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Poet seeks to shake up order

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Poets have no place in the ideal republic. They prefer disorder to order. They disturb the peace by becoming intoxicated not only with wine, but with their own imaginings and their words. They fall in love, yet they will serve no one. How can you hope to preserve law and order, Plato asked, if you permit these enemies of reason to disturb the population?

Plato, as Antonio T. de Nicolas sees him, did not understand the position of the poet. Philosopher, translator, educator and poet, de Nicolas agrees that the poet disturbs the peace. However, he thinks that the peace, especially one such as ours founded on the half-truths and short-range visions of a materialistic society, should be disturbed.

Educated in Spain, India and the United States, de Nicolas is professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Addressing the failure of contemporary education, de Nicolas has written extensively about the need to reconnect art and science. Science and technology, de Nicolas says, will advance only if we recognize the importance of the arts — not as a type of recreation, but as the archetype of self-creation. The poet reminds us of that importance.

Among de Nicolas' numerous books are "Habits of Mind," a criticism of higher education; "Powers of Imagining," a study of Ignatius de Loyola; and "Remembering the God to Come," a collection of poems. In each of these books, de Nicolas looks at the power of art and archetypes to animate ordinary life. The poems in his latest book, "The Sea Tug Elegies/Of Angels and Women, Mostly," explore the same theme. They focus on Eros, the source of creative power, as found in the works of Sappho, Ovid, Shakespeare and (more recently) Dylan Thomas and Theodore Roethke.

In the book's foreword, William Packard, editor of New York Quarterly, explains that "we need poets to show us how Eros can open us up to far larger mysteries in this universe we live in." And he calls de Nicolas "a voice to guide us back to the central mystery of love . . ." No other Greek god, Packard suggests, has been misrepresented as much as Eros. Picturing Eros as a fat boy on a valentine, we deny the classical notion of love. Eros, as the Greeks saw him, was the creator. He alone could conquer death.

To the modern way of thinking, love does not conquer death; love does, however, bring life. And poets, as de Nicolas describes them, express this transforming power. Poets, according to de Nicolas, are like revolving doors. Winter passes through them, but so does spring. They cannot close themselves to either one because, in doing so, they close themselves to both. By keeping themselves open, they allow love to enter. Poets, furthermore, have no protection from the elements. "Earth, air, fire and water" are in them; they accept the order of their disorder. Neither people, nor angels, nor gods can speak for poets. They speak for themselves. "I am the original voice of human life," he writes.

Addressing his daughter in "The Sea Tug Elegies," a sequence of poems comprising almost half of this book, he presents the poet as one who connects the gods of the underworld and the gods of heaven to the Earth. Like Persephone, he tells her, we must pass through our own underworld. And we need love to take us on this journey into the self. Ironically, love, except for the greeting card variety, is often an absence in our lives.

Steeped as they are in mythology and philosophy, these are not easy poems. Nor is de Nicolas an easy poet. He confronts us with the necessity to remake our lives. If his poems disturb us, it is because they show us that we are not bound by rules. Nor are we bound by mysteries. We are bound by love. And therefore, we are boundless.