms." An everyday encounter next to a hotdog stand evolves into a philosophic discussion on the nature of desire, love, and hunger. Ending this collection with Lee's enigmatic "We will be here a while," is the true embodiment of our quest for knowledge as students of Love as we anticipate the ongoing production of beautiful words, text, and ideas.

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It is my hope, along with the rest of the members of the editorial board of *The Comparative Humanities Review*, that readers of this collection strive also to be Students of Love. Your responses and comments to the essays in this issue will generate a larger 'symposium,' which, with any luck, will merge with the voices of the ongoing dialogue on undergraduate scholarship in the humanities. Thank you.

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