Eros’s Arrows: A Comparison of Two Poetic Depictions of Love

Samantha Bergeson

_Eros_

Why hast thou nothing in thy face?
Thou idol of the human race,
Thou tyrant of the human heart,
The flower of lovely youth that art;
Yea, and that standest in thy youth
An image of eternal Truth,
With thy exuberant flesh so fair,
That only Pheidias might compare,
Ere from his chaste marmoreal form
Time had decayed the colours warm;
Like to his gods in thy proud dress,
Thy starry sheen of nakedness.

Surely thy body is thy mind,
For in thy face is nought to find,
Only thy soft unchristen'd smile,
That shadows neither love nor guile,
But shameless will and power immense,
In secret sensuous innocence.

O king of joy, what is thy thought?
I dream thou knowest it is nought,
And wouldst in darkness come, but thou
Makest the light where'er thou go.
Ah yet no victim of thy grace,
None who e'er long'd for thy embrace,
Hath cared to look upon thy face.

— Robert Bridges (1899)

This paper was written for Vicky Greenbaum’s Advanced Placement American Literature class in the spring of 2012.
Eros

I call for love
But help me, who arrives?
This thug with broken nose
And squinty eyes.
‘Eros, my bully boy’—
Can this be you,
With boxer lips
And patchy wings askew?

‘Madam,’ cries Eros,
‘Know the brute you see
Is what long overuse
Has made of me.
My face that so offends you
Is the sum
Of blows your lust delivered
One by one.

We slaves who are immortal
Gloss your fate
And are the archetypes
That you create.
Better my battered visage,
Bruised but hot,
Than love dissolved in loss
Or left to rot.’

— Anne Stevenson (1990)

The pains of a modern love affair apparently injure not only the lovers’ concealed hearts, but also the visible face of Eros, the Greek god of romance. The boundary between tainted lust and desperate yearning is depicted in these two opposing poems by Robert Bridges and Anne Stevenson, untangling the confusion of love by personifying such passion as a divine being; the blind risk of loving is deemed both a heavenly transcendence and an unattainable manipulation of desire. By emphasizing the contrasting visages of Eros, the two poems explore
the innocence of fate and the inevitable corruption of lust, as personified by Eros’ external identity.

Bridges’s *Eros* describes passionate love as an internal unknowingness, the ignorance of a “flower of lovely youth” that remains untouched, as shown by the emptiness of Eros’s face. Through a distinct, melodic a-a, b-b, c-c rhyme scheme, Bridges romanticizes the lyricism of the symbolic human heart as controlled by Eros, the “tyrant of the human race.” The powerful last stanza frames the resonating final lines of the poem, ending in an a-a-a rhyme scheme to emphasize the closing image of a “soft, unchristen’d smile” in Eros’s “face.” Eros’s identity is flexible to the lover’s perception of emotion, the clean “chaste” body of a fantasized passion behind “nothing in thy face.” Yet, regardless of the unknown fate of love, the human race still fervently believes in the splendor of the mythical emotion of romance; through Eros, the Greek god of love, Bridges personifies the uncertainty and mystery that love inflicts upon both the “body and the mind” of humans. The fabled yet brief “sensuous innocence” that romance promises continues to remain a blissfully-sought quality to lovers; and yet, no lover “cares to look upon thy face” of Eros, the beauty of an unknown identity masking the real, tainted face of romance, the bruised body of a scarred fighter, as Stevenson suggests. In contrast, Bridges’s ode to Eros, the fleeting “grace,” implies that humans choose to overlook the imperfections of relationships and lust to continue to maintain a heavenly perception of truly passionate love; man still “longs for thy embrace” yet never “care[s] to look upon thy face” so as not to taint the cherubic illusion of love. Eros’s appearance is not fooling humans, as he has no “face”—it is instead the rejections of the painful reality of heartbreak and emotional despair that blinds humans, choosing to construe truth in order to maintain a fabled hope. Bridges reveals his controlling image of Eros as a faceless being to create a dichotomy between Romantic perceptions of love, and the actual, true visage of a hidden myth.

Stevenson’s *Eros*, however, entirely reinterprets the social gaze upon love; Stevenson uses Eros’s beaten face to symbolize the pain and resiliency that relationships require. Her opening line—“I call for love”—
exemplifies the natural tendencies to yearn for companionship and plead for passion. As the speaker begs for a being to “help,” she is approached by the tenacious “bully boy” Eros, returning from a battle of heartbreak with the excitement of new potential. Stevenson instead characterizes this cycle of blind commitments and eagerness to find a romantic partner as a “brute” force, a naïve ignorance stimulated by fantasy; the “battered visage” and angelic wings are all part of the hopeful façade. Stevenson mirrors the tarnishing of Eros in her poetic perception of the worn excitement that is sewn upon the brow of love. Although the face of love “offends you,” the destruction of the once pure, innocent appearance is due to the “blows your lust delivered”; through the abuse of romance, the attempted normalcy of passion, and the universal expectation of lust, the rare heavenly beauty of natural love is ruined. The “long overuse” of Eros constrains the angelic belief in love; Stevenson represents romance as a “slave” that is bound to the “archetypes that you create” within society. The innocence of Eros is snatched by the social perception of romance, as embodied in the external identity of the Greek god. Through the “bruised” visage of Eros, Stevenson portrays love as a burdened but passionate resilient force, fighting against typicality and inevitable heartbreak.

Both Stevenson’s *Eros* and Bridges’s *Eros* masterfully explore the innocence of fateful love juxtaposed with man’s corruption of chastity. Eros’s changing face, his perceived identity, remains yet a mystery in both works, hidden within the magic of the rare paradise of true love.