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Bittersweet

It was Sappho who first called eros “bittersweet.” No one who has been in love disputes her. What does the word mean?

Eros seemed to Sappho at once an experience of pleasure and pain. Here is contradiction and perhaps paradox. To perceive this eros can split the mind in two. Why? The components of the contradiction may seem, at first glance, obvious. We take for granted, as did Sappho, the sweetness of erotic desire; its pleasurability smiles out at us. But the bitterness is less obvious. There might be several reasons why what is sweet should also be bitter. There may be various relations between the two savors. Poets have sorted the matter out in different ways. Sappho’s own formulation is a good place to begin tracing the possibilities. The relevant fragment runs:

'Ἐρος δηντέ µ' ὁ λυσιμέλης δόνει,
γλυκύπικρον ἀμάχανον ὁρπετον

Eros once again limb-loosener whirls me
sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up
(LP, fr. 130)

It is hard to translate. “Sweetbitter” sounds wrong, and yet our standard English rendering “bittersweet” inverts the actual terms of Sappho’s compound glukupikron. Should that concern us? If her ordering has a descriptive intention, eros is here being said to bring sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: she is sorting the possibilities chronologically. Many a lover’s experience would vali-
date such a chronology, especially in poetry, where most love ends badly. But it is unlikely that this is what Sappho means. Her poem begins with a dramatic localization of the erotic situation in time (dēute) and fixes the erotic action in the present indicative tense (donei). She is not recording the history of a love affair but the instant of desire. One moment staggers under pressure of eros; one mental state splits. A simultaneity of pleasure and pain is at issue. The pleasant aspect is named first, we may presume, because it is less surprising. Emphasis is thrown upon the problematic other side of the phenomenon, whose attributes advance in a hail of soft consonants (line 2). Eros moves or creeps upon its victim from somewhere outside her: orpeton. No battle avails to fight off that advance: amachanon. Desire, then, is neither inhabitant nor ally of the desirer. Foreign to her will, it forces itself irresistibly upon her from without. Eros is an enemy. Its bitterness must be the taste of enmity. That would be hate.

"To love one’s friends and hate one’s enemies" is a standard archaic prescription for moral response. Love and hate construct between them the machinery of human contact. Does it make sense to locate both poles of this affect within the single emotional event of eros? Presumably, yes, if friend and enemy converge in the being who is its occasion. The convergence creates a paradox, but one that is almost a cliché for the modern literary imagination. "And hate begins where love leaves off..." whispers Anna Karenina, as she heads for Moscow Station and an end to the dilemma of desire. In fact, erotic paradox is a problem antedating Eros himself. We find it first enacted on the wall of Troy, in a scene between Helen and Aphrodite. The interchange is as sharp as a paradigm. Homer shows us Helen, embodiment of desire, fed up with the impositions of eros and defying an order from Aphrodite to serve Paris’ bed. The goddess of
love responds angrily, wielding erotic paradox as a weapon:

\[ \text{μὴ μὲ έρεθε σχετλίη, μὴ χωσαμένη σε μεθείω,} \\
\text{τῶς δὲ σ’ ἀπεχθήρω ὡς νῦν ἕκταχ’ ἐφίλησα} \]

Damn you woman, don’t provoke me—I’ll get angry and let you drop!
I’ll come to hate you as terribly as I now love you!
(II. 3.414-15)

Helen obeys at once; love and hate in combination make an irresistible enemy.

The simultaneity of bitter and sweet that startles us in Sappho’s adjective glupupikron is differently rendered in Homer’s poem. Epic convention represents inner states of feeling in dynamic and linear enactment, so that a divided mind may be read from a sequence of antithetical actions. Homer and Sappho concur, however, in presenting the divinity of desire as an ambivalent being, at once friend and enemy, who informs the erotic experience with emotional paradox.

Eros appears in other genres and poets, too, as a paradox of love and hate. Aristophanes, for example, tells us that the seductive young libertine Alkibiades was able to inspire a feeling like lover’s passion in the Greek dēmos:

\[ \text{ποθεὶ μέν, ἐχθαϊρεῖ δὲ, βούλεται δ’ ἐχεῖν.} \]

For they love him and they hate him and they long to possess him.
(Ran. 1425)

In Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, Menelaos is described wandering about his empty palace after the departure of Helen. The rooms seem haunted by her; at their bedchamber he stops and cries out for “ruts of love in the bed” (411). There is no question it is desire he feels (po-thos, 414), yet hate seeps in to fill the void (echthetai):
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πόθω δ' ὑπερποντίας
φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνάσσεων
εὐμώρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν
ἐχθεται χάρις ἀνδρὶ,
δημάτων δ' ἐν ἄχνιαν
ἔρρει πᾶς Ἄφροδίτη.

Because of his longing for something gone across
the sea
a phantom seems to rule the rooms,
and the grace of statues shaped in beauty
comes to be an object of hate for the man.
In the absences of eyes
all Aphrodite is vacant, gone.
(Ag. 414-19)

Love and hate furnish a subject for the Hellenistic epi-
gram as well. Nicharchos’ injunction to his beloved is
typical:

Εἰ μὲ φιλεῖς, μυσεῖς με· καὶ εἰ μυσεῖς, σὺ φιλεῖς με·
ei de me μή μυσεῖς, φίλτατε, μή με φιλεῖ.

If you love me, you hate me. And if you hate me, you
love me.
Now if you don’t hate me, beloved, don’t love me.
(Anth. Pal. 11.252)

Catullus’ epigram is perhaps the most elegant distillate
we have of this cliché:

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.
nescio, sed fieri sentio et ex crucior.

I hate and I love. Why? you might ask.
I don’t know. But I feel it happening and I hurt.
(Catullus 85)

The poets of the Greek lyric tradition sometimes con-
ceptualize the erotic condition as starkly as this, but Sap-
pho and her successors in general prefer physiology to
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counts. The moment when the soul parts on itself in
desire is conceived as a dilemma of body and senses. On
Sappho’s tongue, as we have seen, it is a moment bitter
and sweet. This ambivalent taste is developed, in later
poets, into “bitter honey” (Anth. Pal. 12.81), “sweet
wound” (Anth. Pal. 12.126), and “Eros of sweet tears”
(Anth. Pal. 12.167). Eros knocks a lover flat with the
shock of hot and cold in Anakreon’s poem:

μεγάλω δηντέ μ’ Ἐρως ἐκοψεν ὡστε χαλκεῖς
πελέκει, χειμερίῃ δ’ ἐλονσεν χαράδρη.

With his huge hammer again Eros knocked me like a
blacksmith
and doused me in a wintry ditch

(PMG 413)

while Sophokles compares the experience to a lump of
ice melting in warm hands (Radt, fr. 149). Later poets
mix the sensations of hot and cold with the metaphor
from taste to concoct “sweet fire” (Anth. Pal. 12.63),
lovers “burned by honey” (Anth. Pal. 12.126), erotic
missiles “tempered in honey” (Anac. 27E). Ibykos
frames eros in a paradox of wet and dry, for the black
thunderstorm of desire drives against him not rain but
“parching madmesses” (PMG 286.8-11). These tropes
may have some basis in ancient theories of physiology
and psychology, which associate action that is pleasur-
able, desirable or good with sensations of heat, liquidity,
melting, and action that is unpleasant or hateful with
cold, freezing, rigidification.

But no simple map of the emotions is available here.
Desire is not simple. In Greek the act of love is a mingling
(mignumi) and desire melts the limbs (lusimelēs, cf. Sappho
fr. 130 above). Boundaries of body, categories of
thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs pro-

1 See also the section on “Ice-pleasure” in the Sophoklean fragment
below.

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ceeds to break the lover (damnatai) as would a foe on the epic battlefield:

ἀλλὰ μ’ ὁ ἀνυψωμένης ὠσταὶρε δὰμναται πόθος.

Oh comrade, the limb-loosener crushes me: desire. (Archilochos, West, IEG 196)

The shape of love and hate is perceptible, then, in a variety of sensational crises. Each crisis calls for decision and action, but decision is impossible and action a paradox when eros stirs the senses. Everyday life can become difficult; the poets speak of the consequences for behavior and judgment:

οὐκ οἶδα ὅτι θέω δίχα μοι τὰ νοήματα

I don’t know what I should do: two states of mind in me... (LP, fr. 51)

Sappho says, and breaks off.

ἐρέω τε δήνυτε κούκ ἐρέω
καὶ μαίνομαι κού καίνομαι.

I’m in love! I’m not in love!
I’m crazy! I’m not crazy! (PMG 428)

cries Anakreon.

ἐξ οὖ δὴ νέον ἔρνος ἐν ἡμῖθεος Διόφαντον
λεύσων οὔτε φυγεῖν οὔτε μένειν δύναιμαι.

When I look at Diophantos, new shoot among the young men,
I can neither flee nor stay (Anth. Pal. 12.126.5-6)

“Desire keeps pulling the lover to act and not to act” is the conclusion of Sophokles (Radt, fr. 149). Not only action founders. Moral evaluation also fractures under
pressure of paradox, splitting desire into a thing good and bad at the same time. The Eros of Euripides yields a bow that is “double” in its effect, for it can bring on a lovely life or complete collapse (IA 548-49). Euripides goes so far as to double the god of love himself: twin Erotes appear in a fragment of his lost play Sthenoboae. One of them guides the lover in a life of virtue. The other is a lover’s worst enemy (echthistos) and leads him straight to the house of death (Page 1932, 3.128.22-25). Love and hate bifurcate Eros.

Let us return to the question with which we began, namely, the meaning of Sappho’s adjective glukupikron. A contour has been emerging from our examination of the poetic texts. “Sweetbitter eros” is what hits the raw film of the lover’s mind. Paradox is what takes shape on the sensitized plate of the poem, a negative image from which positive pictures can be created. Whether apprehended as a dilemma of sensation, action or value, eros prints as the same contradictory fact: love and hate converge within erotic desire.

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