

***Hedwig and The Angry Inch*¹: Plato at the Sundance Film Festival²**

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To M. Allué

Probably, a classical philologist –who in this case, furthermore, has worked on the Classical Tradition for several years- has many reasons for a scrupulous selection of the themes on which he will reflect in a congress or in any other place. After all, there are many scholars who maintain –and usually they think of the biased use of Greek and Roman Mythology- that the Classical Legacy has frequently been the victim of an absolute freedom, in their opinion excessive, in order to appeal to the help of Ancient Wisdom –*lato sensu*- in favour of a personal vision. I confess that I do not follow those who practice a certain degree of philological fundamentalism, even beyond the necessary rigour which must be peculiar of course not only to Science but also to the Humanities. And I am speaking this way because this brief article of mine about a film which was awarded at the Sundance Film Festival (2001) -already known as a good exponent of the best Independent American Cinema- might give grounds for complaint even among our audience. The sexuality, which is also alternative in this case, and the complete licence regarding the thesis of the main protagonist of the film, whose “star” and director is John Cameron Mitchell, might still create scandal. For my part, it is quite evident that, if I have chosen *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* as the subject of my contribution, it must be for a good reason. Indeed, this film gives us the opportunity both to speak and to reflect on the challenges that our contemporary society issues to us by invading those realms that sometimes some scholars would want to be reserved for the “professionals”.

What is the plot of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*?

Hansel is a child who was born in East Berlin in 1961 when the Wall was erected. He is an American G.I.’s son and his mother is a Berliner. He is a true rock & roll fan on account of having spent most of his time listening to the *American Armed Forces Radio*, and he himself becomes later one of the greatest rock and roll stars. Another American G.I., who mistakes Hansel for a girl, falls in love with him while he is sunning himself in an old bomb crater near the Wall. Hansel reveals immediately his masculine identity, but Luther does not seem to care about it and says he wants to marry him, so that he will have the opportunity to travel to freedom. Nevertheless, that means for Hansel a full physical examination, so that Luther and his mother think of a sex change operation, since every time someone wants to escape, he must leave “a little something behind”⁴, and he is asked as well to use his mother’s name: Hedwig Schmidt. The operation is “botched” and its sad result is his one-inch penis, that is to say, an “angry inch”. This will not be his sole misfortune, since soon after his arrival in America, Luther, who wants to live now with another blond and handsome young man, will leave him amid a caravan park in Junction

¹ Starring: John Cameron Mitchell, Andrea Martin, Michael Pitt, Miriam Shor and Maurice Dean. Screenplay by John Cameron Mitchell, based on his Off-Broadway play. Songs: Stephen Trask. Directed by John Cameron Mitchell. 2001, 91 minutes. Website: www.hedwigmovie.com.

² This article was published in the *Actas del XI Congreso Español de la S.E.E.C.*. Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 2006, pp. 679-690.

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⁴ All the quotations will correspond to DVD Video. New Line Platinum Series, 2001.

City, Kansas, while his television set is showing the fall of the Wall. Finally, the two halves of Berlin, then, have become a single city, but Hedwig, with his broken heart, works as baby-sitter until he decides both to sing again and to revive his band: The Angry Inch. One of its members, Yitzhak, who is played by a woman dressed as a man, Miriam Shor⁵, is his husband, though his true other half will be a boy, Tommy Gnosis, with whom he falls deeply in love and to whom he teaches to sing. Tommy finds out, of course, about Hedwig's inch, so that he leaves him and, after both stealing his songs and singing them, he turns into a real superstar who fills great stadiums. In revenge Hedwig tries to boycott Tommy's musical tour by singing in parallel the same songs with his band in hotel bars and dining-rooms of a seafood chain whose name is Bilgewater's. Tommy confesses afterwards that Hedwig is the writer and composer of his songs and also praises Hedwig's singular skill, which is the result of his own experience, at recreating human beings by bringing together the separated parts of their broken personalities.

Taking into account that my brief communication belongs to the section devoted to the Classical Tradition and that we have just heard Tommy speaking about the necessity of bringing together some separated parts, it is quite evident that the myth of the three genres of Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium*⁶, better known as the myth of the androgynous, must be the classic content of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*, although, before approaching it, it will be useful to notice to what extent Hedwig's personality is really a singular one. This is for instance what his first song tells us:

Hedwig: 'Don't you know me, Kansas City? I'm the new Berlin Wall. Try and tear me down! I was born on the other side of a town ripped in two. I made it over the Great Divide, now I'm coming for you. Enemies and adversaries, they try and tear me down. You want me baby, I dare you. Try and tear me down. I rose from off of the doctor's slab like Lazarus from the pit. Now everybody wants to take a stab and decorate me. Blood, graffiti, and spit. Enemies and adversaries, they try and tear me down. You want me baby, I dare you. Try and tear me down'.

Yitzhak: 'On August 13, 1961, a wall was erected down the middle of the city of Berlin. The world was divided by a cold war, and the Berlin Wall was the most hated symbol of that divide. Reviled, graffiti, spit upon. We thought the wall would stand forever and now it's gone. We don't know who we are any more. Ladies and gentlemen, Hedwig is like that wall, standing before you in a divide between East and West, slavery and freedom, man and woman... you can try and tear her down, but, before you do, you must remember one thing'.

Hedwig: 'Ain' much of a difference between a bridge and a wall. Without me right in the middle, babe, wow!, you would be nothing at all'.

The band: 'Enemies and adversaries, they try and tear me down. You want me baby, I dare you. Try and tear me down... From East Berlin to Junction City. Hello, New York. Hello, Missouri. What? You wanna try and tear me down? Come on and tear me down!'

⁵ "I certainly wanted Hedwig's world to be one where identification and categories are fluid, changing, and confusing, as they are, really, in life... as a gay man, it was very much about finding my own identity... I tried to help the piece express some of that fluidity is to have a woman play Hedwig's husband, Yitzhak, played by Miriam Shor. And she doesn't play a transsexual; she plays a man who wants to dress as a woman, which some people find confusing" (Pop Matters Film. Interview with John Cameron Mitchell, writer/director/star of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* by Cynthia Fuchs. www.popmatters.com/film/interviews/mitchell-john-cameron.html.)

⁶ 189d-193d.

Not only Berlin but the whole world was shaken by the fall of the most hated Wall, that cold basis for angry graffiti receiving as well all sorts of insults and a great deal of spit. This Wall divided a single community and was the origin of many family tragedies. Therefore, who would dare to vindicate it as standard and symbol? But Hedwig rises from more than a doctor's slab, that is to say, from the abyss of the loss of his sex, the abandonment of his own country and town, and the quick infidelity of a false husband and lover. Hedwig rushes into the world as a firm wall which cannot be torn down though it was erected with demolition material, i. e., his broken personality. Like that implacable Zeus of the Platonic myth rejecting any attempt at arrogance⁷, Hedwig becomes, with a deserved pride in his case, that Great Divide which only a few dare to cross or, much better, to stay on. Indeed, Hedwig is a man and a woman, East and West, etcetera, and, thanks to his image –since Hedwig is above all an icon- the paradox of a wall which does not divide but unites can be understood. In other words, he-she is a true bridge “right in the middle” without which we would be nothing at all, as if a river city lost its umbilical cord because of war, precisely that one which till then had kept it living.

He has stated it with that fury which is peculiar to rock, in just the same way as he answers to a scandalised man: ‘What poor, unfortunate creature had to die for you to wear that?’. (Hedwig): ‘My aunt Trudy’. And with anger he states as well: ‘My sex change operation got botched, my guardian angel fell asleep on the watch, now all I’ve got is a Barbie doll crotch... Six inches forward, five inches back, I got an angry inch’. However, although he defies the whole world, he was born in a cruelly divided town, and he has lost more than the greater part of his sex. He is invaded by the desire of something that he lacks now, he is invaded, then, by *éros*⁸, and the well-known Western myth of the origin of love comes to help him⁹. He sings it this way, while the images give way to Emily Hubley’s cartoons:

‘When the earth was still flat and clouds made of fire and mountains stretched up to the sky, sometimes higher, folks roamed the earth like big rolling kegs. They had two set of arms, they had two sets of legs, they had two faces peering out of one giant head, so they could watch all around them. As they talked while they read, and they never knew

⁷ Plato. *Symposium* 190b-d: Now they were of surprising strength and vigour, and so lofty in their notions that they even conspired against the gods; and the same story is told of them as Homer relates of Ephialtes and Otus, that scheming to assault the gods in fight they essayed to mount high heaven. ‘Thereat Zeus and the other gods debated what they should do, and were perplexed: for they felt they could not slay them like the Giants, whom they had abolished root and branch with strokes of thunder –it would be only abolishing the honours and observances they had from men; nor yet could they endure such sinful rioting. Then Zeus, putting all his wits together, spake at length and said: ‘Methinks I can contrive that men, without ceasing to exist, shall give over their iniquity through a lessening of their strength. 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’, said he; ‘I will slice every person in two, and then they must go their ways on one leg, hopping’ –translations of the *Symposium* by W. R. M. Lamb. *Loeb Classical Library*. London: William Heinemann Ltd.; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁸ Remember, for instance, *Symposium* 200e: ‘Is not love –*éros*- in the first place the desire for anything and, secondly, for what it happens to be lacking?’ (ἔστιν ὁ Ἔρως πρῶτον μὲν τινῶν, ἔπειτα τούτων ὧν ἂν ἔνδεια παρῆ ἀντὶ;).

⁹ “Origin myths. People are interested in where our needs come from, and in not being alone; that’s important in every culture. But this is a particularly Western myth, and Plato is the beginning of Western culture... The myth was picked up by the Gnostic Christians, who were really into this idea of... the other half... It’s not necessary that you need to be with that someone forever, but it’s necessary that Hedwig meets Tommy. Just because he’s her other half doesn’t mean that they’re going to be together forever... she’s the sum of everyone she meets, rather than the idea that they took a piece” (*Ibidem*).

nothing of love. It was before the origin of love. Now there was three sexes then. One that looked like two men glued up back-to-back. They're called the children of the sun, similar in shape and girth. The children on earth, they looked like two girls rolled up in one. And the children of the moon looked like a fork shoved on a spoon. They were part sun, part earth, part daughter, part son. Ah! The origin of love. Now the gods grew quite scared of our strength and defiance, and Thor said: 'I'm gonna kill'em all with my hammer like I killed the giants'. But Zeus said: 'No, you better let me use my lighting like scissors, like I cut the legs off the whales, Dinosaurs into lizards. And then he grabbed up some bolts, he let out a laugh and said: 'I'll split them right down the middle, gonna cut them right up in half'. And the storm clouds gathered above into great bolts of fire. And then fire shot down from the sky in bolts, like shining blades of a knife, and they ripped right through the flesh of the children of the sun and the moon and the earth. And some Indian god sewed the wound up into a hole and pulled it round to our bellies to remind us the price we pay. And Osiris and the gods of the Nile gathered up a big storm to blow a hurricane to scatter us away, in a flood of wind and rain, a sea of tidal waves to wash us all away. And, if we don't behave, they'll cut us down again, and we'll be hopping around on one foot looking through one eye. The last time I saw you, we'd just split in two, you was looking at me, I was looking at you. You had a way so familiar. I could not recognise, cause you had blood on your face and I had blood in my eyes. But I could answer by your expression that the pain down in your soul was the same as the one down in mine. That's the pain that cuts a straight line down through the heart, we call it love. We wrapped our arms around each other, tried to shove ourselves back together, we were making love, making love. It was a cold, dark evening such a long time ago, when, by mighty hand of Jove, it was a sad story how we became lonely two-legged creatures, the story of the origin of love, that's the origin of love'¹⁰.

Flat earth; clouds made of fire; mountains which stretch up to the sky; two men glued up back-to-back; children of the moon who look like a fork shoved on a spoon; first Zeus, afterwards Jove; Thor, Osiris and an Indian god who can sew; dinosaurs turned into lizards, and the menace of a new cut and its consequences. Needless to say, as classical philologists we could certainly deplore the absolute free use of an ancient myth—a philosophical one, besides-, and we could denounce as well, with a good deal of indignation and pride thanks to our *akribeia*, all the additions, inaccuracies, anachronisms and this audacious mixture of gods and cultures which could seem rather an absurd *collage* than a classical *synkresis* phenomenon. But a fairer judgement should let us acknowledge that Cameron Mitchell's screenplay and Stephen Trask's songs show in my opinion not only a good comprehension both of the Platonic myth and its applicability, but also of the deep meaning of the *Symposium*. As André Comte-Sponville has already said in his splendid essay entitled *Petit traité des grands vertus* in its last chapter devoted to love, the real opposition is marked by Aristophanes in speaking about completeness and telling us of *éros* what we would want to hear, believe or dream, and by Diotima-Socrates in maintaining that love is essentially a "lack"¹¹:

¹⁰ Cf. *Symposium* 191-b-d: 'Now when our fist 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... Thus anciently is mutual love ingrained in mankind, reassembling our early estate and endeavouring to combine two in one and heal the human sore'.

¹¹ The thematic coincidence between his treatise and *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* was already maintained by Richard Wells: www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/B00005QW5X/002-4133350-2312043?v=glance.

“... quoi de plus improbable, quoi de plus miraculeux, quoi de plus contraire à notre expérience quotidienne, que ces deux êtres qui n’en font qu’un?... Il faut être deux pour faire l’amour... et c’est en quoi le coût, loin d’abolir la solitude, la confirme. Les amants le savent bien. Les âmes pourraient se fondre peut-être, si elles existaient. Mais ce sont des corps qui se touchent, qui s’aiment... Lucrèce a bien décrit... cette fusion qui se cherche, parfois, souvent, mais qui jamais ne se trouve”¹².

And Cameron Mitchell becomes conscious both of the dream and reality:

“... the myth of the origin of love is so important, because it tells me that there’s someone who can complete me... / The heartbreak being, if you live in the real world, you know that one person cannot complete you, no matter how much you want it... But you never will, no matter how hard you hold onto someone, become one person... It’s like the yearning is more important than the possibility”¹³.

Consequently, we have passed from completeness to lack and its subsequent desire (*éros*), i.e., from Aristophanes to Diotima-Socrates, or appealing once again to Comte-Sponville’s words: “Ce n’est plus l’amour tel qu’on le rêve, l’amour comblé et comblant, l’amour à l’eau de rose: c’est l’amour tel qu’il est, dans sa souffrance féconde... c’est la passion, la vraie, celle qui affole et déchire... celle qui exalte et emprisonne”¹⁴. Or as stated by Professor Lewis in Richard Attenborough’s *Shadowlands*, which is so far from the sensibility and manners of *Hedwig and The Angry Inch*:

‘The perfect rosebud is an image of the courtly love, its one essential quality is its unattainability. The most intense joy lies not in the having but in the desiring. Delight that never fades, Bliss that is eternal, is only yours when what you most desire is just out of reach’¹⁵.

In fact, completeness corresponds to that defiant Hedwig above who was “wall or bridge”, that is to say, a link between two poles which in its turn into a unity. The other Hedwig, who hesitates and longs, undoubtedly deserves all lovers’ solidarity:

‘It is clear that I must find my other half, but is it a he or a she? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow complementary? Does my other half have what I don’t? Did he get ... The luck? The love? Were we really separated forcibly or did he just run off... ? Or did I with this person embarrass me? What about sex? Is that how we put ourselves back together again? Or can two people actually become one again?’

His lack is due to his excessive generosity, and this would demonstrate that, in spite of not having displayed any extreme episode of arrogance (*hybris*), a good number of savage Zeuses or Joves have been cutting him at their discretion all through his life. Suture has saved his image – he continues to be an icon-, but the final result, which is the consequence of many previous restorations, has hardly anything to do with that exalted completeness of the myth of the origin of love:

¹² Comte-Sponville, A. *Petit traité des grands vertus*. Paris: PUF, 1995, pp. 303-04.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 307-8

¹⁵ With a William Nicholson’s screenplay.

‘I was born on the other side of a town ripped in two, and no matter how hard I try, I end black and blue. I rose from off of the doctor’s slab, I lost a piece of my heart. Now everyone gets to take a stab, they cut me up into parts. I gave a piece to my mother, I gave a piece to my man, I gave a piece to the rock... and ran. I’ve got it all sewn up, a hardened razor cut, scar map cross my body, and you can trace the lines through misery’s designs that map across my body, a *collage*. I’m all sewn up, a *montage*...’.

Hedwig meets Tommy and falls in love with him. In fact, he discovers in him his other half. He names him Tommy Gnosis, “the Greek word for knowledge” and Hedwig-Cameron knows perfectly well what is the reason. This young man believes in eternal love, in Jesus and Eve, above all in that Eve who was still on the inside of Adam in paradise, and also in that Eve who, after having eaten of the apple in order to know what Good and Evil is, wants his fellow to take part in this adventure: (Tommy) ‘Hedwig, would you give me the apple?’. Or: ‘When she was separated from him, that’s when paradise was lost. So when she enters him again, paradise will be regained’. (Hedwig) ‘However you want it, honey. Just kiss me while we do it’. Fortunately, Cameron’s own words save us from risky conjectures:

“Tommy’s view of Genesis kind of echoes mine, when I first heard it as a kid. I was like, “Why is God so upset that you wanted to know something, or eat of the apple? Why is that a bad thing?” I never understood that... In the Gnostic tradition, Eve is connected to Jesus, as the knowledge-giver... And the overarching force was an androgynous force, and Jesus and Eve are manifestations of that. And this idea of Adam and Eve being together and separating --the separating was the problem”¹⁶.

Therefore, it is quite clear that, though they are distant in time, Eve-Jesus, a woman and a man, create that longed-for completeness which in some way becomes incarnate in all the Hedwigs, thus causing scandal –I am afraid- among those who have always asserted the doubtless and exclusive masculine identity of God. At any rate, as Professor Josep Montserrat Torrents maintains: “El androginismo es uno de los modelos míticos de la *coincidentia oppositorum*. Dioses andróginos aparecen en diversas religiones... pero es en el gnosticismo donde aparece por primera vez el androginismo integrado en un sistema filosófico-teológico...”¹⁷ (“Androgyny is one of the mythic models of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Androgynous gods can be found in different religions... but it is in Gnosticism where for the first time androgyny belongs to a philosophical and theological system...”).

Hedwig and The Angry Inch ends in a way that I suppose the essayist Comte-Sponville would like very much. The last scene shows us Hedwig, after a concert, almost dragging his feet and above all dragging that solitude which accompanies human beings all through their lives since they long for something else that has not arrived yet. Diotima and Socrates, then, would be the “winners” or, in other words, reality prevails over any kind of dream. However, there has also been room for Aristophanes, since there has certainly been completeness, a true one which seems to be within the reach of some people who are capable of restoring a frequently broken human map. As said before, Tommy “Gnosis” and Hedwig become friends once again at the end, that is to say, the young man “acknowledges” for the first time the magnitude of his error:

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Los Gnósticos I*. Madrid: Clásicos Gredos, nº 59, p. 94, note 13. It is also worth remembering that John Cameron Mitchell also states that “androgyny is traditional in rock, or blues people even. From Little Richard through the British androgynes, Mick and Elton and Bowie, through to now, there’s always been that tradition” (*Ibidem*).

‘... forgive me for I did not know, cause I was just a boy, you were so much more than any god could ever plan, more than a woman or a man. Now I understand, how much I took from you, that when everything starts breaking down, you take the pieces off the ground, show this wicked town something beautiful and new. You think that luck has left you... but maybe there’s nothing up in the sky but air, and there’s no mystical design, no cosmic lover preassigned...’.

Many people took pieces of him, and he is at the same time the sum of everyone he knew. It does not matter. There is room for the pride that he hastens to offer his fellow, Yitzhak, and to other rock & roll stars, whose completeness resembles that one created by the grooves of a 45 disc:

‘... know in your soul... that you’re whole, and you’re shining like the brightest star... and you’re spinning like a 45... and Tina, and Yoko, Aretha... and me, and all the strange rock and rollers, you know you’re doing alright, so hold on to each other, you gotta hold on tonight... Lift up your hands, now’.

Free from any kind of inhibition and provocative, as usual in the case of independent or alternative films, *Hedwig and The Angry Inch* invades without caution or complex our specific realm, though it is quite evident that Classical Philology would demand better credentials to enter it. Nevertheless, John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask are neither frivolous nor scandalous. On the contrary, they know how to cast serious doubts on all sorts of dogmas with regard to sexuality, genres and identities, thus approaching the deepest and most hidden aspects of human nature. And, then, myth and all its power to suggest and the subsequent effort to create the image that does not yet exist reveals itself once more as one of the greatest legacies of Antiquity. For my part, every time Ancient Wisdom -which very often rests on myth without yet abandoning rationality- is clearly honoured I simply prefer to show my gratitude and conduct my analysis, as I think I have done all the time, through a course of both of equanimity and respect.