

Poison

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In a Paris talk of May 25 1944 (according to an unpublished translation by Lee van Laer) Gurdjieff says “you should poison one another in order to go toward your aspiration.” The translation by Joseph Azize in *Wartime Meetings* is somewhat different but uses the same word “poison.” The French word “poison” can also be translated as “potion,” etymologically “that which is drunk” (Latin *Potare*, to drink; from Proto-Indo-European root *po-* to drink); or possibly “that which has power” (Latin root *pot-*, “power, potency”). Usually said of a medicine, or of a poison. In German *das Gift* means “poison” and has the sense of “that which is given.” Gurdjieff is said to have encouraged people to drink at his table in order to poison the usual “inner considering” that inhibits self-revelation: as is said, alcohol makes people “more so,” brings forth unconscious impulses that are usually masked by inculcated civility.

The word *Symposium* has the same root and means “a gathering for drinking together.” In Plato’s famous Dialog *The Symposium* the topic proposed by Socrates for discussion is *Eros*. This is a reflexive topic, since the Athenian institution of *Symposium* was a kind of party for elite intellectual and literary talk, with drinking, the combination often leading to erotic behavior, both hetero- and homo-. One can see frank depictions of this institution on classic Greek pottery, including the large vases called “Kratēr” in which wine mixed with water was served at Symposia, usually by nubile females who were of course present not just to serve wine.



Socrates raises the stakes to an esoteric level, transforming the Symposium into an encounter with truth, which entails the destruction (poisoning?) of all pre-conceptions. For example, in a scene in *The Symposium* Socrates speaks about love to a youth, who assumes it is a prelude to pederasty—but Socrates admonishes him that it is not that kind of love he is interested in.

Two related questions are asked by Socrates in *The Symposium*: (1) what is Love love of? (2) is love human, or Divine? The second question is essayed in erudite fashion by several guests, but all their answers are trumped by that of Socrates himself, which he puts in the mouth of his (female) wisdom teacher Diotima: Love is neither human nor Divine; it is that which stands between the two, as intermediary.

An answer to the first question is divined by Alfred Geier in *Plato's Erotic Thought: The Tree of the Unknown*. Love is necessarily love of "The Unknown," of what Geier translates as "whatever" (ὅτου). The object of love must remain "the Unknown" or love ceases to be love, becomes something else such as lust. *Pace* Jacques Derrida, one could say that Love is love of the *tout autre*, the wholly other, that which is absolutely other than the self (*The Gift of Death*). There do not exist lines of communication between *self* and this *other*, this Unknown, this object of Love, and any attempt to establish such lines misappropriates the otherness of the other, and breaks love. Or poisons it, converts it into something of aspiration, but not of Reality? Which may not be a bad thing, for us undeveloped beings, for whom aspiration for something we do not understand may be a needed spur for inner work. In other language one might say that the love object lives in the *subconscious*, and possibly could be made *conscious*, but arguably should not be because that would denature its numinous nature.

Is this a possible reading of the scene in Genesis 2:16-17 in which the Serpent entices Eve and Adam to eat of the (poison) apple, thereby plunging them and their descendants into the drama of being human? A drama in which the utter *otherness* of the Divine must coexist with the all-too-human? And can it be the foundation of a reading of the pre-Columbian myth of Quetzal-coatl, in which the Divine (represented by "feathers," Beauty—*Quetzal*) must cohabit with the poisonous serpent—*Coatl*, and in which the semi-divine personage Quetzalcoatl, avatar of this dualistic teaching, betrays his oath not to be poisoned by intoxicating drink or sexuality, as a result of which he becomes apotheosized as the planet Venus, alternately morning star and evening star but never both at the same time, pre-Columbian symbol of the troubled union of these two principles in human existence?