

Ecstatic Religion: Sappho, St. Teresa, and the Evangelicals.

This is an outline for the first day of classes of a humanities course that I provided to a local college. It wasn't what they were looking for. I have provided the texts for this proposal at the end of the course description.

1) The assignment

My first assignment would examine Greek mythology with a focus on religious and philosophical issues and, further, provide an elucidation of these issues in terms of other cultures and our own. I would distribute a handout with brief selections of Sappho's poetry, Plato's Phaedrus and Saint Theresa of Avila's autobiography for class discussion.

I would begin my introduction to classical mythology with the goddess, Aphrodite. Using Sappho's account of her rapture and her prayer to Aphrodite, I would demonstrate how she conceives of love as an overpowering, divinely inspired emotion, that afflicts its victim with desperation verging on madness. Desire is a divine insanity that makes one's world fall apart. One loses the ability to speak, loses control over one's body, and feels more dead than alive. This madness of love is more than simply a personal experience as we moderns would understand it. We don't tend to consider excesses of passion to be encounters with the divine. But

for the Greeks, such emotions involved an encounter between a human being and one of the strongest forces in the universe, the power of the goddess Aphrodite.

I would then proceed to Plato's Phaedrus where the soul is portrayed as a winged being that is afflicted by madness and desire when given a glimpse of divinity or higher beauty. Here, Plato uses mythology to present a picture of divinity and desire similar to Sappho's, but now in a philosophical reference to spiritual growth rather than in poetry which describes the power of a goddess in an encounter with the beloved.

I would follow the classical examples with a brief passage from Saint Theresa of Avila's description of her rapture:

I saw an angel near me, on the left side, in bodily form. This I am not wont to see, save very rarely.... In this vision it pleased the Lord that I should see it thus. He was not tall, but short, marvelously beautiful, with a face which shone as though he were one of the highest of the angels, who seem to be all of fire: they must be those whom we call Seraphim.... I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God. The pain was so great that it caused me to utter several moans; and yet so exceeding sweet is this greatest of pains that it is impossible to desire to be rid of it, or for the soul to be content with less than God. (Autobiography, Ch 29)

In this case we have an vision of divine beauty and longing accompanied by bodily sensation equal in intensity to those found in Sappho and Plato. As in Plato, the focus of this ecstatic experience of the divine is

on spiritual growth, yet the sheer physicality of the description is reminiscent of Sappho. Still, the writings of this Sixteenth Century mystic are relevant to today's world as they are valued by contemporary Catholics who regard Theresa as a saint of their church.

Finally, I would bring the discussion to the present day with an account of the ecstatic experience in contemporary Christianity's Evangelical and Charismatic movements. The majority of mainstream religions are focussed on an individual conscience that should remain at all times in full possession of its faculties. If so, then how does one account for the emergence of popular Charismatic and Evangelical religion in the Twentieth Century where personal identity expands into an ecstatic encounter with the holy spirit? Here people are infused by their God and given the gift of speaking in tongues. This recalls ancient Greek religion where the priestess of Apollo at Delphi was seized by her god who delivered his prophecies through her voice. This final example drawn from contemporary religious movements demonstrates that the phenomena described in Greek myth, religion and philosophy are not confined to ancient and other cultures, but are very much at home in our own world. After this, I would open the discussion by asking the students whether they could come up with similar examples either from their experience or their reading.

t

II) Assignment's place within the total course.

The aim of this presentation is to give the students an introductory sense of the mythological world of the ancient Greeks, and also to suggest that a closer examination of ancient beliefs will reveal something about their own world thus making these beliefs more real to them. I would use this assignment as an in-class exercise during the first meeting in order to elicit and encourage participation. This also sets the tone for subsequent classes in which participation would also be encouraged and expected. The

assignment is also intended as a sample of my teaching style in which I extend the relevance of the study of mythology to contemporary events.

Subsequent discussion would focus on stories about origins of the cosmos from the Classical and other traditions as a further introduction to the subject of mythology, to be followed by discussions of the nature and definitions of myth, examinations of the positions of the gods, heroes and ordinary people, and what myth says about society and the family including discussion of social, political and familial contexts of Greek society.

Such a course could involve anthologies such as Adams' World of Myth and primary texts drawn from diverse genres such as the Odyssey, Hesiod's Theogony, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Plato's use of mythology in dialogues such as the Symposium and dramas such as Aeschylus' Oresteia and Euripides' Bacchae.

III) Method of evaluating student's response to the assignment.

Since one of the purposes of this assignment is to obtain some immediate participation and set the tone for the rest of the course, any responses so elicited would provide immediate material for evaluation. During this initial assignment, I would let the students know that I give credit for participation and that participation is expected. I encourage class discussion in order to get immediate feedback from students, and this method of evaluation would be in play throughout the course.

One of the limitations of class

participation is that in a given class not everyone will participate. In order to get the response of all the students in the class, I would assign brief and informal written homework. This would be done in conjunction with a list of suggested study questions or response topics such as, "Can you think of any further examples of mythological or religious phenomena similar to the ones we've reviewed in class? You may draw your examples from contemporary or ancient sources or events." In past courses, I've posted study questions for class discussion on a web site and handed them out in class. Such an approach keeps students focussed on the themes of class discussion and prepares them for papers and exams.

I would use such study questions with required weekly journals entries written in response to study questions or topics of interest to the students. Preferably, the journal entries could be posted to online bulletin board in order to encourage class discussions and to promote dialogues between students outside of the classroom. Such an approach gives the students an opportunity to respond, amplify, qualify or rebut each other's postings outside of class, making for better participation during class. In courses where essays were assigned, student's were able to develop ideas for their papers through this medium. This bulletin board approach also makes classes more interactive and more personalized, as it allows me to sample students' ideas prior to class meetings and incorporate themes suggested by discussion threads into lectures and class discussions.

Sappho

Prayer to Aphrodite

Shimmering-throned immortal Aphrodite,
 Daughter of Zeus, Enchantress, I implore thee,
 Spare me, O queen, this agony and anguish,
 Crush not my spirit

II

Whenever before thou has hearkened
 to me--
 To my voice calling to thee in the
 distance,
 And heeding, thou hast come,
 leaving thy father's
 Golden dominions,

III

With chariot yoked to thy fleet-
 winged coursers,
 Fluttering swift pinions over earth's
 darkness,
 And bringing thee through the
 infinite, gliding
 Downwards from heaven,

IV

Then, soon they arrived and thou,
 blessed goddess,
 With divine countenance smiling,
 didst ask me
 What new woe had befallen me now
 and why,
 Thus I had called the.

V

What in my mad heart was my
 greatest desire,
 Who was it now that must feel my
 allurements,
 Who was the fair one that must be
 persuaded,
 Who wronged thee Sappho?

VI

For if now she flees, quickly she shall follow
 And if she spurns gifts, soon shall she offer
 them
 Yea, if she knows not love, soon shall she feel it
 Even reluctant.

VII

Come then, I pray, grant me surcease from
 sorrow,
 Drive away care, I beseech thee, O goddess
 Fulfil for me what I yearn to accomplish,
 Be thou my ally.

Rapture

Peer of the gods, the happiest man I see
 Sitting before thee, rapt at thy sight, hearing
 Thy soft laughter and thy voice most gentle,
 Speaking so sweetly.

II

Then in my bosom my heart wildly flutters,
 And, when on thee I gaze never so little,
 Bereft am I of all power of utterance,
 My tongue is useless.

III

There rushes at once through my flesh tingling
 fire,
 My eyes are deprived of all power of vision,
 My ears hear nothing by sounds of winds
 roaring,
 And all is blackness.

III

Down courses in streams the sweat of emotion,
 A dread trembling o'erwhelms me, paler than I
 Than dried grass in autumn, and in my
 madness
 Dead I seem almost.

From Plato's Phaedrus

But he whose initiation is recent, and who has been the spectator of many glories in the other world, is amazed when he sees any one having a godlike face or form, which is the expression of divine beauty; and at first a shudder runs through him, and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved as of a god he reverences him, and if he were not afraid of being thought a downright madman, he would sacrifice to his beloved as to the image of a god; then while he gazes on him there is a sort of reaction, and the shudder passes into an unusual heat and perspiration; for, as he receives the effluence of beauty through the eyes, the [soul's] wing moistens and he warms. And as he warms, the parts out of which the wing grew, and which had been hitherto closed and rigid, and had prevented the wing from shooting forth, are melted, and as nourishment streams upon him, the lower end of the wing begins to swell and grow from the root upwards; and the growth extends under the whole soul--for once the whole was winged.

During this process the whole soul is all in a state of ebullition and effervescence,--which may be compared to the irritation and uneasiness in the gums at the time of cutting teeth,--bubbles up, and has a feeling of uneasiness and tickling; but when in like manner the soul is beginning to grow wings, the beauty of the beloved meets her eye and she receives the sensible warm motion of particles which flow towards her, therefore called emotion (imeros), and is refreshed and warmed by them, and then she ceases from her pain with joy. But when she

is parted from her beloved and her moisture fails, then the orifices of the passage out of which the wing shoots dry up and close, and intercept the germ of the wing; which, being shut up with the emotion, throbbing as with the pulsations of an artery, pricks the aperture which is nearest, until at length the entire soul is pierced and maddened and pained, and at the recollection of beauty is again delighted. And from both of them together the soul is oppressed at the strangeness of her condition, and is in a great strait and excitement, and in her madness can neither sleep by night nor abide in her place by day.

From Saint Teresa of Avila's Autobiography, Ch 29

I saw an angel near me, on the left side, in bodily form. This I am not wont to see, save very rarely.... In this vision it pleased the Lord that I should see it thus. He was not tall, but short, marvelously beautiful, with a face which shone as though he were one of the highest of the angels, who seem to be all of fire: they must be those whom we call Seraphim.... I saw in his hands a long golden spear, and at the point of the iron there seemed to be a little fire. This I thought that he thrust several times into my heart, and that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God. The pain was so great that it caused me to utter several moans; and yet so exceeding sweet is this greatest of pains that it is impossible to desire to be rid of it, or for the soul to be content with less than God.