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## A circle of relatives: How Goethe and Plato portray affinity

**Abstract:** This article advances a philosophical interpretation of Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) by posing the central question: Who are the *affines*? Drawing on the Latin *affinis* or *adfinis* – connoting nearness, relation, and shared boundaries or ends –, the study situates Goethe's novel within what Walter Benjamin famously termed its “mythical world” and seeks to uncover the author's “active ontology”, a concept proposed by later commentators such as Astrida Orle Tantiillo to describe the work's philosophical dimension. The inquiry follows a hermeneutic trajectory that includes a detour through Plato's *Symposium*, focusing on Aristophanes' myth of the primal spherical human beings who, once divided, become *symbola* – tokens or signs of mutual recognition – engaged in the search for *synousia*, or essential togetherness and relatedness. Returning to Goethe's novel, the paper argues that *Elective Affinities* crystallizes the “*Urphänomen*” of affinity, a phenomenon apparently so familiar as to risk being misunderstood. The paper thus seeks to illuminate affinity as a primordial structure of relation, as “conceivably the purest word to characterize the closest human connection”, in Walter Benjamin's formulation.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, tangible cultural heritage, intangible cultural heritage, public good, public appropriation, outstanding universal value, *sensus communis*.

“At the exact moment when Kant's work was completed and a map through the bare woods of reality was sketched, the Goethean quest for the seeds of eternal growth began.”

— Walter Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, as part of an attempt at a philosophical interpretation of Goethe's novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* / *Elective Affinities*, I am raising the question “Who are the *affines*?” (*affinis* being an ancient Latin word coming from *ad-* (up to, toward, around, near, against, until) and *finis* (border, finish, end), a notion that we could nowadays broadly translate by “relatives” or “kindred”). In raising this question, I step into the “mythic world” of Goethe's novel (as Walter Benjamin calls it in his essay on *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*), in search of his “active ontology”, as another one of Goethe's commentators<sup>2</sup> have named the

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author's philosophical approach in this novel. In my hermeneutic journey, I will make a halt at Plato's *Symposium* – more precisely, examining that strange moment of the banquet when the comic playwright Aristophanes, taking the floor and recounting the myth of the first human beings who were tragically torn in two by the very gods who had created them as spherical wholes, describes those original men as having become “*symbola* to one another” – “signs” of mutual recognition thrown towards one another in search for the *syn-*, for the *synousia*, for the being-together and the togetherness.

As for Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, we could go back to it as to one of those moments of grace in the history of universal culture, in which a human mind managed to place before its eyes and to reflect upon it a “living” phenomenon in *such* a way, that, when “catching” it for a while, *portrayed* it and “drew its story”, so to speak.

“All the better that I have ideas and that I can see them with my eyes”, Goethe wrote to Schiller; instead, “not theory, but life itself, even thinking as life, as living experience,” is important, Goethe also qualified his opinion in his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* / *Poetry and Truth*.<sup>3</sup> “What is interesting,” Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica comments in *Parting with Goethe*, “is not what an author wants to say, what abstract idea of the intellect lies behind the work, but what is being said through him, the entire «incommensurable» of the work. The author, in general, we will say, must not know what is his part and what is the unexpected part in what he does: this is why he feels something incommensurable; and the reader, too, must not stop at the author's part («the abstract idea») but must deepen into the inexhaustible part of the deeper self: this is why he too senses something incommensurable.”<sup>4</sup>

Sensing myself, in turn, this “incommensurable,” I tried to read and to *see* what was being said *through* Goethe, as he stood on the edge – the turning point – between the two great periods of his creative work, at the time of *Elective Affinities*: namely, the ancient story, as old as human beings and their world, of a so-called “*Urphänomen*” or “original/primordial phenomenon” – that of affinity – melted down and crystallized in the *athanor* of Goethe's mind and novel. Even more so, since it is a question of, I believe, a phenomenon fallen into the realm of the self-evident or ready-understood, and thus in danger of remaining, in fact, misunderstood. As Walter Benjamin remarked in his essay dedicated to the novel *Elective Affinities*, Goethe “rests upon an ambiguity – sometimes naïve, sometimes doubtless more meditated – in the concept of nature. For it designates in Goethe at once the sphere of perceptible phenomena and that of intuitable archetypes”<sup>5</sup>.

Let us look, one character urges us, at all the “*wunderlichen Wesen*,” at all the mysterious beings or essences that Goethe gathers in the novel under the hard-to-translate term *Naturwesen* (which encompasses people

and the human, but also the elements, substances, and the elemental altogether). The same character makes this remark about the named *Naturwesen*: “if you choose to call these strange creatures of yours related [*verwandt*], the relationship is not so much a relationship of blood [*«Blutsverwandts»*] as of soul or spirit [*«vielmehr als Geistes- und Seelenverwandtes»*].” If we look, then, at these *Wesen*, the first and most mysterious thing we observe is – this is stated by another character who launches into an explanation of what “affinity” would mean – “that they have a certain relationship to themselves”<sup>6</sup> [*“an allen Naturwesen, die wir gewahr werden, bemerken wir zuerst, daß sie einen Bezug auf sich selbst haben”*]<sup>7</sup>. “Then, as everything has a reference to itself, so it must have some relation to others”, the same character continues. “It may sound ridiculous to be asserting what is obvious to everyone; but it is only by coming to a clear understanding together about what we know that we can advance to what we do not know”, states another one.<sup>8</sup> We shall see that it is precisely from this idea of a pure and simple relation (or better to say *correlation*) that Goethe will begin to reflect on affinity. In his novel about the dissolution and emergence of relationships, in the end

the subject is not marriage. Nowhere in this work are its ethical powers to be found. From the outset, they are in the process of disappearing, like the beach under water at floodtide. Marriage here is not an ethical problem, yet neither is it a social problem. ... *In its dissolution, everything human turns into appearance, and the mythic alone remains as essence,*” concluded Walter Benjamin in the already cited essay<sup>9</sup>. In the same essay, Benjamin also found the succinct formula by which to describe this tremendous Goethean effort to understand the human condition within the broader landscape of the thought of his time: “At the exact moment when Kant’s work was completed and a map through the bare woods of reality was sketched, the Goethean quest for the seeds of eternal growth began<sup>10</sup>.”

I would go a step further than Benjamin by saying that, of all the things related to man and falling under the concept of affinity as pure (cor)relation, as the “seed of eternal growth,” the problem of the spirit – and therefore of knowledge, of the possibilities of knowing – might find a way to the core through the path of affinity. A path of affinity that, I believe, would then also lead to the heart of the ontological problem, to “Being,” to Heidegger’s *Sein*, about which, as Heidegger never failed to remind us, we generally forget to ask ourselves. And yet it is *this* question that both opens and closes all questions of philosophy and thought in general.

Benjamin formulated his thesis on affinity beginning with what he considered to be the deeper meaning of Goethe’s novel:

And thus the title of the novel [*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, from *Wahl*, choice or decision, and *Verwandtschaft*], English ‘relatives’, from where relationships,

kinships, congenialities – my note] pronounces judgment on them – a judgment of which Goethe was half-unconscious. ... ‘Affinity’ is already, in and of itself, conceivably the purest word to characterize the closest human connection, as much on the basis of value as on that of motives. And in marriage it becomes strong enough to make literal what is metaphorical in it. This cannot be strengthened through choice; nor in particular *would the spiritual dimension of such affinity be founded on choice*. This rebellious presumption, however, is proved most incontrovertibly by *the double meaning of the word ‘choice’ (Wahl)*, which does not cease to signify both what is seized in the act and the very act of choosing. As always, that affinity becomes the object of a resolution; it strides over the stage of choice to decision. This annihilates choice in order to establish loyalty: only the decision, not the choice, is inscribed in the book of life. *For choice is natural and can even belong to the elements: decision is transcendent*<sup>11</sup>.

This would be Benjamin’s thesis. But if I were to advance a thesis myself concerning the more unobvious, though essential, meaning of Goethe’s endeavor in *Elective Affinities* I would formulate it as follows: Goethe attempted to literarily and at the same time philosophically unfold the story of that question with which philosopher Constantin Noica began his journey in the 1930s–40s in the footsteps of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*: the question of how something new is possible, of how the spirit becomes and is continuously renewed (see his 1940 work *Sketch for a History of How Something New Is Possible*). In unfolding this question, Goethe seems to have simultaneously constructed a question on Being (*das Sein*), by means of a discourse that, though disguised in literary garments – or perhaps precisely thanks to this – is even more authentically philosophical. Indeed, I found at least one exegete of Goethe’s novel who has already partially opened the way to such an interpretation, stating, for instance, that:

“Indeed, to grasp the *phenomenon*, and not just an idea of it, he tried to use *all* available hypotheses as aids to understanding ... Goethe’s treatment of affinity in his novel does not simply express a theory, but demonstrates *how* theories occur, and how they may change with the phenomena. ... By exploiting competing, and therefore reciprocally subordinated, hypotheses, it turns «explanation» into an activity, ... aiming to hold the phenomenon in view *between* and *through* the explanations, and, by developing them seeks ever more clearly and fully to uncover the nature of observable reality. ... Underlying his active epistemology, which at every point argues the inadequacy of concepts and words to mediate observable reality, there lies of course an equally active ontology, in which «change» is a central concept”<sup>12</sup>.

An “active ontology” could thus be said to have been designed by Goethe in his novel, and it is this hermeneutical path that I think it could be followed, attempting to develop arguments in support of the thesis, based on passages from the novel. But in this paper, I thought I might try to observe how this *ontology*, in Goethe’s work, passes through the necessary

and inescapable station of *anthropology*; in Heideggerian terms, to see how thought can arrive at Being (*Sein*) through one very important existential determination, namely that of togetherness (*Miteinandersein*).

In his *Elective Affinities*, Goethe proposes a subtle game, a parable, opening it up for us all, his readers of all times, to whom he even indirectly addresses the following wish (see a phrase in a letter to composer Carl Friedrich Zelter written shortly after the completion of the novel, in 1809): “Wherever my new novel finds you, accept it in a friendly manner. I am convinced that the transparent and opaque veil will not prevent you from seeing inside to the form truly intended”<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, when *Elective Affinities* were first published, the author took care, in a very original gesture, to encourage this game himself by anonymously advertising the novel in a newspaper of the time (*Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände* [*Morning Paper for the Educated Classes*], September 4, 1809):

It seems as if the author's continued natural studies have caused him to use this unusual title [*Elective Affinities*]. He may have noticed that in the natural sciences one often uses ethical parables in order to bring closer what is quite distant from the circle of human knowledge; and so he also probably wanted, in a moral case, to bring a chemical figure of speech back to its spiritual origins, especially since there is only *one* nature overall, and also since throughout the realm of cheerful freedom of reason the traces of sad, passionate necessity irresistibly pull themselves and may only be erased by a higher hand, and perhaps even then not in this life.<sup>14</sup>

The entire game of affinity appears then to be one of creating, of renewal, of action and re-action – even through destruction. On this second-tier game of creation, one beyond any knowable space-time, where everything seems that it has to be made anew, Walter Benjamin asked: “Goethe’s characters ... are pleased with themselves in playing with what lies below ground as in playing with what lies above. Yet what else, finally, are their inexhaustible provisions for its embellishment except a new backdrop for a tragic scene?”<sup>15</sup>

Affinity would thus appear to be the rule of the tragic game of being human – the tragedy that, in essence, would be the human condition in its living-and-dying unfolding. But who, then, are the *affines*? Do people “create” affinity, do they “make and unmake” and develop affinities, or could it be the other way around: that *affinities choose* and thereby shape people, as it were, “in their own image and likeness”? Two of the many possible answers to be guessed beyond the veil of Goethe’s novel I will mention here. The first belongs to a character named Mittler (German for “Mediator”), of whom the narrator notes that the affinity of his own name had acted upon him:

[He was working as a mediator] with the fixed determination, or rather in accordance with his old customs and inclinations, never to enter a house when

there was no dispute to make up, and no help to be given. People who were superstitious about names, and about what they imported, maintained that it was his being called Mittler which drove him to take upon himself this strange employment<sup>16</sup>.

Charlotte, one of the main characters of the novel, describes Mittler using the same word used for affinities: “*der wunderliche Mann, unser Mittler*” – “that strange man, our Mittler”. He had been a priest and, after studying law, became a kind of mediator “whose circle of activity extended wonderfully [*sein Wirkungskreis dehnte sich wunderbar aus*]” as we learn, for he is summoned to “make up and put an end to quarrels; quarrels in families, and quarrels between neighbors; first among the individuals immediately about him, and afterward among whole congregations, and among the country gentlemen round”<sup>17</sup>. He mediates complex situations, deadlocks, entanglements from which there seems no way out. Thus, „this eccentric person“ (p. 29) seems to mediate basically all the living dynamics of individuals or entire communities that make up the novel’s society, in matters tied, we can interpret, precisely to the peculiar developments of affinity, or to that “free energy,” “that hidden power that manifests itself ironically in the existence of the landed gentry,” as Benjamin describes it in his essay<sup>18</sup>.

Mittler’s indirect answer to the question “Who are the *affines*?” reflects maybe what I called the tragic condition of being human in the world. It reflects maybe that situation which, in hermeneutical terms, we could call *the aporia of affinity*. This aporia is partially foreshadowed in Benjamin’s remarks on the ambiguous meaning of *Wahl* (choice, decision) in the title *Die Wahlverwandschaften*. Uninvited but arriving “at a gallop pace” (p. 105) to Edward and Charlotte’s freshly reorganized estate – at the exact moment when the couple were debating whether to invite two guests, a friend of their (the unnamed Captain) and Charlotte’s young ward Ottilie –, Mittler gives the couple the following resolution at the gate of the old estate cemetery, then gallops away into the mystery whence he came. The couple then decides “to give it a try,” meaning to invite the two guests and surrender to the game of affinity:

«Either you do not know me, you do not understand me», cried Mittler, «or you are sorely mischievous. Do you call this a quarrel? Is any want of help here? ... Every man must be his own counselor, and *do what he can not let alone*. If all go well, let him be happy, let him enjoy his wisdom *and* his fortune; if it go ill, I am at hand to do what I can for him. ... Yes, yes! laugh as you will, he is playing blindman’s-buff; perhaps he gets hold of something, but the question is what he has got hold of. *Do as you will, it is all one*. Invite your friends to you, or let them be, it is all the same. The most prudent plans I have seen miscarry, and the most foolish succeed. Don’t split your brains about it; and if, one way or the other, evil comes of what you settle, don’t fret; send for me, and you shall be helped. Till which time, I am your humble servant.<sup>19</sup>

So, according to Mittler's resolution, the *affines* would be all people *in general*, caught in the unfolding of affinities – unfolding in a game of blind man's buff where, as Edward and Charlotte conclude after the visit from the Mediator of affinities:

That strange Mittler is right after all. All such undertakings are ventures; what will come of them it is impossible to foresee. New elements introduced among us may be fruitful in fortune or in misfortune, without our having to take credit to ourselves for one or the other. ... Let us make the experiment<sup>20</sup>.

Let us now consider another one of the many answers to the question "Who are the *affines*?" that Goethe's novel veils. It is an answer attempted at one point by Charlotte, a protagonist already mentioned. She initially draws a parallel between the "*die seenlosen Wesen*," the soulless essences or substances of nature, and human beings, who themselves are also part of the *Naturwesen*:

One can almost fancy that in these simple forms one sees people that one is acquainted with; one has met with just such things in the societies among which one has lived; *and the strangest likenesses of all with these soulless creatures are in the masses in which men stand divided one against the other* [*die Massen, die in der Welt sich einander gegenüberstellen*]<sup>21</sup>.

The *affines* could therefore be understood as though in a tableau drawn from the mythical imagination of primordial eras – or perhaps better, from an almost unrepresentable image of a strange myth that would encompass all living beings of all times and places, all who have ever been and will ever be in the world: the *affines*, the "relatives" would *be all human beings taken together, as masses* standing face-to-face in the world, mysterious in the incomensurable multitude of their kind, always unpredictable in the vitality of their lives, and above all, *always caught in the complicated interplay between necessity-destiny and choice-decision*. The purest and simplest relations, namely those of affinity, into which they enter, are, as Charlotte herself calls them, "*geheimnisvollen Wirkungen*" – some "mysterious effects". To this, Edward, Charlotte's husband, replies by adding a particularity of these relations of affinity, thus summarizing nearly everything that will become the novel's plot, development, and outcome:

Now that you have once stirred the thing, you shall not get off so easily. It is just the most complicated cases which are the most interesting. In these you come first to see *the degrees of the affinities*, to watch them as their power of attraction is weaker or stronger, nearer or more remote. *Affinities only begin really to interest when they bring about separations*<sup>22</sup>.

Separation and distancing, Goethe seems to suggest, tend above all to bring about renewal and closeness – or renewed closeness –, coalescence or

re-coalescence of the new. And only in *this* sense – as stated at one point by another protagonist, the Captain now present as a guest at the estate of the Edward–Charlotte couple – can natural affinity be said to be *elective affinity*. The Captain’s summary or account of the affinity of all those *Naturwesen* – among which, of course, human beings hold primacy – sounds splendid and ultimately points again to what Goethe, through the voices of his characters who “theorize” it, calls “*natural necessity*”, “*effect of occasion*”. The Captain’s summary is, fundamentally, about the unfolding of the play of affinity, of the *pure relationship*, of the free energy through which elements or fragments of matter “choose” each other for disunion and (re)union, thereby *configuring by their play a history of the “natural attraction” that grants the possibility of the various (re)configurations and “(re)embodiments” of Being*. Let us read this account:

We had better keep,” said the Captain, “to the same instances of which we have already been speaking. Thus, what we call limestone is a more or less pure calcareous earth in combination with a delicate acid, *which is familiar* to us in the form of a gas. Now, if we place a piece of this stone in diluted sulphuric acid, this will take possession of the lime, and appear with it in the form of gypsum, the gaseous acid at the same *going off* in vapor. *Here is a case of separation; a combination arises, and we believe ourselves now justified in applying to it the words «Elective Affinity»*; it really looks as if *one relation had been deliberately chosen in preference to another*<sup>23</sup>.

Without avoiding a tautology – which in this case is, I believe, more eloquent and useful than any other type of formulation – we could most simply say that the *affines* are the “keepers” of affinity, of that something which, *giving or offering itself especially through separation and disappearance, comes to endure as something ever-new, for it is constantly and endlessly renewed*. Perhaps only in this way can Creation, Nativity – be it only a literary one – come to know, ultimately, both resurrection and afterlife. The *affines*, “the relatives”, would then be the keepers of “that which endures permanently,” if I may recall a term coined by Goethe somewhere in the novella that stands at the core of his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. This German term precisely is noticed by Martin Heidegger, who interprets it in a completely unexpected place in his conference *Die Frage nach der Technik / The Question Concerning Technology*, as follows:

[In Part II, Chapter X of the novel, in the novella *Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder / The Two Strange Children of the Neighbors* (my note)] Goethe once uses the mysterious word *fortgewähren* («to grant permanently») in place of *fortwähren* («to endure permanently»). He hears *währen* («to endure») and *gewähren* («to grant») here in one unarticulated accord. And if we now ponder more carefully than we did before what it is that actually endures and perhaps alone endures, we may venture to say: *Only what is granted endures. That which endures primarily out of the earliest beginning is what grants*.<sup>24</sup>



Heidegger was referring to that which grants even Being. When it comes to affinity, if we consider it a *Urphänomenon*, we could see it also as something that endures – because it grants permanently – between people and things in the world. We could see it as an almost imperceptible “*smikrón ti*” (to use a Greek term dear to Socrates–Plato) that Goethe’s novel nevertheless attempts to bring into the light of its veil with that ever-fragile hope for understanding, hope which in a chapter near the end of the novel appears “like a star shooting in the sky, above their heads...” (p. 331).

In order to better glimpse the possible meaning of this *smikrón ti* that endures by permanently granting, I will try to look into the mirror of clear waters of Antiquity – more precisely, to make a halt (which will in fact be the final part of my hermeneutic journey) at Plato’s *Symposium*, for it is there that we find one of the few places in ancient writings where we are, through the mediation of a myth spun on the spindle of philosophical dialogue, suddenly transported into “a time once upon a time”, into the immemorial and placeless era of the primordial, when the first human beings lived, having just been shaped and born by the gods. We will dwell back into a time without time when people were living together as one, spherical beings rolling through their own lives.

Goethe believed that “only all people together know nature, only all people together live the human. ... The rational world must be considered as a great, immortal individual”<sup>25</sup>. And not coincidentally, when in Goethe’s novel the characters begin to seek first the theoretical meaning of affinity and then, in their literary lives, come to embody this meaning on the go, they formulate the following observation, from which I will proceed to Plato’s *Symposium*:

“And here,” said the Captain, “let me just *cursorily* mention one remarkable thing. I mean that *the full, complete correlation of parts* [affinity – my note] *which the fluid state makes possible shows itself distinctly and universally in the globular form* [«dieser völlig reine, durch Flüssigkeit mögliche Bezug sich entschieden und immer durch die Kugelgestalt auszeichnet»]. The falling water-drop is round; you yourself spoke of the globules of quicksilver; and a drop of melted lead let fall, if it has time to harden before it reaches the ground, is found at the bottom *in the shape of a ball*<sup>26</sup>.

Goethe seems, therefore, to have wanted to capture in the story of his novel – like in a temporary, yet luminous, amber of understanding – that “great, immortal individual” into which the entire world of people who are “*ζῶα λόγον ἔχον*”, and their whole life, transforms. *Intra mentem auctoris*, inside the author’s mind, the characters embody vividly, in their “lived experiences”, the theory of affinity which they also come to articulate within the novel: they float like a sphere or a globe of life on the slopes of the imponderable atmosphere of thought and imagination whose creations they

thereby become. The stake of their floating, as one of the characters also states, would be a mysterious “eternal life” (of substances, but, we may consider, also of the products of reason, imagination, or creation – the Creation of the spirit in general):

One should not spoil such things with words,” replied the Captain. “As I said before, as soon as I can show you the experiment, I can make it all intelligible and pleasant for you. ... *You ought yourself to see these creatures, which seem so dead, and which are yet so full of inward energy and force at work before your eyes. You should observe them with a real personal interest. Now they seek each other out, attract each other, seize, crush, devour, destroy each other, and then suddenly reappear again out of their combinations, and come forward in fresh, renovated, unexpected form*; thus you will comprehend how we attribute to them *a sort of immortality* – how we speak of them *as having sense and understanding*; because we feel our own senses to be insufficient to observe them adequately, and our reason too weak to follow them<sup>27</sup>.

People akin to these substances, thus formed, circulate through their mythical lives like children or sleepwalkers, as the narrator also calls them – children whose childish actions “we are unable exactly to approve, from the serious consequences which may follow, and yet we are not able to find fault, perhaps with a kind of envy” (p. 93).

Let us now compare this with how Plato, in the 5th century BC, describes “all men together,” or, shall we say, *the “original human sphere or globe,”* in the immemorial beginnings of their memorable live in the world, in the mythic world crafted for understanding the human condition by the demiurgic mind of Socrates, creation of the demiurge Plato himself.

We learn that “Plato came into Goethe’s hands only after he turned 40, in 1793 ([Letter] to Jacobi, February 1st),”<sup>28</sup> at the threshold of Goethe’s great *Kehre*, the turning point marked by the composition of *Elective Affinities*. The poet Goethe, sensing maybe a congenial spirit in the philosopher Plato, appreciated the latter because “he seemed to possess the world beforehand and to appear within it not so much in order to know it as in order to fill it with his meaning and understanding”<sup>29</sup>. Goethe, a demiurge at his turn, seems to appreciate the demiurge Plato who gifted us – by means of *the myth of the first human beings* voiced in the *Symposium* – with one of the most moving testimonies about *the original spherical or globular wholeness* called, at the dawn before any beginning, *man*. This myth, charged with the gravity of any anthropogony, is narrated and thus entrusted to us forever by the comic poet Aristophanes.

To reach this myth in the *Symposium*, let us make one briefer halt at the beginning of Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo*, where we find Socrates spending his last mundane day. There, we witness this following dialogue – a parenthesis amid the argumentation:

Cebes laughed and said:

— Assume that we have that fear [of death], Socrates, and try to convince us; or rather, do not assume that we are afraid, but *perhaps there is a child within us, who has such fears. Let us try to persuade him not to fear death as if it were a bogoblin.*

— Ah, said Socrates, *you must sing charms to him every day until your charm away his fear.*

— Where then, Socrates, said he, shall we find a good singer of such charms, since you are leaving us?

— Hellas, Cebes, he replied, is a large country, in which there are many good men, and there are many foreign peoples also. *You ought to search through all of them in quest of such a charmer. ... And you must seek among yourselves, too, for perhaps you would hardly find others better able to do this than you.*

— That, said Cebes, shall be done. But let us return to the point where we left off, if you are willing. (*Phaedo* 77e–78a)<sup>30</sup>

The mystery of the charm meant to lull the child's fear of death – of that “bogeyman death” Socrates mentions – is revealed perhaps at the end of the dialogue. There it becomes clear, I believe, that the entire myth that the poet Socrates unfolds before his friends on that last day of his life *is itself* this charm – a cure for the fear of death [of death-life...] of the child-Socrates who prepares to die. It is the myth:

“concerning our souls and their abodes, since the soul is shown to be immortal, which I think he [a man of sense] may properly and worthily venture to believe; for the venture is well worth while; and he ought to repeat such things to himself as if they were some magic charms” And, once finished, Socrates adds: “This is the reason why I have been lengthening out the story so long” (*Phaedo* 114d, transl. cited).

Now, through this halt in the myth of the “abodes of our immortal soul,” we arrive at the Platonic symposiac myth. Might we consider this last myth too as a charm – a healing incantation – for the fear of death? The answer could well be yes, given that it is a myth about the living, spherical *whole and oneness* that was once the human being, in a time before time, in the fairy-tale realm of “once upon a time”.

In the *Symposium*, Socrates claims he can contribute to the debate with the only thing he truly understands – namely, “nothing but love-matters”<sup>31</sup> (*ta erotiká*, 177e). The physician Eryximachus, in his praise of “the great daimon Eros”, chooses at one point to speak of the mysterious “attraction [perhaps synonym to affinity] of all creatures to a great variety of things, *which works in the bodies of all animals and all growths upon the earth, and practically in everything that is*” (186a, emphasis mine), “the love and unanimity in ... the most contrary qualities which are most hostile to each other in these [bodies, my note]” (186d–e). In contrast, the poet Aristophanes announces that he will speak of Eros as “the most friendly to men” (189d) (here the Greek word used by Plato is: *estí theón philantropótatos*<sup>32</sup>, so Eros is the greatest *philanthropist* among the gods). But Aristophanes announces this only to bring forth

Eros's opposite – the god who is the most *misanthropic*. This god turns out to be none other than Zeus. This original confrontation between the bad Zeus and the good Eros seems to mark the entire history of humanity – of all people, in every time and place, alone or together, in their solitudes as well as in all their “circles”. But what did the original human being of *any gender* look like?

You must begin your lesson with *the nature of man and its development. For our original nature was by no means the same as it is now. ... The form of each person was round all over, with back and sides encompassing it every way. ... The creature walked upright as now, in either direction as it pleased and whenever it started running fast, it went like our acrobats, whirling over and over with legs stuck out straight; only then they had eight limbs to support and speed them swiftly round and round* (189d–190b).

We also learn that these beings “*were globular in their shape as in their progress, since they took after their parents [the Sun, Earth, and Moon, my note]. Now, they were of surprising strength and vigor*” (190b). But, envied by Zeus for their hybris in “conspiring against the gods” (a conspiracy that still remains a mystery), “Zeus and the other gods debated what they should do, and were perplexed [they were in *aporia*, Plato says]: they could not slay them like the Giants ... nor yet could they endure such sinful rioting” (190b–c). The punishment for this merely suspected but never proved hybris was in essence *the weakening of human power* (presumably that “*power to begin, to act, as natality,*” that attraction to action, as Hannah Arendt will describe the defining human trait in her book *The Human Condition*). And how was this power of the first men weakened? Through a strange... circum-section that changed their bodily aspect and figure (a reconfiguration with immediate spiritual effects), followed by the further threat of another split “if they wouldn’t keep quiet”. More specifically Zeus *decides*:

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the defining human trait in her book *The Human Condition*). And how was this power of the first men weakened? Through a strange... circum-section that changed their bodily aspect and figure (a reconfiguration with immediate spiritual effects), followed by the further threat of another split “if they wouldn’t keep quiet”. More specifically Zeus *decides*:

Methinks I can contrive that men, *without ceasing to exist*, shall give over their iniquity *through a lessening of their strenght* [asthenésteroi genómenoi, Plato says]. I propose now *to slice every one of them in two, so that while making them weaker* we shall find them more useful *by reason of their multiplication*; and they shall walk erect upon two legs. If they continue turbulent and *do not choose to keep quiet*, I will do it again, I will slice every person in two, and then they must go their ways on one leg, hopping” (190c–d, my emph.).

What do human beings become after this punishment, after this embodiment into a new condition? *Sýmbola*, says Aristophanes–Plato. *Symbols, tallies* to one another, permanently searching for their lost *wholeness and oneness*. Thus, they become *strange neighbors* throwing themselves toward the contours and the “signs of recognition” of others, *affines or related souls in the unending, unreconciled search for their original affinities*:

Now, when *our first form had been cut in two*, each half *in longing for its fellow would come to it again*; and then would they fling their arms about each other and in mutual embraces yearn to be grafted together, till they began to perish of hunger and *general indolence, through refusing to do anything apart*. And whenever on the death of one half the other was left alone, *it went searching* and embracing to see if it might happen on that half of the whole woman which now we call a woman, or perchance the half of the whole man. ...  
*Thus anciently is mutual love ingrained in mankind, reassembling our early estate and endeavoring to combine two in one and heal the human sore.*  
*Each of us, then, is but a tally [to sýmbolon] of a man, since every one shows like a flat-fish the traces of having been sliced in two; and each is ever searching for the tally that will fit him* (191a–d, my emphasis).

What traits define affinity in this Platonic fragment? The terms used are primarily those of *search, longing, craving, pursuit and inclination toward*: the despherified, un-whole men throw themselves and are thrown (*bállo*) toward one another, toward the original togetherness (*sym-/syn-*), toward reunion, toward the renewal of sphericity and completeness of being-together (*synousía*). But we also encounter terms that suggest developments or complications or even *coverings* of the pure and simple (*cor*)relation called affinity – more precisely, terms such as “friendship, kinship (home-like, *óikos*-type) love” (in Greek, “*philia te kai oikeióteti kai éroti*”). I quote now the passage containing these terms:

Well, when one of them – whether he be a boy-lover or a lover of any other sort – happens on his own particular half, the two of them are wondrously thrilled with affection and intimacy and love, and are hardly to be induced to leave each other's side for a single moment (192b–c, emphasis mine).

What is the life of *affine* or kindred souls like, and what is *imposed* on them by the essential relationship thus established as affinity? It is a life of *bewilderment and perplexion*, of encounter and expression *within mystery*. A... *aporetic* living:

These are they who *continue together throughout life, though they could not even say what they would have of one another*. ... *No one could imagine this to be the mere amorous connection*, or that such alone could be the reason why each rejoices in the other's company with such eager a zest: *obviously the soul of each is wishing for something else that it cannot express, only divining and darkly hinting what it wishes* (192c–192d, emphasis mine).

But what strange turn takes further in Aristophanes' tale this entire effort of the first human beings to symbolize themselves, to throw themselves into mutual recognition! Aristophanes proposes an imaginative exercise in which the protagonist – as a possible ally of the philanthropic Eros and adversary of the misanthropic Zeus – is the god Hephaestus, master of fire and transformation, demiurge of all things chemical, alchemical, and now, re-unifying or (re)fining the human beings according to their primordial affinities. Hephaestus, within this Olympian demiurgic experiment suggested by Aristophanes, proposes, in indirect speech, a re-Creation with consequences for life and death, even for the “life beyond life,” for the death *lived* by Platonic human beings in Hades. Let us hear Aristophanes (I will quote extensively):

Suppose that, *as they lay together*, Hephaestus should come and stand over them, and showing his implements should ask: «What is it, good mortals, that you would have of one another?» – and suppose that in their perplexity he asked them again: «*Do you desire to be joined in the closest possible union*, so that you shall not be divided by night or by day? If that is your craving, *I am ready to fuse and weld you together in a single piece, that from being two you may be made one; that so long as you live, the pair of you, being as one, may share a single life; and that when you die you may also in Hades yonder be one instead of two, having shared a single death. Bethink yourselves if this is your heart's desire*, and if you will be quite contented with this lot.» No one [concludes Aristophanes ending the imaginary exercise without awaiting a response], no one on hearing this, we are sure, would demur to it or would be found wishing for anything else: each would unreservedly deem that he had been offered just what he was yearning for all the time, namely, to be so joined and fused with his beloved that the two might be made one.

*The cause of it all is this, that our original form was as I have described, and we were entire; and the craving and pursuit of that entirety is called Eros* (192d–193a, emphasis mine).

To the wholeness that can be regained through “pious observance of the gods,” Aristophanes believes, although no actual impiety could have been blamed on the first men prior to their unjust punishment by splitting, there is opposed a dark prospect, a *worse* fate seemingly to be carried by humanity forever:

We may once more be cloven asunder and may go about *in the shape of those outline-carvings on the tombs, with our noses sawn down the middle, and may thus become like tokens of split dice*. Wherefore we ought all *to exhort our neighbors to a pious observance of the gods*, in order that we may escape harm and attain to bliss under the gallant leadership of Eros (193a–b, emphasis mine).

Yet the clarification of that “pious observance of the gods” does not delay in coming, as the conclusion of Aristophanes’ speech and the *opened closure* of the entire story: What we have to do – since we’ve been gifted with the ability to do it – is *the unceasing search for our ownmost proper self*, to the very end, on the scale that stretches from the individual to the community, to the whole of humankind, under the force of Eros, who grants *everything* that is *the most possible of all*, namely *elpís*, hope, and thus, paradoxically, he grants... nothing tangible. Aristophanes says:

What I mean is – and *this applies to the whole world of men and women* – that the way to bring happiness to our race is *to give our love its true fulfillment* [*ektelésaimen ton érota*]. ... Eros is the god who brings this about; he fully deserves our hymns. *For not only in the present does he bestow the priceless boon of bringing us to our very own* [*Éros... eis to oikéion ágon* – bringing us (back) home], *but he also supplies this excellent hope* [*elpidas megístas*] that if we will supply the gods with reverent duty *he will restore us to our ancient life and heal and help us* into the happiness of the blest (193c–d, emphasis mine).

From the *acrobatic human beings*, the symbol-people of the Platonic myth, mysteriously caught in the circular spinning after their original wholeness, thrown together as people among people in a world like a rotating stage itself, I now return, for the conclusion of my paper, to just one of the many spectacular images from Goethe’s *Elective Affinities* that portray the mythical human sphericity in motion or in vivid unfolding. It is a scene congenial, I believe, to that in Aristophanes’ tale.

Goethe’s people, like “fluid lumps” (to borrow a beautiful term from a poem by famous Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu), or like “the round falling water-drop or ... the globule of quicksilver and a drop of melted lead” – that is, of lead which has been weakened and then fully refortified –, these people pour everywhere throughout the novel, through the twists and episodes of their story, which I hope you’ll discover or rediscover by reading *Elective Affinities*. These mythical people seem to flow forward by a

kind of *inertia of circulation*, like that of *springs*, toward an *unresolved outcome of the experiment with their own lives* – a blind game of life and death.

Goethe's people, like all *Naturwesen*, *circulate: they move, simply put, in co-relation, in co-motion*. And of all the images of this *affine circulation* (or *circulating affinity*) – perplexing in its very nature or *boule-versante* like that of the “lumps” –, of all then the Goethean portraits of this affine circulation, the most spectacular is, I think, the following. The scene takes place on the waters of the middle pond, which, throughout the novel, seem like the first and final waters, opening and then, in the end, absorbing all that happens, silencing the literary world before the reader too closes the book. The protagonists set off (three of them at first, then two – Otilie had remained at the castle to write) in a *new boat* “which Edward had had fetched from a distance, at no little expense” and which had been “*made fast on the bank of the middle pond*” (transl. cited, p. 131, emphasis mine); they set off on this pond that will eventually bury life, until a new beginning. It will bury the life of an infant (Edward and Charlotte's newborn, carried in Otilie's arms – she who had once embodied the *tableau vivant* of the Nativity scene at a Christmas, like a Virgin holding the Child in her arms), then the lives of young people (in turn: Otilie, who silences herself, then Edward following in her footsteps), and finally, the life of *hope* itself.

Around and within “the middle pond” is where we find ourselves, then. And here, when “much had been begun, and much yet remained to be done” (p. 140), because “we can not now prevent this moment from forming an epoch in our lives” (as Charlotte solemnly exclaims after the first illicit kiss “which the Captain had ventured to give her” on the water (p. 136)), this turning-point is marked in “festive” fashion, at Edward's initiative. For Edward, “in all he thought and all he did, there was no more moderation” (p. 139), he “wandered this way and that way; he was at once the most restless and the happiest of mortals. He strayed through the gardens – they seemed too narrow for him; he hurried out into the park, and it was too wide. He was drawn back toward the castle; he stood under Otilie's window. He threw himself down on the steps of the terrace below” (p. 138), because “Otilie's presence absorbed everything” (p. 139). Edward plans to honor Otilie's upcoming birthday, on which event “she should appear as the queen of the day; and Edward would not have it talked about, *because everything was to spring out, as it were, of itself, with a natural and delightful surprise*” (p. 148, my emphasis)). He plans the inauguration of the newly built house and a *special surprise: a fireworks show*:

The fireworks *were to be let off on the side of the middle water* in front of the great ash-tree. The party were to be collected on the opposite side, under the planes, that *at a sufficient distance from the scene*, in easy and safety, *they might see them to the best effect, with the reflections on the water, the water-rockets, and floating-lights, and all the other designs* (p. 149, my emphasis).



This is a strange and wondrous spectacle whose description seems to sum up – as we will see – the entire game of *affines* and affinity:

Among the stores at the castle *was a small show of fireworks which had never been let off. It would be easy to get some more, and have something really fine.* Edward caught the idea. ... This matter was to remain a secret (pp. 148–149, emphasis mine).

As a preliminary image for this *human-fireworks show*, we first see its “recipient” and reason, Otilie, “queen of the day”, still unaware of what she is about to receive as a gift. It is a scene that allows for an authorial-narrative reflection *on all people together* – a thought as calmly-troubled as the waters in which it unfolds:

Otilie, led by the sense of her own innocence along the road to the happiness for which she longed, only lived for Edward. *Strengthened by her love for him in all good, more light and happy in her work for his sake, and more frank and open toward others, she found herself in a heaven upon earth.*

*So all together, each in his or her own fashion, reflecting or unreflecting, they continued on the routine of their lives. All seemed to go its ordinary way, as, in monstrous cases, when everything is at stake, men will still live on, as if it were all nothing* (p. 221, my emphasis).

The protagonists are then prisoners in *Wahl* – that is, in the unfolding over them, over their own lives, of *the necessity of affinities* and of many kinds of *fines*, of borders and ends and endings.<sup>33</sup> No matter how many plans they make and how easy these seem – “they will present no difficulty” –, difficulties do arise for the “heroes”. The show (of fireworks) is already unfolding in its potential, yet in fact still lets itself awaited. The unfolding of the event speaks for itself, and I now attempt to capture its meaning, by catching a glimpse of the whole happening. And the whole happening is tied to *the elementary, natural affinity* once questioned theoretically by the characters, and which now purely manifests, in all its “demonic” nature, as a clash and collision of positive and negative signs – in the form of explosions between air, water, earth, and fire – like a sort of Genesis-Apocalypse ruled by all these elements together:

At sunset... a calm evening, a perfect absence of wind, promised everything in favor of the spectacle” (pp. 153–154). “After dinner ... the guests *found their way in little parties, broken up, as they pleased, without rule or order, to the scene of action.* ... For Otilie being really the last that appeared, it seemed as if the trumpets and the clarinets *had only been waiting for her, and as if the gaieties had been ordered to commence directly on her arrival*” (pp. 151–152). “The upper end of the embankment, *having been recently raised, was still far from compact* ... and the earth was *uneven and insecure.* The crowd pressed on, however, in great numbers. The sun went down, and the castle party was served with refreshments under the plane-trees, to pass the time till it should have become sufficiently dark... (p. 153, emphasis mine).

When suddenly: *the ground gave way*. Clumps of clay and cement rolled into the ripples of the pond along with living clumps – people:

Suddenly loud and violent shrieks were heard. *Large masses of the earth had given way on the edge of the embankment, and a number of people were precipitated into the water. The pressure from the throng had gone on increasing till at last it had become more than the newly laid soil would bear, and the bank had fallen in. Everybody wanted to obtain the best place, and now there was no getting either backward or forward. People ran this and that way, more to see what was going on than to render assistance. What could be done when no one could reach the place?* (p. 154, my emphasis).

In the end, *apparently* no one dies – “all were safe,” (p. 155) even though the new and expensive boat could not help, for “*by an unlucky chance it was on the opposite shore filled with fireworks*” (p. 154, my emph.). And yet, the ambiguity between people and fireworks sets in: the people seem to “dissolve,” as those present scatter in all directions (“in the end, no one wished to be the last, and all followed” (p. 156)), but only *then* the fireworks are “born,” and thus re-embody people who scattered – remaining behind and above them like so many bodies of fire and light, with only two *really-living* human beings witnessing: “Edward and Ottilie found themselves alone under the plane-trees” (p. 156). Charlotte had tried to stop the moment, saying it was best “to put off an amusement *which was no longer in place*, and which at the present moment no one could enjoy,” (p. 155), but Edward, reflecting that “even without us, I should think, *the half-dead may wake, and the living dry themselves*” (p. 156, emphasis mine), he demands suddenly, looking in Ottilie’s eyes while commanding to the valet on the boat:

«*Let them off!*», Edward cried to him. ... «*The extraordinary is not brought to pass in the smooth, common way – the wonderful accident of this evening brings us more speedily together. ... It was only for you that the fireworks were provided, Ottilie, and you shall be the only one to see them!* Let me sit beside you and enjoy them with you» Tenderly, timidly, he sat down at her side, without touching her (p. 156, my emph.)

And so, suddenly, the aerial dance erupts – appearing all at once “up in the highest heights,” the first and the last of people, the humankind altogether, the luminous sphere, the entire globe of all humanity, those first, middle, and last kindred spirits, linked by endless, infinitesimal, infinite affinities, and (textually) by a euphonic “charm to slay the fear of death-life,” echoing the ancient Socratic-Platonic charm we heard earlier:

Rockets went hissing up – cannon thundered – *Roman candles shot out their blazing balls – squibs flashed and darted – wheels spun round, first singly, then in pairs, then all at once, faster and faster, one after the other, and more and more together* (p. 157, my emphasis).

Darkness afterwards slowly returns and, as soon as “the night had scarcely reassumed its rights,” (p. 157) the two “lovers” walk back under a different light now – the moonlight (“for the moon rose and lighted their path” (p. 157)) – and are met along the way by a single, last remaining presence or *symbolon*: in the guise of a “importunate beggar,” who “with his hat in his hand stepped across their way, and begged an alms of them – *in the general holiday he said that he had been forgotten*” (p. 157, my emphasis). Perhaps we could guess here the presence of the demiurge himself, or if not, that of the great daimon Eros, the most philanthropic of all the gods, and still the most forgotten... The scene ends with this demiurge in rags receiving, as a gift of pity from the illicit lovers, along with the traces of the final fireworks up in the sky, “*a piece of gold*” – a price perhaps for Charon and Hades, or, on the contrary, for future, reborn, “excellent hopes” of reunification...

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.–London, England, 5th ed., 2002, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Adler, “Newton, Goethe and *Die Wahlverwandschaften* – On the Virtue of Contradictory Hypotheses”, in *Jahrbuchbericht*, 1985–1986, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup> *Apud* Constantin Noica, *Despărțirea de Goethe*, Univers, București, 1976, pp. 8, resp. 31 (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> Constantin Noica, *ibid.*, pp. 142–143.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

<sup>6</sup> For all the quotes from the English translation of Goethe’s novel, I have used Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities: a novel*, translated by F. Ungar, Collier, New York, 1977

(online: <https://archive.org/details/electiveaffiniti00goetuoft/electiveaffiniti00goetuoft/page/n5/mode/2up> [09.07.2025]), here p. 56, resp. p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> For all the quotes from the German version of Goethe’s novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften*, I have used the digitalized reproduction of the edition published in Tübingen in 1810, online: [https://ia800209.us.archive.org/27/items/bub\\_gb\\_iQ4UAAAAQAAJ/bub\\_gb\\_iQ4UAAAAQAAJ.pdf](https://ia800209.us.archive.org/27/items/bub_gb_iQ4UAAAAQAAJ/bub_gb_iQ4UAAAAQAAJ.pdf), as well as the online edition at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2403/2403-h/2403-h.htm#chap03> (09.07.2025).

<sup>8</sup> *Elective Affinities*, ed. cit., pp. 53–54.

<sup>9</sup> “Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*”, ed. cit., p. 302 (emphasis mine).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346 (emphasis mine).

<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Adler, “Newton, Goethe and *Die Wahlverwandschaften* – On the Virtue of Contradictory Hypotheses”, *op. cit.*, pp. 216, resp. 219.

<sup>13</sup> *Apud* Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 352.

<sup>14</sup> *Apud* Astrida Orle Tantillo, *Goethe’s “Elective Affinities” and the Critics*, Camden House, New York, 2001, p. xviii, online: <https://books.google.ro/books?id=tjr3X7whgaAC&printsec=frontcover&hl=r#v=onepage&q&f=false> [09.07.2025].

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>16</sup> *Elective Affinities*, ed. cit., p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 303.

<sup>19</sup> *Elective Affinities*, ed. cit., pp. 30–31 (emphasis mine).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55 (emphasis mine).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56 (emphasis mine).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56 (emphasis mine).

<sup>24</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “*The Question Concerning Technology*” and *Other Essays*, translated and with an Introduction by William Lovitt, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York–London, 1977, p. 31 (online: [https://monoskop.org/images/4/44/Heidegger\\_Martin\\_The\\_Question\\_Concerning\\_Technology\\_and\\_Other\\_Essays.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/4/44/Heidegger_Martin_The_Question_Concerning_Technology_and_Other_Essays.pdf) [09.07.2025]).

<sup>25</sup> *Apud* Constantin Noica, *Despărțirea de Goethe*, ed. cit., p. 36 (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> Ed. cit., p. 54 (emphasis mine).

<sup>27</sup> *Elective Affinities*, ed. cit., pp. 59–60 (emphasis mine).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Constantin Noica, *Despărțirea de Goethe*, ed. cit., p. 127.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 1 translated by Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W.R.M. Lamb, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA–William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1966, online: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0170%3atext%3dPhaedo> [09.07.2025], emphasis mine.

<sup>31</sup> For all the quotes from the English translation of Plato’s *Symposium*, I have used Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 9 translated by Harold N. Fowler, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA–William Heinemann Ltd., London, 1925 (online: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0174%3atext%3dSym> [09.07.2025]).

<sup>32</sup> For all the quotes from the ancient Greek text of Plato’s *Symposium*, I have used *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet, Oxford University Press, 1903 (online: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0174%3atext%3dSym> [09.07.2025]).

<sup>33</sup> “A huge embrace would be needed, the erasure of everything different, the melting of all boundaries in an emotional, affective way, so that the elements of the intimate-strange background would lose their negative force. Only democracy in the face of death and of God (this ultimate point of the annulment of differences) reminds me of the boundary of finitude and of the fact of being human,” Romanian philosopher Gabriel Liiceanu reflects on this phenomenon in his book *On the Limit* (see *Despre limită*, Humanitas, București, 2009, pp. 32–33, my transl.).

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