

LOVE & ROMANCE : A NOTE

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DEDICATION : MY MOTHER

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*"In love, everything is true, everything
is false; it is the one subject on which
one cannot express an absurdity."*

— S. CHAMFORT

"Before I knew you" - look, the words are meaningless. You know very well that, when I saw you for the first time, I recognised you at once'.

ANDRE BRETON.

The concept of romantic love is often paralleled with the Romantic movement as a whole. The turn of the eighteenth century began to witness a massive upheaval in attitudes as well as technical changes in all the cultures. But it would be mistaken to confuse the extraordinary developments in the Romantic arts with romantic love; true the reaction to freer and more violent expression inevitably fed more information of a sexual-passion nature to the man in the street, but no more than this. The basis for the concept of romantic love does not lie in 'expression' or in the degree of inhibition but in Myth; and this goes back very much further indeed.

No matter how light-weight the material that deals with romance, it never fails to hint at the essential common denominator, Unity.

The number of power for the lover is One, One in consideration, One in sensuality, One in every kind of awareness, One and One only.

Everything to the 'real' lover seems to have come from the same source, it is one of the few areas in which the word 'eternity' takes on any meaning.

Endless emphasis has been placed on the origins of the masculine and feminine principles, and we are all familiar in some way with the myth of Adam and Eve. Eve was contained in him, and then taken from him. Genesis makes the arrival of sexuality coincide with man's revolt against the divine Unity. Hence every man is Adam who carries within him the obscure but recognised image of Eve. A haunting suggestion, therefore, emerges in some of our lives that the concept of the 'ideal couple' may not be romantic in the assumed sense but a psychic necessity for any relationship of quality and meaning.

And the primary hint to this assumption is the very exploitation of this myth in the form of high and popular art and literature, which failing to 'experience' the androgynous origins of our nature struggles to perpetuate its memory in a bizarre 'creative' pollution.

The romantic experience in its deepest sense may be seen as the only way in which two people may return - even for a moment - to their origins. By becoming 'One' the primordial nostalgia is satisfied; for all the great Systems have their beginnings in Unity. Distinction has created separateness, and this duality with its consequent sense of isolation creates a kind of homesickness, which may only be assuaged by the 'return' of the desire and union of the sexes.

One of the most popular romantic tales in Western Literature is the novel, *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Bronte. This strange and occasionally extraordinary work contains several memorable passages regarding the kind of 'hint' referred to above. Chapter nine, for example, contains the following observation made by the 'heroine', Catherine:

'I cannot express it, but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here? My great miseries in this world have been Heathcliff's miseries, and I watched and felt each from the beginning: my great thought in living is in himself. If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger: I should not seem a part of it. My love for Linton is as the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as the winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary. I am Heathcliff!'

Here in dramatic but simple terms can be identified all the ingredients that go to make up the exciting and beautiful metaphysic of contraries. Night and Day, One and Many, Order and Chaos. Much earlier Plato in his *Symposium* has the comic-poet Aristophanes observe that originally human beings were a rounded whole, with double back and flanks forming a complete circle; it has four hands and an equal number of legs and so on. These people, it appears, were quite formidable and at one

point had the audacity to attempt climbing to heaven in order to set upon the gods. Zeus and the other gods considered this behaviour tiresome and decided that by cutting them in half they would perform the double function of weakening them and making them more numerous to serve. Aristophanes concludes his speech on Love to his friends led by Socrates by saying:

'.....and everybody would regard it as the precise expression of the desire which he had long felt but had been unable to formulate, that he should melt into his beloved, and that henceforth they should be one being instead of two. The reason is that this was our primitive condition when we were wholes, and love is simply the name for the desire and the pursuit of the whole.'

There is an overwhelming amount of material on the variants of the androgyne myth. And it serves convincingly to show that the symbolism of Unity and Duality occurs almost everywhere. This is not to say that the myth has not become degraded, it is difficult today to use the term hermaphrodite without conjuring an atmosphere of theatrical erotic-curioso. Thus it becomes more important to remind ourselves of the fascinating and complex history of the androgyne throughout western and Eastern culture, whether through gnosticism and alchemy or the Cabala and Ritual Magic.

A significant area of its development arises with the behaviour of the courtly love of the Troubadours. But here sexual union was replaced by a 'magical' communication between the lover and his Lady. The energy that might normally disperse itself in sexual activity is sublimated and employed in awakening the 'feminine' image of their Lady within themselves. For the Troubadour, Love was an ecstasy of incomparable value; it was higher than life itself for it was a means by which one could understand divine mysteries.

"For love sing the birds, and for love sing I," cries the minstrel, and he lays down his lute to indulge in amorous adventure as a point of philosophic honour.

It seemed necessary to become 'intoxicated' by the mistress's charms, and in this exalted condition to begin to sing. The 'love experience', however, tended to encourage some rather excessive behaviour on the part of the Troubadour who would ceaselessly walk through the snow in piteous pilgrimage wearing nothing but gossamer materials of the lightest texture in order to excite the compassion of the most obdurate lady. When summer came they would likewise exchange their gauze garments for thick furs and heavy woollen wraps suffocating in massy swounds of covering as a means of self-mortification through unrequited love.

One such gentleman - Richard de Barbesieu - had the misfortune of attaching himself to a lady of singular vivacity, gaiety and energy who never tired of society and brilliant conversation. Her ardent admirer, however, was possessed of a very gloomy, melancholy disposition, and though poet and songster of high standing, his talents encouraged by her interest, he was never fully compensated by even the slightest testimony of her love. Quitting her company he attached herself to another young lady and sang her praises just as strongly. "I like not men such as you", said his new charmer, "you have abandoned the loveliest lady in the world, and there is every possibility that you will abandon me." Barbesieu took her advice and returned to his former lady-love, but this Countess bitterly rejected him and he ended with no-one. He decided to live for the rest of his life as a hermit in the forest and there to pass his days until he had been returned to the favour of the Countess. For two years she refused to see him; all the lords and ladies missed him, they exhorted him to leave his isolation and to return to the world, but all their efforts ended in failure. Eventually the Countess gave utterance to as singular a whim as must ever pass through the mind of a lover. She said that if one hundred ladies and one hundred gentlemen, who were truly in love with one another, would come to her with their hands joined, and falling on their knees before her would thus solicit the pardon of the Troubadour, she would grant it, but on no other terms. It appears that this large instalment of lovers was not too difficult to find, and Barbesieu was relieved of his life in the woods. Stories abound regarding the sacrificial element in the 'love experience'; they grew beards to their feet, forcing their servants to do the same, and in the case of Pierre Vidal - the Don Quixote of the Troubadours - demonstrated to all the world love for his lady by disguising himself as a wolf to be hunted by dogs and men. When finally caught by the hounds he cried out to the huntsmen "I will not allow the dogs to be driven off, I am submitting to their mangling teeth for the best of purposes."

The cult of chivalry, its beautiful symbols and bizarre activities did not fully quench its flame until the 17th century. From Jean de Meung's Roman de la Rose to Dante's Vita Nuova, and from there to Jonson and John Donne. Perhaps nowhere is the notion of that 'touch' between allegory and personal biographical experience more clearly enshrined than in the tale of Dante and Beatrice. For Dante the sinner paled and sighed at his guilt when he saw her, the sight of her ennobled all who met her in the street. Whoever she greeted trembled, and when she died Dante wrote a letter to the princes of the earth to notify them of the great loss the world had suffered. The transcendental quality of medieval love poetry reached a 'climax' in Dante's 'beyond the grave' attitude towards sacral love.

"It was through love that the subtle
Tempter turned me to evil ways"

HELOISE

If duality lay like a mysterious shadow in the background of the love experience, then it was so because unity lay there also.

If passion lost control and revealed some elemental dynamic, then it was so because chastity crept in its wake.

The vast lunacy of recent centuries in its attempt to resolve the 'spiritual' complexities of carnal nature, have resulted in strange mutations where human relationships are concerned.

The phenomenon of marriage in all its variations over the last century is witness to some of the most aggressive and insensitive masculine orientated behaviour patterns ever perpetrated by human beings. Where sheer wanton destruction is concerned, it bears comparison with the great wars, with the anti-semitic holocausts and other nameless horrors. But it is in the nature of the marriage ritual to disguise these elements. The commandment that exhorts us not to covet our neighbour's goods, treats as part of his property his wife. The whole concept of treating another human being as 'property' as at the basis of our personal sense of security. Hence our fears of infidelity and 'betrayal'; the symbol of the fool-cuckold strikes at the very heart of our usage of other people to help navigate existential problems.

"God in heaven help us! Can we not get it into our heads/
that impossible promises are not promises, that they are not
able to be kept. Who would promise to fly like a bird and
keep his promise, if God did not perform a miracle on his
behalf? Yet now it is the same, whether it be a man or a
woman who takes vows of chastity, for they are not created
for chastity.

Who has commanded thee to promise and to swear what is
against God and his order?... Wilt thou learn whom thou
hast promised to keep chaste? I will tell thee: the foul
devil in hell and his mother."

When Luther wrote this in the 16th century the problem was only beginning. True the seed of 19th century attitudes to man as mere flesh and woman as pure spirit had already been sown. The church recognised four seasons for marriage, to procreate, to avoid undue lewdness (an extraordinary phantasy if ever there was one); to be of 'mutual help' to one another, and to seal a pact, a change of property or some other business. He that married to satisfy his desires alone commits a deadly sin and is predestined to hell. It was a misuse of the sacrament that married people should love each other too much.

Ambrosius recommends that woman should encourage moderation by dieting in order to weaken her desires. Her mission is to tame the desire of man and to bring him to his knees. For Jeronimus virgins are angels half way to heaven. The Queen of them all was the 'Virgin' Mary herself.

She rose in esteem as the centuries rolled on upon the three wheels of the Trinity and it was not long before she became the fourth.

As one worshipped the wounds of Christ, so one worshipped her.

Bernhard of Clairvaux seems just a little too passionate when he says:

"It must be like a kiss to thee, Virgin, every time thou hearest
the Ave Maria of the angels. Every time one humbly greets thee
with an Ave, thou are kissed in blessedness."

Needless to say, the lust of life broke out somewhere, and nowhere more clearly than in the visual arts. Arid dry angels singing hosannas were soon replaced by mighty breasts and arses, and the glorification of human flesh satiated itself on the corpse of ascetic men and women.

The act of loving someone is simultaneously the act of giving them attention. The two are fundamentally related; if one loves without giving attention then one loves 'symbolically', and the need for attention finds an outlet elsewhere.

Several aspects of eroticism and frigidity emerge at this point.

The inability to express the needs that we recognise as attention seeking results in tendencies we often term 'deviant'

We are witness today to the enormous number of contradictions and absurdities that operate in the realm of human affection.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the way in which we are conditioned by the media to have faith in completely unreal aspects of the love experience. Wilde wrote that "When one is in love one begins by deceiving oneself. And one ends by deceiving others. That is what the world call a Romance". In this sense the romantic experience has within it a specific treachery, an inherent faithlessness has been inbuilt into the commodity that is sold in the market place of human communication. The old proverb "Nothing dries sooner than a tear" reflects that touch of truth none of us can deny, but does not satisfy.

The curious nature of human affection seems structured in such a way that when it has 'committed' itself to one other person it simply refuses to see the rest.

If we find reasonably attractive one in every hundred persons we meet, let us even say one in every thousand, then we are aware that in relation to the present population we are finding strongly attractive and to our personal taste, approximately 13 million men and women. By meeting just one of this army of possibilities we can, in many cases, find ourselves satisfied. This may be plain lifelessness or stupidity, but it does seem that many couples find genuine reward in exclusive relationships. A healthy suspicion may be levelled at such behaviour, for its very exclusiveness can so easily exclude the whole of the world.

But equally it could be argued that through the relation with the 'one person' one is making a contact, if only for a moment, with an essential mystery that lies behind it all.

If a person walks up to another in the street and states directly: 'I find you attractive, I wish to make sex with you'; one may respond according to one's conditioning and impulses, but it is rarely seen as a 'Romantic experience' simply because the element of mystery is absent. We know that 'in fact' the same mystery lies dormant in every situation, but it does not 'feel' that way. The very nature of such a simplistic and direct overture is designed to ban that element of 'destiny' we all feel drawn to in the romantic experience.

By behaving in a manner that expresses 'authority' over the situation, one undervalues the mysterious. Only when we do not 'feel' that we understand what is happening, only when we feel that a situation is not in one's control - somehow in other hands - do we submit ourselves in trust to the enigma of the situation.

Another interpretation for this inclination may well be simple ignorance; but it is clear that only in the realm of the mysterious and the uncontrolled is the sensation of surrender to another person possible.

Some brief thought should be given to the rather extraordinary attitudes operating in our own times regarding romanticism and sex.

The fundamental approach towards sex and romantic love held by more or less all the publicists, propagandists in any manner, shape and form at the present time seems to be that sex without 'love', sex for its own delightful sake, sex devoid of mutual respect, warmth, admiration, is more or less the cheapest and most disgusting thing in the world. Whoever enjoys sex pleasure with a mate whom he or she does not 'love' is, according to this view, an insensitive, crass, low-living soulless apology for a human being.

Illustrations abound in contemporary popular literature and art testifying to this attitude.

In a popular novel called 'The Long Love', the hero hints that his wife may fancy his friend; she, hurt to the quick that he should even consider such a possibility, retorts: "What you say is an insult to me, I will not endure it, do you hear me, Ned"? If ever again you accuse me of being physical with a man I don't love, that day I will leave you."

Sex without love is seen as such anathema that to cohabit with someone one did not adore is a crime against oneself and society. In more sophisticated and sexually liberated stories this sex-without

-love-equals-iniquity theme is still supported. 'A Rage To Live' has its adulterous heroine refuse a would-be-lover with these words:

"I'm sorry too, it has to be love with me, Paul. Or the other so much that I don't know where it comes from, and can't help it."

If one considers the idea that sex is largely a biological urge, and that it is proper for men and women to cohabit without thought of love and marriage, we find it strangely 'necessary to reject the notion out of hand by saying that pigs and snakes may freely copulate on a biological basis but any human being who does so must have a pig's or snake's sensibilities.

I am carnal, sold under sin.

In me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing.

ST. PAUL, Romans vii, 14 and 18.

Hardly anyone dares to face with open eyes the great delights of love.

ANDRE BRETON.

The theme that sex without love is not nice encourages the idea that sex pleasure, though real and enjoyable enough, simply cannot compare with the ecstatic joy of love. Curiously enough, the same romantic love without which sex becomes disgusting also serves to make sex wickedness good. In numberless novels the hero or heroine is allowed to fornicate and we have a variety of adulterous or forbidden relationships with some person precisely because they love the person. Love, presumably, sanctifies anything. The rationale that makes unconventional sex behaviour sinful in one instance and not in another seems to be the romantic notion that love somehow so transforms the sex act as to make it entirely different from the same act performed on a non-love basis.

The aim of this view implies that once sex becomes transformed by love, imperious and promiscuous sex desires suddenly become rigidly channeled, towards the one true love of their life, etc. In the novel 'Prince of Egypt', the previously Don Juan-like Amon-nebet tells Moses that since he has loved Nefertiti, "I haven't wanted to possess another woman. Is that strange?" And Moses replies: "No, it's not strange at all. I think I would feel the same way."

We are constantly assured that the moment 'it happens' we will kick out of bed all those delicious athletic 'compensations' that we have been killing our time with up till now.

Psychology goes so far as to regularly imply that anyone who is unable to comply with this romantic monogamous pattern in his sex life is distinctly immature.

Romantic philosophy at present, it seems, runs as follows:

(1) Sex is only good, beautiful and proper when it is accompanied by deep feelings of 'love'.

(2) Sex without 'love' is relatively mild, a purely animal pleasure. With 'love' it is soul-stirring and ecstatic bliss.

(3) The same kind of sex relations that, without 'love', would be shameful may be indulged in regardless when experienced as part of a heavily romantic attachment.

(4) Sex transformed by love becomes so rewarding that one does not give serious thought to copulating with another person.

The attitude, in short, amounts to the notion that sex desires should be thoroughly controlled by and under the influences of 'love' feelings, and that whenever they are not so controlled and influenced, they are more or less reprehensible. Ostensibly, this is a more or less consistent philosophy, and has no serious contemporary opposition. For although there is an increasing development in the area of pleasure for pleasure's sake, there is still not a very great deal of popular culture material dealing with the idea of men and women enjoying sex consciously without suffering some sort of unspeakable aftermath.

The key word is 'consciously'. Unconsciously the situation seems to be very different.

For whilst most of the arts present human relationships within the general context of the 'love experience', and each participant is in love or temporarily imagining they are, and whilst every non-fictional publication on sex points out the importance of not 'cheapening' sex, there can be little doubt that below the very thin surface of this sex-must-go-with-love- attitude, lies a vast terrain of flaunting promiscuity.

The numberless lasciviously arrayed - and disarrayed - ladies that adorn our streets, advertisements, cinemas, everything and anything from Mary Magdalene to exhaust pipes are clearly designed to arouse masculine ardour. Can we seriously accept that the endless relationships carried on in the backs of cars

or in comfortable bedrooms are regularly accompanied with the breathless clippety-clop of heart beats, or rather, are these innumerable kisses, embraces and copulations enjoyed on a fairly non-feeling and neutral basis resulting in the piling up of an enormous burden of guilt and regret that will scare and inhibit sex pleasure, sabotaging the mental and physical health of a variety of human beings who 'should not', but obviously do, enjoy themselves.

These observations echo fairly simple factors prevalent today. It is clear that the factors of modern technology, scientific discovery, literacy, and universal education, makes it increasingly difficult for traditional-conservative views of any type, including sexual views, to flourish unchallenged, unopposed, for very long.

There will always be some degree of cultural lag, which permits highly inconsistent and immature sex views to linger on for decades and even centuries beyond their original function and logical applicability to human affairs.

*How nicely does doggish lust beg for
a piece of spirit when a piece of
flesh is denied it.*

— NIETZSCHE