Love and Poetry

Erik Gray

DOI:10.1093/osoy/9780198752974.003.0002

Abstract and Keywords
This chapter considers the relation between love and poetry by examining different theories of each. It begins with Horace’s *Art of Poetry* and Ovid’s *Art of Love*, which give very similar accounts of their respective subjects. Both phenomena are said to involve a counterpointing of contradictory forces: impulse and artistry, spontaneity and deliberate craft. The parallel persists in the work of thinkers across different periods. Thus the Romantics of the early nineteenth century describe a similar balance; both poetry and love, in their accounts, consist of a two-stage process in which momentary inspiration is followed and fulfilled by self-conscious reflection. These dualities find their ultimate model in Plato, who describes love as an effect of simultaneous recognition and disorientation. The same dichotomy is fundamental to poetry, notably through poetry’s use of meter, with its reliance on pattern and variation, and metaphor, with its emphasis on both similarity and difference.

Keywords: Horace, Ovid, Romanticism, Plato, inspiration, spontaneity, recognition, self-consciousness, meter, metaphor
“Who ever lov’d that lov’d not at first sight?” So exclaims the shepherdess Phebe in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* when, against all odds and against all reason, she finds herself falling in love with a strange youth she has just met, who has done nothing but speak rudely to her.¹ This is a notion of love we all recognize: an untaught, irrepressible feeling. “Love is merely a madness,” as that same stranger (the disguised Rosalind) has already observed (3.2.400). Yet Phebe’s line is not complete in itself but comes as part of a couplet:

```
Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might,
“Who ever lov’d that lov’d not at first sight?”
```

The context changes everything. Phebe’s declaration about the spontaneity of love is in fact a quotation—something she has learned from her reading. The “dead shepherd” she cites is Christopher Marlowe, who in *Hero and Leander* had written, “Where both deliberate, the love is slight: | Who ever loved, that loved not at first sight?”² The two couplets make the same point: love is not self-conscious, at least in its origins. But Phebe’s conscious reference to this precept presents an important paradox. By falling in love at first sight, Phebe is both acting spontaneously and at the same time following a convention of which she is well aware. The pleasure and excitement she feels in this scene derive equally from her experiencing something unexpected and from the way that her experience meets a pre-existing expectation.
The paradox is reinforced by the fact that Phebe not only quotes a poet but does so in a couplet. The rhyme sets these lines off from the rest of the scene, which is nearly all in blank verse; it is the only rhyme that Phebe produces before the very end of the scene, where rhyme is conventional. (p.16) Her lines about love are thus doubly marked, even within the fiction of the play, as poetry—which seems only appropriate, since poetry is traditionally held to be the most impassioned form of discourse, and hence particularly suited to expressions of love. Yet that traditional association is worth pondering. Nobody, of course, actually produces an iambic pentameter couplet in moments of great passion. Rather, poetry is regarded as a fit medium for expressing or describing love because it displays the same paradoxical duality as love itself. Poetry is characterized by passion and unpredictability; even more than other forms of writing, it depends upon the vagaries of inspiration. Yet poetry also, even more than prose, depends on forethought, self-consciousness, and the fulfilment (or at least awareness) of conventional expectations. Phebe’s couplet directly imitates her falling in love at first sight: the rhyme is entirely unexpected, yet once it has arrived it appears, not as a total novelty, but as a form of completion, a recognizable fulfilment.

The same conjunction of inspired impulse and conscious convention is prominent in the two works of classical Latin poetry from which the title of this book derives: Horace’s Art of Poetry (as it is usually known), written around 10 BCE, and Ovid’s Art of Love, composed about a decade later. For all their differences in form and tone, the two poems are surprisingly similar. Ovid’s aspiring lover acts very much like Horace’s ideal poet: he takes great care in choosing his words, but only so as to keep them as true to nature as possible; he feels his will possessed by an outside force, but is aware of its urgings and seeks to cultivate them, rather than submit to them blindly. The whole art of both poet and lover, in short, lies in balancing feeling and forethought, spontaneity and self-consciousness. The similarity between the two treatises derives, not from a deliberate attempt by Ovid to model himself on Horace, but from a more intrinsic connection between poetry and love.
Like most classical writers, Horace grants as a matter of course that poetry has a divine origin, attributing it to “the lyrical Muse and the singer, Apollo.” This divine source of inspiration is what raises Greek poets above all others: “to the Greeks in particular the Muse has given a genius [ingenium] for well-wrought speech” (ll. 323–4). Without such aid all the effort in the world is useless, since, when it comes to poetry, “I don’t see what good study can do without a rich vein [of native talent]” (ll. 409–10). But Horace hastens to add that the obverse is equally true: “uncultivated genius” (rude…ingenium (l. 410)) is just as valueless as uninspired effort—and this is the idea to which he devotes most of his poem. The first law of poetry, Horace makes clear, lies not in unswerving fidelity to an inner vision, but in duly fitting that vision to the reader’s natural expectations. Hence the Ars Poetica begins by invoking, not the Muse, but the audience, as the ultimate arbiter of artistic success. Horace opens the poem abruptly by posing a question to his readers. “If a painter,” he asks, “wished to draw a human head on a horse’s neck,” and then to add to this figure all sorts of other mismatched absurdities, “when you were admitted to view it, my friends, could you help but laugh?” (ll. 1–5). Trust me, he continues, a poem made up of self-indulgent flights of fancy, “like a sick man’s dreams,” is no better than such a picture (l. 7).
This opening foregrounds the importance of the reader both in what it says—an artist must be conscious of his or her audience—and in the way it says it: the poem is cast as a verse epistle. (The “friends” addressed in line 5 are named in the following line as the Piso family; the poem is technically known as the Epistle to the Pisos.) Rather than writing a straightforwardly didactic poem, in which an authoritative voice hands down precepts to whoever will listen, Horace has deliberately chosen a genre in which author and reader exist on equal footing. Because a letter is generally written to a single, specified recipient, or small group of recipients, a letter-writer tends to be extremely conscious, more than writers in almost any other genre, of his or her audience. This helps explain why letters, like poetry, are closely associated with love, as mentioned in the Introduction. But here the chief effect of the epistolary form is to reinforce the original claim: in poetry, an awareness of one’s audience and its expectations is just as important as the writer’s individual genius. The true poet is not the disheveled bard, oblivious of social convention—a figure Horace satirizes at length at the end of his poem (ll. 453–76)—but a conscious craftsman. This idea is further confirmed by the very fact that this work of literary criticism is written in verse at all. Horace draws attention to this fact by self-contradictorily declaring the opposite: that he is not writing a poem. “I could write as good poems as anyone, but it’s not worth it,” he announces; therefore, “I will teach the function [of poetry] without writing any myself” (ll. 303–6). The irony of these paradoxical lines makes an important point: poetry and criticism are simply inseparable. When Horace takes up the mantle of critic, he does not, despite his claim, cease to act as a poet. And, just as the critic remains a poet, so a poet, to be successful, must always be his own critic, disinterestedly judging and editing the words he produces, as if perceiving them from the reader’s point of view.
All of which is not to say that the poet’s duty is merely to cater to public demand, endlessly repeating received forms and self-censoring anything (p.18) that seems out of the ordinary. To the contrary, good poetry must be inventive and original. But poetic originality lies, according to Horace, not in doing something undreamt of, but in producing an unexpected variation on something familiar, and so making “common material your private property” (l. 131). This rule applies, for instance, to verbal coinages, which Horace permits to poets on occasion, and even welcomes as a notable beauty, but only if “the word is produced through a clever combination” (ll. 47–8)—that is, if the new word is formed from recognizable roots. This seems only reasonable in the case of vocabulary: an assemblage of nonsense syllables would communicate little. But Horace extends the principle to larger aesthetic concerns, such as when he famously praises Homer for launching his narratives “in medias res” (l. 148). Horace follows hundreds of years of classical precedent in singling out Homer as the ultimate example of good poetry. But he produces a surprising twist on precedent by praising Homer, not as the source or inventor of tradition, but rather as one who manipulates traditional material to spectacular effect. What is so brilliant about Homer, says Horace, is not how new his stories are but precisely how familiar they are; this is what allows him to establish for his audience, from the very opening of the poem, a deeply pleasurable sense of shared understanding. Homer does not begin by filling in the whole history of the Trojan War, starting from its origins, but rather “rushes straight to the point and carries his listener right into the middle of the story [in medias res], as if it were already known” (ll. 148–9). “As if it were already known” (non secus ac notas): in other words, the thrill of beginning one of the Homeric epics is the same one that Phebe experiences in As You Like It. It is the double thrill of being whirled into an unexpected situation that nevertheless strikes you as tallying exactly with something you already know and recognize.
The same combination of transport and self-awareness that Horace finds in great poetry characterizes love in Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* (Ars Amatoria). The connection is made manifest by Apollo, the god of poetry, who midway through the poem appears to Ovid to remind him that lovers, too, must be self-aware. “Teacher of love,” says Apollo, “lead your students to my shrine [at Delphi], where stands the inscription known to all the world that bids each person know himself. Only a person who is known to himself will love wisely.” Yet Ovid, like Horace, implicitly acknowledges that wisdom and knowledge are insufficient in themselves to create love, which for Ovid, as for most classical poets, remains at root an unpredictable, (p.19) irrational impulse. Thus the *Ars Amatoria* is followed by a sequel, the *Remedia Amoris* (Cures for Love), addressed to those who are made miserable by love but are powerless to resist it. And, even in the *Ars* itself, love often appears as a bolt out of the blue. Ovid writes, for instance, of a young man who goes to the gladiatorial arena hoping to pick up a casual lover and finds himself unexpectedly struck by Cupid’s arrow: “the one who was gazing at wounds receives a wound himself. While he is chatting and touching someone’s hand and looking for a program, and asking who is winning while he places his bet, he feels the arrow wound him, and he groans—himself become part of the entertainment he was watching” (1.166–70).

Nevertheless, the *Ars Amatoria* devotes by far the majority of its attention to the more conscious, deliberate aspect of love. Ovid does not, in this poem, speak in the voice of one who has been swept away by mad passion, nor does he particularly address himself to such people. Rather, the poem is framed as a practical handbook on how to foster love—in oneself, to some extent, but primarily in others. Hence it leaves nothing purely up to nature or to chance but gives calculated advice on everything: how to dress, to speak, to walk. Ovid even offers instruction on how an aspiring lover should laugh (3.283–4). In short, the *Art of Love* seems to be far more about art than love, right from its opening lines:

Siquis in hoc artem populo non novit amandi,  
Hoc legat et lecto carmine doctus amet.  
Arte citae veloque rates remoque moventur;  
Arte leves currus: arte regendus amor.

(1.1–4)
If anyone in this town does not know the art of loving,
let him read this poem and emerge from his reading a learned lover.
It’s art that, together with sail and oar, moves the swift ships,
It’s art that moves sleek chariots; love must be ruled by art.

Like Horace, Ovid plunges right in, on the assumption that his subject is so well known as to need no introduction. Yet the metaphors in these opening lines do offer an implicit definition of love, or rather an implicit distinction between love and mere physical desire. The fact is, ships could still travel swiftly powered only by the brute force of wind and oars, and a riderless chariot could continue to be moved by its horses; only the art of the steersman, however, gives those movements value. By the same token, men and women could still feel brute attraction and successfully couple without the aid of any art at all, but Ovid evinces little interest in such unreflective impulse. His topic is love, not sex; and love is defined by the conjunction of desire and conscious cultivation, or art.
Although the *Ars Amatoria* may take the form of a handbook on seduction, therefore, that does not mean that Ovid’s concept of love is founded on insincerity—any more than Horace’s concept of poetry is, even though the *Ars Poetica* is also, in a sense, a seduction manual. Ovid’s point, rather, is that self-awareness enriches the experience of love, and indeed is inseparable from it, just as criticism is inseparable from poetry. As much as any modern theorist, Ovid recognizes the impossibility of disentangling self-conscious performance from “true” emotion; much as we might think or wish to distinguish between them, the one inevitably shades into the other, in a constant fluctuation. Thus “one who feigns love often begins to love indeed, and becomes what at first he only pretended” (1.615–16). By the same token, even the most sincere lover must still convey his feelings through the artifice of words. Ovid notes, for instance, that ardor, not rhetorical skill, is a lover’s chief recommendation: “There’s no need to submit to my rules when you speak—just make sure of your desire, and eloquence will come to you spontaneously” (*sponte disertus eris*). Yet he immediately concedes that, still, “you need to play the lover, and you need to perform your suffering in words; you must use every possible art to make her believe” (1.609–12). Despite what seems to be an initial antagonism between his two central terms (“love must be ruled by art” (1.4)), it quickly becomes clear that art does not oppose love but defines it.
Hence Ovid’s repeated invocation, beginning in book 1, of the theater, a site that demands both self-awareness and its suspension—a belief in fiction balanced by a constant awareness of its artistry. A brief but suggestive instance is furnished by the case, quoted above, of the spectator at the gladiatorial arena who is unexpectedly struck by Cupid’s arrow and “himself becomes part of the entertainment he was watching” (1.170). In this case the gladiators’ fight is staged, yet their suffering of course is real. Meanwhile, the sympathetic pang of imagined pain that the spectator presumably feels at seeing their wounds (as he would at the performance of a tragedy) gives way to a more direct pang of suffering when the spectator is “wounded” himself—a suffering that then turns him into a spectacle for others. A similar dissolution of the boundary between fictional and actual is presented at greater length in an earlier passage (1.89–134) about the theater proper. Ovid, speaking at first in his typically practical, preceptorial style, recommends the theater as a convenient place to find love—either a mere dalliance or a lasting affection (“There you will find an object you may love, or one merely to play with, someone to touch once or else to cleave to” (1.91–2)). But the style soon changes as Ovid shifts into an etiological fable about the Sabine women—the first of the great inset narratives that punctuate the Ars Amatoria. During these interludes, which usually offer versions of traditional legends or myths, the preceptorial voice essentially disappears. The narrative is entirely foregrounded, just as in Homer’s extended similes and digressions, allowing the reader to get lost in the story while its supposed didactic purpose (in this case, to teach us how the theater first became a breeding ground for love) fades into the background.
The poem thus imitates in its discursive structure the mixture of self-conscious purposefulness and unreflective pleasure that forms the subject of the first narrative episode, and to some extent of the poem as a whole. After the founding of Rome, as Ovid tells the tale, Romulus’ soldiers needed wives and so invited the neighboring Sabine women to attend a theatrical spectacle. While the women allow themselves to become rapt in the performance, however, the Roman soldiers in the audience are eyeing them; and, as the women break into “artless” applause (1.113), the men rush in to seize them. The Sabines struggle, but the passage ends by quoting one of the soldiers, who seeks to assure his captive of the sincerity of his intentions:

Atque ita “quid teneros lacrimis corrumpis ocellos? Quod matri pater est, hoc tibi” dixit “ero.”
Romule, militibus scisti dare commoda solus.
Haec mihi si dederis commoda, miles ero.
Scilicet ex illo sollemnia more theatra
Nunc quoque formosis insidiosa manent.

(1.129–34)

Hence he said, “Why do you spoil your tender eyes with tears?
What your father is to your mother, I will be to you.”
Romulus, you alone knew how to compensate your soldiers;
For such compensation, I too will become a soldier!
And surely, from that time up until now, by custom,
The hallowed theater remains a danger to the fair.
The presentation offers as important an insight into the nature of self-consciousness as the story itself. Progressing through the three couplets, the reader moves through three layers of discourse, each more self-conscious than the last. When the soldier speaks for himself in the first couplet, his voice is foregrounded; the focus is entirely on the story and the feelings of the characters within it. In the second couplet, however, (p.22) Ovid—or the version of him that is narrating the episode—consciously comments on the story from a position outside it. The third couplet then draws back still further, as the forgotten preceptorial voice returns after a long interval to remind us of the original, explanatory function of the story within the larger didactic scheme of the poem.

These layers of self-consciousness are appropriate both to the theater and to love, each of which, to be fully savored, requires a combination of absorption and distance. In this sense the women of Ovid’s day are superior to their predecessors both as theatergoers and as lovers. Unlike the Sabines, who are unaware of being a spectacle themselves—and unlike Romulus’ soldiers who pay no attention to the play—modern women manage to do both at once: “They come [to the theater] to watch, and to be watched themselves” (Spectatum veniunt, veniunt spectentur ut ipsae (1.99)). Ovid does not necessarily mean to ridicule the Sabine women; there is true pleasure and value in losing oneself in a play, just as there is in losing oneself in Ovid’s narratives. But he implies that the characteristic self-consciousness of modern women represents an improvement, not only for aesthetic appreciation but for amatory relations. In place of the one-sided looking and desiring of their ancestors, Roman women now participate in something more mutual. They can truly be said to enjoy all the pleasures of consciousness, in its original, root sense of “shared knowledge.” Shared understanding, as we have already seen, lies at the heart of both aesthetic and erotic satisfaction; it provides the thrill experienced by Horace on reading Homer, as well as the pleasure felt by Phebe on discovering that she and the poet Marlowe share a single perception of love.
Such mutual understanding lies at the heart of the *Ars Amatoria* as well. For all its infamous objectification of women (and the poem can be startlingly misogynistic), the *Ars* insists on reciprocity. Its first two books are addressed to men, but the third is addressed to women; unless both parties are equally informed, the pleasure of consciousness is lost. In the third book Ovid makes explicit the precept implied in his earlier (p.23) passage about theater: that for both men and women self-awareness is key to love. Midway through the book, for instance, he advises women to play sports and games as a way of meeting and charming men, but he warns them never to let themselves become too caught up in their own play:

\[
\text{Tum sumus incauti, studioque aperimur in ipso,} \\
\text{Nudaque per lusus pectora nostra patent:} \\
\text{Ira subit, deforme malum, lucrique cupidó,} \\
\text{Iurgiaeque et rixae sollicitusque dolor.} \\
\text{(3.371–4)}
\]

Then we grow heedless and in our eagerness reveal ourselves,  
And as we play the game our hearts lie bare:  
Anger, an ugly vice, creeps in, and desire for gain,  
And quarrels and squabbles and trouble and grief.

As usual, Ovid’s advice works on two levels. Ever practical, he warns women not to lose their temper in public, which is unattractive. But he is also reminding them that a game, like a stage play, remains pleasurable only when one enters into it wholeheartedly, yet without forgetting that it is a game.

In this sense, playing inherently resembles loving. Molly Myerowitz illuminatingly expounds this connection in *Ovid’s Games of Love*, noting that, for Ovid, “mutuality between lovers exists only insofar as there is complicity in play.” Although readers may be made uncomfortable by Ovid’s depiction of love as a highly cultivated game, in which both parties are constantly aware of themselves, Myerowitz suggests that the discomfort arises not from the falseness of Ovid’s vision but from its unsettling accuracy:
“In love” we have no choice but to play at love. For the man of wit a certain schizoid selfconsciousness must accompany the performance. We may admire the tragic intensity of Virgil’s Dido, the passionate abandon of Catullus, the wholeness of the elegists’ exclusive devotion, but it is Ovid’s lover with the voice of his mean-spirited praeceptor, like the voice in our head forever directing us to choose one role or another, that must remind us most of our own secret selves.10

The dual consciousness described here resembles that in Horace, where the poet serves as his own constant critic as he writes. It is no accident that the passage on games in the Ars Amatoria appears between two discussions of poetry—one in which Ovid counsels would-be lovers to read poetry, including his own (3.329–48), and one in which he directly compares the poet and the lover (3.397–416). Poetry, like love (and like play), (p.24) requires a degree of self-awareness, which in turn makes possible the pleasures of mutual understanding and recognition; hence the similar emphasis on consciousness in The Art of Poetry and The Art of Love.
If the accounts of poetry and love given by Horace and Ovid, respectively, seem to tally so closely, our first response might be to ascribe the affinity simply to a common ideology. The Augustan aesthetic to which both poets, for all their differences, adhered was one that pre-eminently valued wit, artifice, human ingenuity; so it is hardly surprising that the two poets emphasized the importance of self-consciousness in guiding imagination and desire. Yet this aesthetic is, of course, far from universal. Readers over the centuries have objected to both accounts, finding Ovid’s representation of love in particular to be alien, even unrecognizable; and many modern readers are likely to respond in similar fashion. The love described in the *Ars Amatoria* may strike us as disingenuous, opportunistic, and “repugnant to [modern] conceptions of love based on untutored sincerity.” But such a response, while natural, is not only somewhat misguided but beside the point. In the first place, the notion of love as performance (and poetry as well, though that is less counterintuitive) is far less contrary to current commonly accepted notions than it may seem on the surface. Furthermore, the importance of Horace and Ovid is not that their definitions are timeless or universal, but that they reflect the tendency, at any given historical moment, for thinking about love and poetry to follow parallel lines. If we look, for example, at a period of thought that seems to lie at the opposite extreme from the Augustans—namely, the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century—we find the same shared elements. It is therefore worth considering a range of different theories—modern, Romantic, and finally Platonic—to determine what elements persist.
In order to understand the centrality of conscious performance
to love, it may be helpful to begin with the work of Irving
Singer, one of the foremost modern philosophers of love.
Singer’s ideas on love, though original, are unlikely to strike
most readers as outlandish; yet in some ways they closely
resemble Ovid’s. At the outset of his influential treatise *The
Nature of Love* (1966–87), Singer introduces his central
concept of “bestowal.” A loving relationship, he argues, is
classified by the bestowing of value, meaning that a lover
will highly value the existence, presence, actions of the
beloved, regardless of whether those actions, or that beloved,
could objectively be considered to merit such response. (p.
25) Bestowal thus mediates between two other ways of
responding positively to another person, neither of which by
itself is sufficient to qualify as love. On one side lies what
Singer calls “appraisal”: the valuing of another person for
recognizably excellent qualities, or else for an ability to meet
one’s own particular pre-existing needs (what Singer calls
“individual appraisal”). To appreciate that someone is
generous or that his particular sense of humor makes me
laugh, however, is not enough to constitute a feeling of love on
my part toward that person—rather than, say, respect or
friendship. Lovers do, of course, naturally appraise and
appreciate valuable qualities in the beloved, but “love would
not be love unless appraising were accompanied by the
bestowing of value.”12 A loving response by definition exceeds
what could rationally be expected or claimed as due.
On the other side lies delusion, or what Sigmund Freud calls “overvaluation”: a false perception of nonexistent qualities or value. As Singer notes: “That is the familiar joke about lovers: they live in constant illusion, Cupid is blinded by emotion, etc.” (i. 17). Bestowal resembles delusion in that it too is an act of imagination, but it differs importantly in that the lover is conscious of the act. In other words, the lover responds to the beloved more warmly and affirmatively than a detached appraisal would seem to warrant, not from a delusion that such valuation is objectively justifiable (that is, that the beloved “really is” the most generous, funniest, and so on, and therefore worthy of an extreme response), but rather, Singer says, “as if” these things were true. The lover does not believe in the beloved’s extraordinary excellence, but rather voluntarily suspends his or her disbelief; the high appraisal is not erroneous, because it results from an act of self-avowed (and therefore self-fulfilling) imaginative bestowal. “Though he is bestowing value, the lover seems to be declaring the objective goodness of the beloved. It is as if he were predicting the outcome of all possible appraisals and insisting that they would always be favorable” (i. 12; emphasis in original).

Hence Singer, like Ovid, proposes the analogy of theater: “In love, as in theater, imagination manifests itself in a particular set or disposition” (i. 21). In both cases, however, the analogy is complex. Neither author asserts that the lover is merely playing a role. Rather, they invoke the multiple layers of self-consciousness and of mutual understanding that characterize both love and theater, concentrating on the role of the audience (p.26) member rather than on that of the actor. The spectator at a drama can achieve authentic emotional fulfilment, Singer notes, but only by his or her willingness to “respond as if the actor were really Hamlet and as if Hamlet really existed. …In love the same kind of thing occurs” (i. 17; emphasis in original). This explains why lovers and theatergoers are both so attuned to the physical presence of the beloved or of the actors. They are conscious of how much their own imagination contributes to the effect of what they see, but the presence of the other reminds them of how much is also real—not a delusion but an actuality, recognized for what it is but willingly transvalued.
The amorous imagination bestows value upon a person as the dramatic imagination bestows theatrical import upon an actor. If, as sometimes happens, the beloved is put on a pedestal, this is comparable to the actor being put on stage: not necessarily for the purposes of adoration, but in order to concentrate, in the most imaginative way, upon the suggestive reality of her presence.

(i. 19–20)

The analogy helps explain what might seem to be misguided behavior on the part of someone in love. It is as natural and reasonable to feel elation at seeing one’s beloved perform some mundane action as it is to feel grief at seeing the actor who plays Hamlet lying “dead” on the stage. The emotion is not less genuine or meaningful for resulting in large part from an act of the imagination.14

Ronald de Sousa similarly sees theater, and imaginative art more generally, as intimately bound up with love, although his reasoning is quite different. As thinkers at least since Plato have noted, erotic love is rooted in paradox. Love is predicated on a desire for union or possession, which, if actually achieved, would eliminate the desire, and hence the love; as love is supremely pleasurable, however, it constantly resists attaining the ends for which it longs.15 Faced with such a paradox, the mind must resort (p.27) to one of two alternatives: to treat love as a religion, full of unquestionable mysteries (a common response); or more properly, de Sousa says, to treat it as art. Since love “make[s] literally impossible demands, which must drive us either to simple self-deception or to some other, more sophisticated response,” de Sousa suggests that lovers “attempt to apprehend the unattainable realizations symbolized by the impossible demands of romantic love by playing at love—by conscious, mutually consenting representations or simulations of love.”16 Although his phrasing is deliberately provocative, there is nothing cynical in de Sousa’s account, any more than there is in Singer’s or in Ovid’s. To the contrary, the element of theatrical self-consciousness in each case is what distinguishes love from mere delusion.
The best way to gain a perspective on the theories of Ovid and Horace, however, might be to examine works about love and poetry from a period of thought that may be considered to stand at the opposite extreme from theirs. Stendhal’s treatise On Love (De l’amour (1822)), for instance, is an arch-Romantic document that would seem to be fundamentally opposed to the Ars Amatoria. It begins right away by distinguishing true, passionate love (l’amour-passion) from cultivated love (l’amour-goût), which it explicitly deprecates. And it is filled with illustrative stories about people who fall passionately in love across a crowded room in an instant, or fall out of love just as precipitously; who nearly faint in the middle of the street any time something reminds them of a lover; who incontinently kill themselves, or each other, for love.17 “Love is like a fever, which is born and dies in defiance of our will,” Stendhal writes (p. 37). For this reason, anything that smacks of convention or self-consciousness is inimical to it: “Whatever is premeditated or formal in a man’s behavior insults the imagination and banishes the possibility [of love]. Love triumphs instead, in romantic fashion, at first sight” (p. 70).

Yet, having thus abjured artificiality, Stendhal in the very next chapter likewise abjures mere infatuation. The blind ardor of schoolboys, he writes, is as far removed from love as the cautious sentiment of those who have outlived the fire of passion. What is lacking in both cases is the (p.28) due appreciation of one’s own emotions that constitutes love: “At either extreme of life, when there is either too much feeling [sensibilité] or too little, one cannot appreciate things as they really are or experience the true sensation that they ought to give” (p. 73). For love involves not passion alone but an element of self-reflective distance, says Stendhal, such as that produced by modesty, or by doubt. Far from being a primal or universal experience, therefore, “love is a miracle of civilization. Among peoples who are too barbaric or savage one finds only the crudest types of physical love. [But] modesty gives love the assistance of the imagination, and that is what gives it life” (p. 86).

From the outset of his book, Stendhal defines love, not as a simple impulse, but as a complex (if rapid) imaginative process, which he calls “crystallization.” The most celebrated passage in De l’amour is Stendhal’s initial description or illustration of this key term, in chapter 2:
Leave a lover’s mind to work for twenty-four hours, and this is what you will find:

In the salt mines of Salzburg a tree branch, stripped bare by winter, is thrown into the abandoned depths of the mine. Two or three months later it is retrieved, covered in brilliant crystals; the smallest twigs, those no larger than the claw of a titmouse, are embellished by an infinity of sparkling, ravishing diamonds. The original branch is unrecognizable.

What I am calling crystallization is an operation of the mind, which finds in everything it sees new evidence of the loved object’s perfections.

(pp. 28–9)

Many critics, including very sophisticated ones, treat this passage as if it were Stendhal’s last word on the nature of love.18 “Crystallization” thus comes to seem like a wholly unconscious version of Singer’s “bestowal”: the amorous imagination indiscriminately, almost automatically, endows every trait of the beloved with beauty. But in fact the Salzburg bough represents only what Stendhal calls “first crystallization,” which is merely a step in a continuing process. It is followed before love reaches its final form by two further stages: doubt (the lover wonders whether the love is reciprocated); and “second crystallization,” which like the first is an imaginative act, but which differs in being far more conscious, in every sense. The lover constantly questions his or her own impressions, while simultaneously trying to understand the beloved’s state of mind:

Every quarter of an hour of the night after doubt is born, after a moment of terrible unhappiness, the lover tells himself, “Yes, she does love me,” and crystallization begins discovering charms anew; then doubt with haggard eye seizes him again and stops him cold. He forgets to breathe, asking himself, “But does she love me?”

(p. 31)
It is this combination of imaginative fervor and self-reflective doubt, oscillating between a conscious conviction of one’s own feelings and a questioning of the other’s, “that renders the second crystallization so superior to the first” (p. 31).

For all its celebration of unreflective passion, therefore, *De l’amour* is always attuned to the importance of self-consciousness. The very form of the book reflects this recognition. In one of its prefaces, the last of several that he composed, Stendhal says that the work is the product of pure impulse: each of its chapters, he claims, was written on the spur of the moment, without forethought or subsequent editing, on whatever “scrap of paper” came to hand (p. 18). Yet, shortly after asserting that the book represents his unfiltered jottings, he explains that, while reading his manuscript aloud for the printer to transcribe, he already began to censor certain parts. And the mere fact that this account appears in a preface that was added to the book many years after its original publication necessarily suggests that second thoughts do play a role in the work. This is everywhere borne out in the text—most notably by the numerous footnotes (the whole book is a tissue of self-reflective paratexts), which provide a running commentary on his theories of love from the bottom of the page. These notes just as often serve to question the claims of the main text as to support them, and they often explicitly question the reader’s state of mind as well. Thus no sooner has Stendhal introduced the idea of crystallization than his footnotes begin to cast doubt on it: “I therefore advise the reader who is likely to feel shocked by the term *crystallization* to close the book” (p. 33n). He continues to use the word nonetheless, only to second-guess it again in a note a few chapters later: “I am being advised to drop this word, or…to offer frequent reminders of [what] I mean by it” (p. 59n).
De l’amour is an ecstatic book: effusive, unabashed, exhibiting all the leaps and discontinuities of impassioned speech. But it is also constantly and explicitly aware both of its own self-presentation and of its effect on the reader. The main text and the footnotes lie across many of the pages (p.30) (especially at the beginning, where the footnotes are longest and most frequent) in two separate layers, like two levels of consciousness. And the main text itself overflows with self-conscious irony. In addition to using patently transparent pseudonyms for himself whenever he recounts what are clearly personal reminiscences, Stendhal also delights in playing Shandean tricks on the reader. In chapter 33, for instance, he repeats his central claim about the indispensability of doubt for second crystallization, and hence for love; in its entirety, the chapter reads as follows:

Always some little doubt to assuage—that is what spurs passionate love [l’amour-passion] to desire at every moment, that is what keeps love vital and happy. Since love can never escape from doubt, its pleasures can never grow tiresome. Its happiness is characterized by extreme earnestness.

(p. 120)

Yet our perspective changes, and that “earnestness” is called into question, by a later chapter, where Stendhal writes:

I borrowed chapter 33 from a letter by a woman of great wit:

“Always some little doubt to assuage—that is what spurs passionate love to desire at every moment...Since love can never escape from doubt, its pleasures can never grow tiresome.”

( pp. 144–5)

Just as Phebe’s revelation about the spontaneous nature of love turns out, in the context of the full couplet, to be a piece of inherited wisdom, so Stendhal’s epigram about the doubtful fluctuations of love is revealed, even more appropriately, to have come from outside. The antiphony of the two passages in De l’amour imitates the dialogue of the mind with itself, as well as with the imagined other, that characterizes Stendhalian love.
It is hard to imagine a more characteristically Romantic treatment of love than Stendhal’s. Yet both in its explicit definitions and through its metatextual ironies, *De l’amour* presents love not only as passion but as an eminently self-conscious phenomenon, a second-order act of the imagination reflecting on itself. A similar duality appears in major Romantic treatises about poetry. One of the best-known definitions of poetry from the period is given by John Stuart Mill, who in an 1833 essay declares the characteristic feature of true poetry to be its total freedom from any trace of self-consciousness. This is what distinguishes poetry from a closely allied form of impassioned speech, eloquence:

[E]loquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of (p.31) solitude...Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy.19

Mill’s definition of poetry seems to read like a direct rebuttal of Horace’s description in *The Art of Poetry*, with its premeditation, its deliberation, and its constant awareness of the expectations of the audience.

It is important to recognize the fundamental differences that do indeed exist between Horace’s conception of poetry and that of Mill, who cherishes the Romantic ideals of organic form and lyric spontaneity. (“What is poetry, but the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself?” Mill asks (p. 356).) Yet the opposition is not so stark as this one selection from Mill’s essay might suggest. Immediately after the famous passage above, Mill concedes that most poetry is not, of course, overheard by accident. To the contrary, poets tend to publish their poems—and to write them in the first place—specifically in order to be read and heard by others. But Mill answers this objection by drawing a parallel to theater: what is required of a poet, he says, is not really the total unselfconsciousness of solitary effusion, but a convincing simulacrum thereof:
What we have said to ourselves, we may tell to others afterwards; what we have said or done in solitude, we may voluntarily reproduce when we know that other eyes are upon us. But no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself. The actor knows that there is an audience present; but if he act as though he knew it, he acts ill.

(p. 349)

This qualification is more rarely quoted, but it makes all the difference. Put this way, Mill’s definition of poetry does not seem to differ so significantly from that of Horace, who also recommends giving the appearance of spontaneous emotion, finding it more effective than the purple patches of practiced rhetoric: “If you wish me to weep, you must first weep yourself” (Ars Poetica, ll. 102–3). Mill’s allusion to theater, meanwhile, together with his concession that the poet may, and in fact must, “reproduce” private feelings in public, but will only succeed if he “can express his emotions exactly as he felt them in solitude” (p. 349), is even more reminiscent of Ovid, who on several occasions notes that, while it is often necessary to perform one’s passion, any appearance of performing it is disastrously counter-effective.

(p.32) Mill’s description of a two-step process—an effusion of passionate feeling, followed by a close reproduction and translation of it into poetry—owes much to his great Romantic predecessor, William Wordsworth, who in his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800) defines poetry in very similar terms. Like Mill’s, Wordsworth’s definition is given in two distinct stages that mimic the two-part process he delineates. Early in the preface Wordsworth writes that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Later, however, he returns to this claim and refines it; poetry is produced not spontaneously by feeling alone, but by a combination of feeling and subsequent reflection:

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.
Yet although Wordsworth deeply influenced Mill’s thinking on poetry, as this passage shows, Mill distances himself from Wordsworth’s theory and practice in the second half of his essay. Wordsworth’s poetry, he asserts, though supreme of its kind, belongs to the lesser of two types, the “poetry of culture” (Mill, p. 358). In such poems, Mill says, the feeling remains subordinate to the thought—or, to use Wordsworth’s terms, the emotion to the tranquil recollection. Mill sets in contrast to Wordsworth his younger contemporary, Percy Shelley, as an exemplar of the higher type, “the poet of nature” (p. 356). Shelley, Mill claims, writes spontaneously and impulsively, expressing pure passion even at the expense of coherent thought. His lyrical poems “are obviously written to exhale, perhaps to relieve, a state of feeling...The thoughts and imagery are suggested by the feeling, and are such as it finds unsought” (p. 360). Despite his earlier admission that poetry is in fact produced voluntarily, Mill thus returns to his initial image of the poet as rapt, unconscious oracle.

(p.33) If we turn to Shelley’s own treatise, A Defence of Poetry (1821; pub. 1840), however, we find a more complex account of poetic self-expression. A number of passages in the Defence do closely prefigure Mill’s description of poetry (in opposition to eloquence) as “feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.”23 In Shelley’s essay, as in Mill’s, the poet is said to be unconscious of his own words and especially of their effect on others: “A Poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.”24 This idea is reiterated in the treatise’s resounding final sentences:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration...the words which express what they understand not, the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.

(p. 535)
Shelley here repeats, with variations, the common Romantic trope according to which the poet is pictured as an “aeolian harp” or wind chime, producing music involuntarily and unconsciously when stirred by the breeze of inspiration.

Yet this concluding cluster of images is complicated by several key passages that directly challenge the idea that poetry is produced without conscious effort or mediation. In the second paragraph of the *Defence*, Shelley introduces the metaphor of the aeolian harp only to deny its accuracy:

Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Æolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony...It is as if the lyre could accommodate its chords to the motions of that which strikes them, in a determined proportion of sound; even as the musician can accommodate his voice to the sound of the lyre.

(p. 511)
Poetry is not melody produced by a random force, as the well-worn trope suggests, but harmony produced by a sentient being. Shelley therefore proposes his own metaphor to describe a process of poetic creation that, once again, involves two distinct stages. The breeze of inspiration, Shelley writes, does indeed come to the poet unsolicited; the poet’s mind responds, however, not like a “lyre,” but like a smoldering ember that leaps momentarily into flame: “the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness” (p. 531). Because inspiration is so fleeting, however, the flame dies down before it can be consciously apprehended, and, “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline” (p. 531). The poet’s work, therefore, is to strive to recapture and translate the original flash of insight before it is lost forever; and, although “the finest passages of poetry are [never] produced by labour and study” alone, nevertheless inspiration must always be complemented by conscious exertion (p. 531). Shelley therefore finds himself, perhaps surprisingly, justifying Horace’s assertion that poets require effort and time to turn moments of insight into poetry: “The toil and the delay recommended by critics can justly be interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connexion of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions” (p. 532). Shelley’s “careful observation of the inspired moments” recalls Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquillity,” while looking forward to Mill’s claim that poets “voluntarily reproduce” before a public what they have felt in solitude. Like his fellow Romantics, Shelley recognizes the centrality of self-consciousness (even down to the use of “artificial” means and “conventional expressions”) to the creation of poetry.
A few years before composing *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley wrote a much briefer, fragmentary essay “On Love” (1818; pub. 1828) that foreshadows many of the notions in the later treatise. According to Shelley, love, like poetry, begins with the careful observation of an ideal image within the mind—not a flash of poetic inspiration, in this case, but a preconception of the person we can love. “We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are (p.35) capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.”

Just as the poet strives to realize his or her ideal conception in words, so the lover constantly and consciously seeks the manifestation of the beloved image in another human being. Love culminates in the recognition of someone corresponding to this “ideal prototype”:

> The discovery of its antitype: the meeting with [one]... whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own; and of a combination of all these in such proportion as the type within demands: this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules.

The lover and the poet are not identical in Shelley’s description, just as his use of the lyre image is not identical in each case, but they are closely allied. Both try to locate in physical reality the closest possible resemblance to a pre-existing conceptual ideal. Love and poetry are thus always iterative—variations on something already known. A poet may be inspired and wholly original, but his or her poetic creations will still be *re*-creations; a person may fall in love only once, and at first sight, yet the love will still take the form of *re*-cognition. Such is the experience of Phebe in *As You Like It*, whose sudden love expresses itself as both a pristine emotion and a cognitive recursion.
Shelley’s model is not Shakespeare, however, but Plato. Shelley writes in the *Defence*, “Love...found a worthy poet in Plato alone of all the an[c]ients” (*Defence*, p. 526); the essay “On Love” was drafted immediately after Shelley finished translating Plato’s *Symposium* into English. The *Symposium* and Plato’s other main dialogue on love, the *Phaedrus*, are the two most prominent and extended ancient Greek treatments of the subject. Both works describe love as depending intrinsically on the recognition of something formerly known. This occurs most famously in Aristophanes’ speech in the *Symposium*, an imaginative fable describing the origins of love. Aristophanes explains that human beings were originally (p.36) double—two heads, four arms, four legs—until they were split in half by an angry Zeus. Since then we are driven by the need to find our long-lost other half; “love” is our name for the thrill of recognition that occurs when we do: “And so, when a person meets the half that is his very own...then something wonderful happens: the two are struck from their senses by love, by a sense of belonging to one another.” The same idea, in different form, underlies Socrates’ own subsequent contribution to the debate about the nature of love. Using as his mouthpiece a wise woman named Diotima, Socrates agrees that love springs from a recognition of the beloved—not as a portion of oneself, as Aristophanes had suggested, but as a version or vessel of the absolute form of Beauty.
Socrates’ idea, set forth rather briefly in the Symposium, is greatly expanded in the Phaedrus, which follows the Symposium in Renaissance editions. Speaking this time in his own voice, Socrates offers a long speech that essentially combines those of Aristophanes and Diotima: it is an etiological narrative, but one that centers on absolute forms, notably Beauty. To understand the frenzy and madness of love, Socrates tells Phaedrus, we must know the history of the soul. He therefore explains that all souls originally dwelt in heaven with the gods. From the highest rim of heaven, they looked out onto that which “really is what it is”—the realm of transcendent, unchangeable forms. Only the gods, however, could stay in heaven forever. All souls marked by any sort of imbalance or imperfection, by contrast, eventually lost their wings and fell to earth, to be born into mortal beings. One of these dwells inside each of us, and we fall in love when our soul recognizes in another a resemblance to one of the heavenly forms. Thus a man who falls in love with a beautiful boy is “struck by the boy’s face as if by a bolt of lightning,” because, when he sees it, “his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty, and he sees it again where it stands [in heaven] on the sacred pedestal” (p. 119 (254b)). The lover’s soul then immediately begins to sprout again the wings it lost when it fell from heaven, a process Socrates describes as a type of erotic anguish. When a man “sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time”; then “his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, (p.37) because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings” (pp. 115–16 (251a–b)). Love consists in a constant oscillation between pain, on the one hand—the pain of new growth and of the consciousness of separation—and the pleasure of recognition and remembered wholeness, on the other. When the beloved is absent:

Then the stump of each feather is blocked in its desire and it throbs like a pulsing artery while the feather pricks at its passageway, with the result that the whole soul is stung all around, and the pain simply drives it wild—but then, when it remembers the boy in his beauty, it recovers its joy.

(p. 116 (251d))
“From the outlandish mix of these two feelings—pain and joy” comes the sweet madness of love (p. 116 (251d)).

The description of love given in the *Phaedrus* can be viewed as the archetype for all those that have followed. Some thinkers have followed Plato’s theory of love-as-recognition very closely: Shelley, for instance; or Freud, who in various essays offers much the same account, only replacing the Platonic Beauty known in heaven with the figure of the mother known in infancy. But Plato provides a precedent likewise for those theorists of love who do not emphasize recognition—like Ovid, Stendhal, and many others—because his model is fundamentally dialectic. Love, says Socrates, is “a bolt of lightning”: instantaneous, unreflecting, unexpected. Yet Socrates is obliged to give his description of love in the form of a narrative, because love also forms part of an extended process, beginning at the very dawn of the soul and depending, even at the instant of falling in love, on the recognition of forms known in the distant past. (The process is also ongoing: love-at-first-sight is not the end any more than it is the beginning (p.38) of the story, which ideally continues, Socrates says, through multiple lifetimes and thousands of years before reaching its consummation.) Love is thus both surprising and familiar, singular and universal, introspective and interpersonal. The balance or emphasis may shift from thinker to thinker, but the duality remains.
More obliquely, the *Phaedrus* can also be considered a model for subsequent theories of poetry. Socrates draws a direct parallel between love and poetry relatively early in the discussion, reminding Phaedrus that both are types of wisdom that take the form of divine madness. But the more significant connection between love and poetry emerges more gradually in the second half of the dialogue. The *Phaedrus* falls into two distinct parts: midway through, the focus of discussion switches from love to rhetoric and language.

Socrates explains to Phaedrus that rhetoric, like love, is able to offer access to eternal truths, but only dialectically. Just as lover and beloved require one another to attain a perception of Beauty that neither could achieve on his own, so wisdom can be attained only through dialogue between two people, each of them consciously responding to the other. For this reason Socrates ultimately, and startlingly, rejects written language altogether. Near the end of the dialogue he categorically denies that any truth can be communicated through the unresponsive medium of writing, favoring instead “the living, breathing discourse” of conversation (p. 148 (275d–276a)).
Clearly this assertion leaves the reader faced with a conundrum—a version of the classic paradox of the Cretan liar. We are told that writing cannot communicate a philosophical truth, but we are told so in a written \( \text{(p.39)} \) work. This paradox is no mere intellectual joke but a key to understanding, not just the \textit{Phaedrus}, but the Platonic dialogue as a form. All of Plato’s works maintain a dual consciousness. The words seem to come from Socrates, who produces them on the spot in response to an interlocutor; but they actually come from Plato, who consciously records, arranges, and even fabricates them after the fact. Socrates is the nightingale, inspired by the presence of Phaedrus, by Phaedrus’ own excitement concerning questions of love and language and the relation between them, by the beauty of his immediate surroundings—all of which are described in detail—to pour forth speech without any thought beyond the occasion. Plato is the tranquil recollector, who reconstructs the moment of philosophical transport for posterity. At the end of the \textit{Phaedrus}, when Socrates denounces writing, Plato reveals this double voice more clearly than anywhere else, and so confronts directly a question implicitly raised by all his dialogues. It is the same question addressed by the Sidney sonnet discussed in the Introduction: why are these words being set forth in public form, when the very act of doing so seems directly at odds with the spirit of those words?
Plato’s response is the same as Sidney’s. Since the writing-down of philosophical dialogue, like the articulation of feelings of love, is counter-effective yet indispensable (for the progress of philosophical thought, or of love), the solution is to produce a form of writing that acknowledges the irony at every turn. Hence the *Phaedrus* is as self-conscious a text as Sidney’s sonnets, or as Stendhal’s treatise on love. It is only superficially true to say (as was said above) that Socrates’ speech on the origins of love in the *Phaedrus* is spoken in his own voice. In the first place, the speech remains as always a re-creation of Plato’s, a fact of which the reader is forcibly reminded by the metatextual paradox at the end. Even within the fiction of the dialogue, moreover, the words are not presented as direct self-expression. Socrates does not deliver the speech to Phaedrus as representing his own thoughts but merely offers it as an example of what he would say if making a speech to a hypothetical auditor. In place of a direct truth-claim, the *Phaedrus* thus gives only a chain of nested fictions: Plato (p.40) presents words that Socrates may have spoken, which include a speech that Socrates claims he might give—which itself depends on an extended metaphor or fable, an account not of “what the soul actually is” (since that is “a task for a god”) but of “what it is like” (p. 110 (246a)).

Socrates rejects writing; Plato implicitly embraces it as the flawed but necessary medium for preserving the transient gusts of divine inspiration provided by philosophical dialogue. This explains why Shelley in the *Defence* asserts that “Plato was essentially a poet” (*Defence*, 514): a work like the *Phaedrus* exhibits the double movement that Shelley (under Plato’s influence) considers definitive of poetry. At the same time, the multiple levels of consciousness that make up Plato’s dialogue also echo Socrates’ description of love—love as a mixture of momentary madness and extended self-awareness, being “driven out of [one’s] mind” and looking deeply within it. Hence Anne Carson’s claim that the form of the *Phaedrus* renders it not only a poetic text but an erotic one:
The *Phaedrus* is a written dialogue that ends by discrediting written dialogues. This fact does not cease to charm its readers. Indeed, it is the fundamental erotic feature of this *erôtikos logos* [erotic discourse]. Each time you read it, you are conducted to a place where something paradoxical happens: the knowledge of Eros that Sokrates and Phaedrus have been unfolding word by word through the written text simply steps into a blind point and vanishes, pulling the *logos* in after it.  

Love, as Plato, Carson, and so many others affirm, is paradoxical: conscious and unconscious, ever thirstily pursuing an end that it hopes, and knows, it will never attain. When love grasps for language, it naturally reaches for the language that displays the same paradox, aspiring higher than any other form of linguistic expression while also remaining more conscious of its own limitations. That is the form that writers across the ages have concurred in calling poetry.

The paradoxical duality of Plato’s dialogue resembles the dialectic that is both exhibited and described in all the works we have considered. The terms shift from Horace to Ovid and beyond: originality and convention; nature and culture; surprise and recognition; transport and self-consciousness. But the interplay between the two terms remains the definitive feature of both poetry and love. Poetry is inherently erotic: the effect it produces resembles that of love. When poetry directly addresses itself to love, it gives the additional pleasure of fulfilling the function to which it is most perfectly suited.

To exemplify how these theories, and the congruences between them, help illuminate the erotic nature of poetry, consider “To Jane” (1822; pub. 1832), one of Percy Shelley’s last lyrics:

```
The keen stars were twinkling
And the fair moon was rising among them,
Dear Jane.
The guitar was tinkling,
But the notes were not sweet ’till you sung them
Again.—
As the moon’s soft splendour
O’er the faint cold starlight of Heaven
Is thrown—
So your voice most tender
To the strings without soul had then given
```
Its own.
The stars will awaken,
Though the moon sleep a full hour later,
Tonight;
No leaf will be shaken
While the dews of your melody scatter
Delight.
Though the sound overpowers
Sing again, with your dear voice revealing
A tone
Of some world far from ours,
Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.\textsuperscript{38}

Most readers would agree that this is a love poem, perhaps even that it is a particularly seductive one. Yet the poem never mentions love, and has scarcely more to say about desire, aside from the concluding request for a musical encore. The paraphrasable meaning of the lyric suggests rather an expression of personal and aesthetic admiration, or what Singer calls “appraisal.” What is the source, then, of the poem’s undeniable erotic power?
There are some obvious elements that create an erotic undertone. Music and moonlight, particularly in conjunction, carry strong cultural associations, calling up images of serenade that date back at least to the troubadours. Similarly, the words fair, sweet, soft, faint, tender, sleep are all familiar from other love poems and so serve as metonyms for romance. Moreover, the direct address of “Dear Jane” establishes the second-person intimacy that is peculiar to letters and lyrics and makes them such suitable vehicles for expressions of love. Yet the resonant language and the epistolary salutation would not by themselves suffice to make this such an erotic poem. The effect depends on other, more subtle, elements, including first and perhaps most notably the stanza form. The stanza immediately reinforces the intimacy of the direct address by its singularity: this is no conventional stanza but a highly irregular nonce formation, invented just for this occasion and therefore having all the force of the personal and unexpected. At the same time, however, the stanza, by definition, repeats. The form is thus irregular and regular at once; the initial odd mixture of line lengths, juxtaposing effusive description and abrupt exclamation (“Dear Jane”), is revealed to be part of a consciously constructed pattern—yet without losing its original effect. As the form repeats, surprise and immediacy are increasingly complemented by a sense of expectation, of recognition, and finally of inevitability.
Conscious repetition is the keynote of “To Jane.” The poem describes or suggests four communicative acts, each responding to the previous one, and each more deliberate than the last. The first is the sound of the guitar, which seems to play agentlessly (“The guitar was tinkling”). The tune is then repeated (“sung...Again”) by Jane, and this second iteration, the translation of mere “notes” into human “voice,” is what gives the melody a “soul.” The poem itself represents the next stage, responding to Jane’s song as her song had responded to the instrument; and, just as her voice conveyed a greater sense of personality than the guitar’s tinkling notes, so the speaker adds a new layer of conscious articulation. Nothing is said of the words of Jane’s song, which may even have been wordless, but the poem is explicitly intimate, naming its addressee and replying voice to voice. In Stendhalian fashion, however, the speaker seems to doubt the efficacy of his own expressions and asks for a sign in return, an unmistakable response to his response: “Sing again.” Each repetition thus represents an increasing level of consciousness, moving from the almost aeolian sounds of the guitar to the intimate responsiveness of participatory dialogue.
Yet this apparent progression toward an ever more explicit understanding is challenged and complicated by the third stanza, which breaks the pattern set by the others. The opening stanzas present the same material in two different forms. The first offers a parallel: the moon shone out among the twinkling stars; your voice sang out among the tinkling notes of the guitar. The second stanza then offers a simile, making explicit what was implied in the first: “As the moon” enriches the starlight, “So your voice” gave soul to the strings. From here the fourth stanza would follow logically: though your voice (like the moon) may “overpower” lesser beauties, yet sing again. The third stanza, by contrast, does not fit either logically or imagistically; the poem would be tighter if it simply omitted the anomalous lines. But it would be far less erotic. Stanza 3 is crucial to the lyric’s effect because it reintroduces the characteristic element of unexpectedness—the illogical leap, the doubtful image that will intrude in spite of all the lover’s, and the poet’s, conscious care and study. From the explicitness of simile in stanza 2 (“As...So”), we turn in stanza 3 to the vaguer suggestiveness of metaphor. Indeed, two different metaphors are introduced (the stars “awakening,” the “dews of melody” scattering), both of them new, unprepared for, apparently unconnected to anything else in the poem. The third stanza thus interrupts the syllogistic logic of the rest, gratuitously prolonging the poem, luxuriating in sounds and images for their own sake, without regard to strict sense or purpose. These lines deliver the familiar thrill of mutual understanding, because they implicitly trust the addressee (and the reader) to share the speaker’s appreciative “Delight” in forms of expression—Jane’s song; the poem’s wayward imagery—that fall beyond the scope of everyday, rational discourse. Hence this stanza, like the previous ones, relies on consciousness, but of a different sort: not the express agreement of dialogue, but the unspoken sympathy of shared enjoyment.

The most seductive part of all, however, is the conclusion. The final stanza begins by returning to the singularity of the beginning, an exceptional “voice” that “overpowers” everything else. Yet this gives way in the last three lines to an image of perfect union and non-differentiation:

Though the sound overpowers
Sing again, with your dear voice revealing
A tone
Of some world far from ours,
Where music and moonlight and feeling
Are one.

In the closing lines “your” becomes “ours,” and Jane’s distinctive “tone,” together with both the tenor (“music”) and vehicle (“moonlight”) of the poem’s earlier simile, are all mingled into “one.” The sense of fulfilment is reinforced by the form, as the long penultimate line, with its feminine rhyme, finds closure in the pithy simplicity of the two final syllables. (The same resolution occurs in all four stanzas, but here is strengthened by the expectation that builds from stanza to stanza, as well as by the particular aptness of this instance, in which three subjects spread over three beats are counterbalanced by the single-beat predicate “Are one.”) The stanza manages to describe feelings and ideals that remain ineffable (“some world”) and out of reach (“far from ours”), yet that nevertheless seem, through the sense of recognition that the poetic structure provides, to have been momentarily realized. The poem is erotic, in short, because of the way it simultaneously fulfills and defies expectation, appearing in the end familiar and ungraspable at once.

Poetry always evokes love, regardless of its content, and this is due less to the arbitrary cultural associations that lyrics, like roses, have accrued than to the intrinsic qualities that love and poetry share. There are many different elements of “To Jane” that suggest the paradoxical dualities of erotic love; other poems exhibit more such features, as later chapters will show. But the two most important—features that are in some degree shared by all poetry—are meter and metaphor.
The erotic effect of meter is perhaps self-evident. Wordsworth, in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, writes that poetry has the advantage over prose of being both more exciting and more reassuring, and that this effect is largely attributable to the “continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement.” Wordsworth’s oxymoronic description of meter—continually impulsive, regularly surprising—nicely encapsulates the contradictions inherent both in love and in poetry, with their characteristic double sense of recognition and defamiliarization. Needless to say, not all poetry is metrical. But the same paradigm of “regular... surprise” applies to a wide range of poetic structures in addition to meter—any of those aspects of poetry that depend on repetition and variation. It could be said that all genres of literature create meaning and interest by setting up patterns of expectation, which are then fulfilled or disappointed in various ways; but poetry exhibits more of those patterns than other genres. The repetition of feet, of line lengths, of initial and terminal sounds, of syntactic structures (to name just a few), all of which is rare or nonexistent in prose, is common in verse, and each additional pattern creates further potential for pleasure. By “meter,” therefore, I mean, not just the interplay of metrical pattern and rhythmic variation, but all those formal features of poetry for which it serves as a model and which similarly evoke the familiar paradoxes of love.

(p.45) The erotic valence of metaphor may be less immediately apparent, but it too follows naturally from all that has been said. Wordsworth, for instance, concludes his discussion of the “pleasurable surprise” of meter by articulating a basic principle “upon which the pleasure received from metrical language depends”:

I mean the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it take their origin...and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude, and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and our moral feelings.
“Similitude in dissimilitude” pithily describes not only the mixture of repetition and exception that defines meter but also the various other dichotomies (of convention and originality, consciousness and transport, recognition and novelty) that characterize poetry. At the most literal level, however, “the perception of similitude in dissimilitude” refers specifically to the power of metaphor, which critics since Aristotle have seen as central to poetic endeavor. Wordsworth’s phrase translates almost exactly Aristotle’s definition of metaphor in the *Rhetoric* as a perception of “similarity even in things very dissimilar.” Aristotle repeats nearly the same definition in the *Poetics*, where he also explains that “to use metaphor well” is “by far the most important” skill a poet can possess. Again, as with formal patterning, metaphor is a feature of all types of literature, not just poetry. But poetic discourse has always been distinguished from others by its greater use of metaphor, in the broad sense (given by Aristotle) of the application of familiar words to unfamiliar referents. Hence Shelley’s assertion that the “language [of poetry] is vitally metaphorical...it marks the before unapprehended relations of things” (*Defence*, 512).
If metaphorical thinking is essential to poetry, however, it is equally essential to love. So Wordsworth postulates when he writes that it is from our perception of similarity and difference that “the direction of the sexual appetite, and all the passions connected with it take their origin.” One’s beloved, in other words, both resembles oneself and does not, and both qualities are crucial to erotic attraction, just as both are necessary to metaphor. Wordsworth’s formulation emphasizes the similarity and difference that exist between the two lovers; but this is only one aspect of the link between love and metaphor. The model of love in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, for instance, is based on a comparison, not between the beloved and the lover, but between the beloved and a conceptual ideal: it is when the lover detects his beloved’s similarity to absolute Beauty that the thunderbolt falls. As Julia Kristeva writes, Plato’s insistence in the *Phaedrus* on the erotic importance of drawing comparisons “has the advantage, at the very dawn of Greek thought, of placing love in concert with image-making, resemblance, homologation”; in return, “philosophical thought on metaphor is rooted, with Plato, in a reflection on love.” Subsequent theories of love that depend, like Plato’s, on recognition share the same emphasis on metaphor. Thus Shelley, just as he claims that poetry is “vitaly metaphorical,” writes that love too “thirsts after…likeness.”
The act of comparison, in fact, pervades every aspect of love. Rivalry, for instance, which in some form (jealousy, triangulation) has often been described as inalienable from and even definitive of erotic love, provokes the jealous lover to self-comparisons with the rival. And even the beloved (p. 47) is necessarily subject to comparisons. This last idea tends to make philosophers of love uneasy, since it seems to put love uncomfortably close to “appraisal”—a mere evaluation of comparative advantages and benefits. As Troy Jollimore writes, “the lover…who is constantly asking whether her beloved is the funniest, the prettiest, or physically the strongest of the persons in her acquaintance, seems not to be a genuine lover at all.” Yet love cannot escape comparison; the very fact of preference implies it. You may love one person absolutely, without regard to how his or her individual qualities compare to someone else’s. Yet to love a particular person in a world that contains others is necessarily to be conscious that this one seems (at the very least) more lovable or desirable than the others do.

Poets are far less squeamish than philosophers on this point; it is a commonplace of love poetry to compare the beloved to others. To take just one example, from Sir Henry Wotton’s “Elizabeth of Bohemia” (c.1620):

You meaner beauties of the night,
    That poorly satisfy our eyes
More by your number than your light,
    You common people of the skies;
What are you when the moon shall rise?
These lines introduce a complex web of comparisons. The moon is compared to the stars and found to be fairer—just as, in the next two stanzas, the nightingale is declared to be superior to other songbirds and the rose to other flowers. At the same time, the speaker’s beloved is implicitly being compared to the moon (and the nightingale and the rose), a comparison that is made explicit in the fourth and final stanza: “So, when my mistres shall be seen...”; by extension, then, the beloved is being compared and preferred to all other women. The different metaphors that make up each stanza of Wotton’s poem are not mere incidental adornments, therefore, but are essential to the subject. The love being expressed, the speaker’s sense that his “mistress” is, at least to him, superior to everyone else, begets all the other comparisons. This helps explain why metaphors are so prevalent in love poems, even more than in other types of poetry. In Shelley’s “To Jane,” for instance, unlike in (p.48) Wotton’s poem, the speaker’s beloved is never explicitly compared to other women or men. Yet the metaphors that cluster around Jane—including the one comparing her, as in Wotton, to a moon shining among the stars—all grow out of the essentially comparative nature of passionate, exclusive love.
Lovers may dream of inhabiting a world unto themselves, but they are forced by reality to acknowledge and accommodate themselves to the presence of other people and other things. Some form of comparison is thus inevitable, just as self-consciousness is inevitable. As Francis Landy writes, “lovers can communicate only through the world, through metaphor”; hence the reliance on poetry, the most metaphorical of genres, to express or represent love. Landy is writing specifically in reference to the Song of Songs, a work in which metaphor figures with particular prominence. But other love poems show the same tendency: to the question posed by Shakespeare in sonnet 18—“Shall I compare?”—the answer, more often than not, is yes. Shakespeare’s sonnets themselves are a case in point, since they are brimming with comparisons. The speaker offers endless similes both for the beloved and for himself; he also compares himself to rival poets, as well as to rival lovers. At the most basic level, however, his sonnets are vitally metaphorical in that almost every line is thickly textured with figurative language—and this, together with the equally dense formal patterning, gives an erotic charge even to those sonnets that do not mention rivalry, or the beloved, or even love in any way. Shakespeare’s sonnets, in other words, are particularly rich in both meter and metaphor, and they therefore do in more extreme form what all poems do. They give the reader a perception of simultaneous similarity and difference, of recognition and surprise at once—the same feeling experienced by Phebe in As You Like It. This is the experience that draws love and poetry together.

Notes:


Greek lyric poets from Sappho onwards, as well as the Roman amatory poets starting with Catullus and including Ovid himself in his earlier collection the *Amores*, tend to treat *eros* or *amor* as a form of madness, an irresistible and often malevolent force.

Perhaps surprisingly, love and desire in the *Ars Amatoria* are always cast in heterosexual terms; homosexual attraction is summarily dismissed (1.524).


Ovid says at one point that it is allowable for a man to use force if a woman denies him further favors (1.673). Yet more typical is the passage at the end of book 2, where Ovid declares that full sexual pleasure (*plena voluptas*) is achieved not only when both partners consent but when they climax together (2.727).


Singer concedes that “the analogy between love and the theater can also be misleading”: the lover uses imagination in order more fully to appreciate the beloved as he or she is, whereas a theatergoer uses imagination to see through the actor to the fictional character (i. 20). There is also a notable difference between the degree of will involved in each imaginative act. One does not decide to fall in love with someone, the way one decides to go to the theater; the impulse is usually involuntary and unconscious. What is conscious in love (and what distinguishes it from delusion), however, is the recognition that others will not value the beloved to the same extent, and the willingness to continue to bestow value in full light of that recognition.

Eros the BittersweetLove is the acute consciousness of the impossibility of possessionRonald de Sousa, “Love as Theater,” in Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (eds), The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 477–91,


De l’amour, ed. Patrick Poivre d’Arvor (Chaintreaux: Editions France-Empire Monde, 2009), 111–12


Ovid advises men to flatter their lovers, but warns them: “Only make sure that your words do not make you seem insincere...Art avails if hidden, but brings shame if detected” (Ars Amatoria 2.311–13). At the very end of the poem Ovid offers women even more explicit advice: if you do not achieve orgasm during sex, fake a passionate response anyway, but “Just beware lest you be detected when you pretend” (3.801).

Wordsworth, “Preface,” 266.

Given the delay in publication of the Defence, Mill is highly unlikely to have known it when writing his own essay in 1833; the similarities are attributable not to direct influence but to a shared ideology. The same is true of Stendhal’s De l’amour, written at almost exactly the same time as Shelley’s Defence. Just as Stendhal begins by defining “passionate love” in opposition to self-conscious, “cultivated love,” but then calls his own definition into question, so Shelley opens the Defence by drawing a strict division between imagination (including poetry) and reason, only to blur the distinction subsequently.


Apparantly dissatisfied with “On Love,” Shelley abandoned it and immediately began writing a longer (though also fragmentary) essay entitled “A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love,” which he seems to have intended as an introduction to his translation. Though interesting in its own right, the “Discourse” has little to say about Plato or even about the nature of love; it is mostly concerned to explain why the Greeks chose young men as objects of their love and spends much time wrestling uncomfortably with the question of their actual sexual practices.


Plato, Phaedrus, in Plato on Love, 88–153, p. 112 (247c); hereafter cited parenthetically.
(31) Socrates’ imagery closely recalls Sappho’s famous description of the effects of love; in Anne Carson’s translation: “when I look at you, a moment, then...| fire is racing under skin | and in eyes no sight and drumming | fills ears | and cold sweat holds me and shaking | grips me all” (fr. 31, ll. 7–14; see Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 13).

(32) See “A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men” (1910) and “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” (1912), which recall Plato in describing the act of falling in love, not as an isolated occurrence, but as part of an ongoing narrative. Both essays focus largely, though not exclusively, on sexual desire; by contrast, “On Narcissism: An Introduction” offers a broader consideration of erotic attraction. In “On Narcissism” Freud identifies two objects of infant attachment, the self as well as the mother. These lead in later life to two distinct forms of love, narcissistic and “anaclitic,” but both forms involve a love object reminiscent of the primal one. The conclusion of Freud’s essay uncannily resembles Shelley’s passage about love’s “ideal prototype”; the love object, Freud writes, will often be one that resembles an idealized version of the self: “a person will love in conformity with the narcissistic type of object-choice...what possesses the excellences which he never had” (Freud, Complete Psychological Works, xiv. 101).

(33) See Plato on Love, 113–14, 121 (Phaedrus 248c–249a, 256a–b). The practice of love during this time also takes the form of a Platonic dialectic: the conscious, rational part of the soul constantly struggles to control the impulses of desire—an effort that (in a foreshadowing of the opening of Ovid’s Ars Amatoria) Socrates compares to that of a charioteer curbing his horses (p. 110 [246b], and passim).

It should be noted that the Socratic method (elenchos) that Socrates both employs and recommends is itself inherently erotic. Socrates, like Homer in Horace’s description, presents wisdom “as if it were already known.” The pleasure for the interlocutor lies in the recognition that he already possesses the knowledge that he is apparently being taught—that he and Socrates are actually of the same mind. The erotics of the Socratic method is an erotics of consciousness.

The same is true to some extent of all Plato’s dialogues: the form is inherently self-conscious and ironic. Even when the dramatic structure is suspended, and dialogue gives way to a monologic disquisition by Socrates, the effect still depends on the genre; it would not be the same if Socrates himself had written the same words down for dissemination. To take the most obvious example: the parable of the cave (Republic, bk 7) explains that humans approach truth only obliquely, through shadowy imitations. It is crucial that this idea is communicated, not only through the oblique means of allegory, but in a speech that Socrates apparently re-created for listeners the next day, and that was then subsequently re-created at a third remove by Plato.

Carson, Eros the Bittersweet, 166. The Greek phrase comes from the beginning of the dialogue (227c). See also the whole of Carson’s treatment of the Phaedrus (Eros the Bittersweet, 123–67), to which I am indebted.

Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 479. I have slightly adjusted the text found in the Reiman and Fraistat edition, printing it, as many other editions of Shelley do, in four stanzas rather than two.


"Metaphor is the introduction of a word that belongs to something else" (Aristotle, Poetics, 34 (1457b)).

David Punter, Metaphor (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 9


The importance of rivalry or jealousy has been stressed by many different theorists of love and desire. Andreas Capellanus, for instance, whose twelfth-century treatise On Love greatly influenced Stendhal—especially the latter’s claims about the erotic necessity of doubt—states categorically that “true love cannot exist without jealousy” (Andreas Capellanus, On Love, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh (London: Duckworth, 2009), 149). (This statement, pronounced by one participant in an exemplary dialogue, is denied by the second; but the first speaker is eventually vindicated, and the same axiom is repeated elsewhere in the treatise—which, however ironic it may be, was nevertheless widely influential; see the beginning of Chapter 5.) On the importance of triangulation to desire of all types, including erotic desire, see René Girard, Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 1–52.


(53) Shakespeare, sonnet 18, l. 1; *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1846.

(54) Sonnet 130 is an example of a blazon, or part by part metaphorization of the beloved (in this case the female beloved). The speaker offers a form of the same about himself, more hypothetically, in sonnet 29, and in general produces as many metaphors describing himself as describing his beloved. Rival poets are the the subject of sonnets 78–86; the central love triangle is most acutely represented in sonnets 40–2 and 133–4. Note that the Song of Songs, which forms one of the main subjects of Chapter 2, also exhibits these same features, including a prototypical form of the blazon. A verse such as "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, | So is my beloved among young men" (Song of Songs, 2:3) displays in miniature the multiple forms of comparison found in Wotton’s poem.