

# AGAINST LOVE

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A POLEMIC

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To the only begetter  
—Shakespeare, *Sonnets*

## LOVE'S LABORS

Will all the adulterers in the room please stand up? This means all you cheating wives, philandering husbands, and straying domestic partners, past, present, and future. Those who find themselves fantasizing a lot, please rise also. So may those who have ever played supporting roles in the adultery melodrama: "other man," "other woman," suspicious spouse or marital detective ("I called your office at three and they said you'd left!"), or least fun of all, the miserable cuckold or cuckoldess. Which, of course, you may be, without (at least, consciously) knowing that you are. Feel free to take a second to mull this over, or to make a quick call: "*Hi hon, just checking in!*"

It will soon become clear to infidelity cognoscenti that we're not talking about your one-night stands here: not about those transient out-of-town encounters, those half-remembered drunken fumbblings, those remaining enclaves of suburban swinging—or any of the other casual opportunities for bodies to collide in relatively impersonal ways in postmodern America. We live in sexually interesting times, meaning a culture which manages to be simultaneously hypersexualized and to retain its Puritan underpinnings, in precisely equal proportions. Estimates of the percentage of those coupled who have strayed at least once vary from 20

to 70 percent, meaning that you can basically select any statistic you like to support whatever position you prefer to take on the prevalence of such acts. Whatever the precise number—and really, must we join the social scientists and pen-protector brigades and fetishize numbers?—apparently, taking an occasional walk on the wild side while still wholeheartedly pledged to a monogamous relationship isn't an earthshaking contradiction. Many of us manage to summon merciful self-explanations as required ("Shouldn't drink on an empty stomach") or have learned over the years to deploy the strategic exception ("Out-of-town doesn't count," "Oral sex doesn't count") with hairsplitting acumen. Perhaps a few foresightful types have even made prior arrangements with the partner to cover such eventualities—the "one time rule," the "must-confess-all rule" (though such arrangements are said to be more frequent these days among our non-heterosexual denominations). Once again, statistics on such matters are spotty.\*

\*Sexual self-reporting is notoriously unreliable. Consider the statistical problems plaguing the 1994 survey on sexual behavior by the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center. Though touted as the most authoritative and thorough sex survey ever conducted, there was a small problem with the data: 64 percent of male sexual contacts reported couldn't be accounted for—or rather, they could if, in a pool of 3,500 responses, ten different women had each had 2,000 partners they didn't report. Sociologist Martina Morris, writing in the journal *Nature*, proposed a solution: eliminate the answers of male respondents who reported more than twenty partners in their lifetime or more than five in the previous year, which would make the numbers come out right. Leaving aside the question of whether men over-report more than women under-report sexual activity, or whether accumulating more than twenty partners in a lifetime defies probability, we might ask, does tweaking the

But we're not talking about "arrangements" with either self or spouse, or when it's "just sex," or no big thing. We will be talking about what feels like a big thing: the love affair. Affairs of the heart. Exchanges of intimacy, reawakened passion, confessions, idealization, and declarations—along with favorite books, childhood stories, relationship complaints, and deepest selves, often requiring agonized consultation with close friends or professional listeners at outrageous hourly rates because one or both parties are married or committed to someone else, thus all this merging and ardor takes place in nervous hard-won secrecy and is turning your world upside down. In other words, we will be talking about *contradictions*, large, festering contradictions at the epicenter of love in our time. Infidelity will serve as our entry point to this teeming world of ambivalence and anxiety, and as our lens on the contemporary ethos of love—as much an imaginary space as an actual event. (Commitment's dark other, after all—its dialectical pal.) Meaning whether or not you signed up for the gala cruise, we're all in this boat one way or another—if only by virtue of vowing not to be.

So just as a thought experiment—though it will never happen to *you* and certainly never has—please imagine finding yourself in the contradictory position of having elected to live a life from which you now plot intricate and

data on the basis of such assumptions make statistics any more reliable than guesses? As it happens, the Chicago survey reported quite low adultery rates (men 21 percent, women 11 percent), figures which are still widely quoted in current news stories on adultery. By comparison, the Kinsey reports pegged male adultery at 50 percent (in 1948) and female adultery (in 1953) at 26 percent.

meticulous escapes: a subdivision getaway artist, a Houdini of the homefront. You didn't plan it, yet . . . somehow here you are, buffeted by conflicting emotions, and the domesticity you once so earnestly pledged to uphold now a tailor-made straitjacket whose secret combination is the ingenious (and hopefully undetectable) excuses you concoct to explain your mounting absences (or mounting phone bills for you long-distance strayers; thank God for those prepaid phone cards, an adulterer's telephonic godsend). When defenses are down, or some minor domestic irritant unaccountably becomes an epic dispute—which happens even in the best of times, not only when you're preoccupied by thoughts of where you'd rather be and with whom—or when the yearning becomes physically painful, or you're spending an inordinate amount of time sobbing in the bathroom, this turn of events may raise fundamental questions about what sort of emotional world you want to inhabit, or what fulfillments you're entitled to, or—for a daring few—even the nerve-rattling possibility of actually *changing your life*. (Alternatively, forego hard questions and just up the Prozac dosage, which will probably take care of that resurgent libido problem too.)

A note on terminology: while adultery traditionally requires the prior condition of a state-issued marriage license for at least one of the parties, for the purposes of the ensuing discussion any coupled relationship based on the assumption of sexual fidelity will count as "married." And with gay populations now demanding official entry to state-sanctioned nuptials too, no longer is this the heterosexual plight alone: welcome aboard all commitment-seeking queer,

bi, and transgendered compatriots. But gay or straight, licensed or not, anywhere the commitment to monogamy reigns, adultery provides its structural transgression—sexual exclusivity being the cornerstone of modern coupledness, or such is the premise—and for the record, you can also commit it with any sex or gender your psyche can manage to organize its desires around; this may not always be the same one that shapes your public commitments.

An additional terminological point. As our focus will be on "social norms" and "mainstream conventions" of love rather than exceptions and anomalies (and on the interesting penchant for inventing conventions that simultaneously induce the desire for flight), for the purposes of discussion terms like "love" and "coupledom," or "coupled" and "married," will often be used interchangeably. Though coupledom is not always the sole outcome of romantic love, nor does love necessarily persist throughout coupledom's duration; though not all couples have joined into legal marriage contracts with the state; though a few iconoclasts do manage to love to the beat of a different drummer, let's agree at the outset that the sequence "love-couple-marriage" does structure prevailing social expectations, regardless of variations in individual practices. Feel free to make whatever semantic adjustments are required should some idiosyncrasy (or prolonged adolescent rebellion or bad luck streak or terminal ambivalence) on your part necessitate a different terminology. "Domestic partners," "significant others," even you "commitment-phobes": keep reading. There are a million stories in love's majestic empire, and yours is in here too.

And while we're clarifying terms, a note on gender. These days either partner can play either gender role, masculine or feminine, regardless of sex or sexual orientation. Thus, gender will not be a significant aspect of our discussion. Whoever waits at home, whoever "has their suspicions," is the wife. Whoever "wants more freedom" is the guy. And if the married-male/single-female configuration is still the most prevalent adultery form, all indications are that female straying is on the rise: clearly all that was required were more opportunities for women to get out of the house. (And more academic degrees: sociologists report that the higher a woman's education level, the more likely she is to have affairs; when the female partner has more education than the male, she's the one more likely to stray.) While feminism typically gets the credit (or blame) for propelling women out of the domicile and into the job market, let's give credit where credit is due: thanks must go too to economic downturns and stagnating real wages—although if it now takes two incomes to support a household, maybe this was not exactly what the term "women's liberation" was designed to mean.\*

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\*It remains to be seen whether feminism's greatest accomplishment was the liberation of women or whether it was redistributing feminine submission more equally between the genders: this question will hover in the background of our discussion. Note that gender equity isn't necessarily synonymous with greater freedom; it can simply mean equality in submission. The wave of civil and constitutional reforms that took place throughout the liberal democracies during much of the twentieth century did grant women equal status as legal subjects and did reform marital property laws; the questions being posed here will take up less evident forms of subjection, which intersect variously with gender reforms.

And, finally, a note on genre. This *is* a polemic. If there is scant attention paid to the delights of coupled fidelity and the rewards of long-term intimacies or the marvelousness of love itself, please remember that the polemicist's job is not to retell the usual story, and that one is well rehearsed enough that it should not need rehearsing once more here. Should its absence cause anxiety, if frequent bouts of sputtering are occluding your reading experience, just append where necessary.

Adulterers: you may now be seated. Will all those in Good Relationships please stand? Thank you, feel free to leave if this is not your story—you for whom long-term coupledness is a source of optimism and renewal, not emotional anesthesia. Though before anyone rushes for the exits, a point of clarification: a "good relationship" would probably include having—and wanting to have—sex with your spouse or spouse-equivalent on something more than a quarterly basis. (Maybe with some variation in choreography?) It would mean inhabiting an emotional realm in which monogamy isn't giving something up (your "freedom," in the vernacular) because such cost-benefit calculations just don't compute. It would mean a domestic sphere in which faithfulness wasn't preemptively secured through routine interrogations ("Who was that on the phone, dear?"), surveillance ("Do you think I didn't notice how much time you spent talking to X at the reception?"), or impromptu search and seizure. A "happy" state of monogamy would be defined as a state you don't have to *work* at maintaining. After all, doesn't the demand for fidelity beyond the duration of desire *feel* like

work—or work as currently configured for so many of us handmaidens to the global economy: alienated, routinized, deadening, and not something you would choose to do if you actually had a choice in the matter?

Yes, we all know that Good Marriages Take Work: we've been well tutored in the catechism of labor-intensive intimacy. Work, work, work: given all the heavy lifting required, what's the difference between work and "after work" again? Work/home, office/bedroom: are you ever *not* on the clock? Good relationships may take work, but unfortunately, when it comes to love, trying is always trying too hard: work doesn't work. Erotically speaking, play is what works. Or as psychoanalyst Adam Phillips puts it: "In our erotic life . . . it is no more possible to work at a relationship than it is to will an erection or arrange to have a dream. In fact when you are working at it you know it has gone wrong, that something is already missing."

Yet here we are, toiling away. Somehow—how exactly did this happen?—the work ethic has managed to brown-nose its way into all spheres of human existence. No more play—*or* playing around—even when off the clock. Of course, the work ethic long ago penetrated the leisure sphere; leisure, once a respite from labor, now takes quite a lot of work itself. (Think about it the next time you find yourself repetitively lifting heavy pieces of metal after work: in other words, "working out.") Being wedded to the work ethic is not exactly a new story; this strain runs deep in middle-class culture: think about it the next time you're lying awake contemplating any of those 4 A.M. *raison d'être* questions about your self-worth or social value. (*"What have I*

*really accomplished?")*\* But when did the rhetoric of the factory become the default language of love—and does this mean that collective bargaining should now replace marriage counseling when negotiating for improved domestic conditions?

When monogamy becomes labor, when desire is organized contractually, with accounts kept and fidelity extracted like labor from employees, with marriage a domestic factory policed by means of rigid shop-floor discipline designed to keep the wives and husbands and domestic partners of the world choke-chained to the status quo machinery—is this really what we mean by a "good relationship"?

Back in the old days, social brooders like Freud liked to imagine that there was a certain basic lack of fit between our deepest instincts and society's requirements of us, which might have left us all a little neurosis-prone, but at least guaranteed some occasional resistance to the more stifling demands of socialization. But in the old days, work itself occasionally provided motives for resistance: the struggle over wages and conditions of course, and even the length of the workday itself. Labor and capital may have eventually struck a temporary truce at the eight-hour day, but look around: it's an advance crumbling as we speak. Givebacks

\*Note that sociologists have devised a somewhat ironical term for non-working populations—the unemployed, the welfare classes, the elderly, or criminals—presumably meant to reflect how they're seen by society. The term is "social garbage."

are the name of the game, and not just on the job either: with the demands of labor-intensive intimacy and “working on your relationship,” now it’s double-shifting for everyone.\* Or should we just call it vertical integration: the same compulsory overtime and capricious directives, the dress codes and attitude assessments, those dreaded annual performance reviews—and don’t forget “achieving orgasm.”

But recall that back in the old days the promise of technological progress was actually supposed to be *less* work rather than more. Now that’s an antiquated concept, gone the way of dodo birds and trade unionism. How can you not admire a system so effective at swallowing all alternatives to itself that it can make something as abject as “working for love” sound admirable? Punching in, punching out; trying to wrest love from the bosses when not busily toiling in the mine shafts of domesticity—or is it the other way around? It should come as no surprise, as work sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild reports, that one of the main reasons for the creeping expansion of the official workday is that a large segment of the labor force put in those many extra hours because they’re avoiding going home. (Apparently domestic life has become such a chore that staying at the office is more relaxing.)

So when does domestic overwork qualify as a labor viola-

\*But which sphere models the other? Recent United Nations statistics show employed Americans working an average of 49½ hours a week, and that’s just at paid labor. This is an average of 3½ weeks a year more than Japanese workers (the previous world leaders), 6½ weeks more than British workers, and 12½ weeks more than German workers. Said the economist who compiled the report, “It has a lot to do with the American psyche, with American culture.”

tion and where do you file the forms? For guidance on such questions, shall we go straight to the horse’s mouth? This, of course, would be Marx, industrial society’s *poète maudit*, so little read yet so vastly reviled, who started so much trouble so long ago by asking a very innocent question: “What is a working day?” For this is the simple query at the heart of *Capital* (which took three volumes to answer). As we see, Marx’s question remains our own to this day: just how long should we have to work before we get to quit and goof around, and still get a living wage? Or more to our point, if private life in post-industrialism means that relationships now take work too, if love is the latest form of alienated labor, would rereading *Capital* as a marriage manual be the most appropriate response?

What people seem to forget about Marx (too busy blaming him for all those annoying revolutions) is how evocatively he writes about *feelings*. Like the feeling of overwork. The motif of workers being bled dry keeps cropping up in his funny, mordant prose, punctuated by flurries of over-the-top Gothic metaphors about menacing deadness. The workday is a veritable graveyard, menaced by gruesome creatures and ghouls from the world of the ambulatory dead; overwork produces “stunted monsters,” the machinery is a big congealed mass of dead labor, bosses are “blood-sucking vampires,” so ravenous to extract more work from the employees to feed their endless werewolf-like hunger for profit, that if no one fought about the length of the workday it would just go on and on, leaving us crippled monstrosities in the process, with more and more alienated labor demanded from our tapped-out bodies until we dropped dead just from exhaustion.



Funny, the metaphors of the homefront seem to have acquired a rather funereal ring these days too: *dead* marriages, *mechanical* sex, *cold* husbands, and *frigid* wives, all going through the motions and keeping up appearances. Your desire may have withered long ago, you may yearn—in inchoate, stumbling ways—for “something else,” but you’re indentured nevertheless. *Nothing must change*. Why? Because you’ve poured so much of yourself into the machinery already—your lifeblood, your history—which paradoxically imbues it with magical powers. Thus will social institutions (factories in *Capital*, but love is a social institution too) come to subsume and dominate their creators, who don’t see it happening, or what they’ve lost, or that the thing they themselves invented and bestowed with life has taken them over like a hostile alien force, like it had a life of its own. Or so Marx diagnosed the situation at the advent of industrialism.

A doleful question lingers, and with no answer yet in sight: *Why work so hard?* Because there’s no other choice? But maybe there is. After all, technological progress could reduce necessary labor to a minimum had this ever been made a social goal—if the goal of progress were freeing us from necessity instead of making a select few marvelously rich while the luckless rest toil away. Obviously the more work anyone has to do, the less gratification it yields—no doubt true even when “working on your relationship”—whereas, being freed from work would (to say the least!) alter the entire structure of human existence, not to mention jettison all those mildewed work-ethic relationship credos too—into the dustbin of history they go. “Free time and

you free people,” as the old labor slogan used to go. Of course, free people might pose social dangers. Who knows what mischief they’d get up? What other demands would come next?

As Marx should have said, if he didn’t: “Why work when you can play? Or play around?” (Of course, playing around sometimes gets to be serious business too; about which, more to come.) Historical footnote: Marx was quite the adulterer himself.

Whining about working conditions won’t make you too popular with management though, so keep your complaints to yourself. Obviously the well-publicized desperation of single life—early death for men; statistical improbability of ever finding mates for women—is forever wielded against reform-minded discontented couple-members, much as the grimness of the USSR once was against anyone misguided enough to argue for systematic social reforms in a political argument (or rash enough to point out that the “choices” presented by the liberal democracies are something less than an actual choice). “Hey, if you don’t like it here, just see how you like it over there.” Obviously, couple economies too are governed—like our economic system itself—by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibitions, held in place by those incessant assurances that there are “no viable alternatives.” (What an effective way of preventing anyone from thinking one up.) Let’s note in passing that the citizenship-as-marriage analogy has been a recurring theme in liberal-democratic political theory for the last couple of hundred

years or so, from Rousseau on: these may feel like entirely personal questions, but perhaps they're also not without a political dimension? (More on this to come.)

How we love and how we work can hardly be separate questions: we're social creatures after all—despite all those enlightening studies of sexual behavior in bonobos and red-winged blackbirds claiming to offer important insights into the nuances of human coupling. Harkening back to some remote evolutionary past for social explanations does seem to be a smoke screen for other agendas, usually to tout the “naturalness” of capitalist greed or the “naturalness” of traditional gender roles. Man as killer ape; woman as nurturing turtledove, or name your own bestial ancestor as circumstance requires. (When sociobiologists start shitting in their backyards with dinner guests in the vicinity, maybe their arguments about innateness over culture will start seeming more persuasive.) No, we're social creatures to a fault, and apparently such malleable ones that our very desires manage to keep lockstep with whatever particular social expectations of love prevail at the moment. What else would explain a polity so happily reconciled to social dictates that sex and labor could come to function like one inseparable unit of social machinery? Where's the protest? Where's the outrage? So effectively weeded out—and in the course of just a few short generations too—that social criticism is now as extraneous as a vestigial organ. Note that the rebellion of desire against social constrictions was once a favorite cultural theme, pulsing through so many of our literary classics—consider *Romeo and Juliet* or *Anna Karenina*. Now apparently we've got that small problem solved and can all

love the way that's best for society: busy worker bees and docile nesters all.

Despite the guise of nature and inevitability that attaches itself to these current arrangements, the injunction to work at love is rather a recent cultural dictate, and though the vast majority of the world's inhabitants may organize themselves into permanent and semi-permanent arrangements of two, even the most cursory cross-cultural glance reveals that the particulars of these arrangements vary greatly. In our own day and part of the globe, they take the form of what historians of private life have labeled the “companionate couple,” voluntary associations based (at least in principle) on intimacy, mutuality, and equality; falling in love as the prerequisite to a lifelong commitment that unfolds in conditions of shared domesticity, the expectation of mutual sexual fulfillment. And by the way, you will have sex with this person and this person alone for the rest of eternity (at least in principle).

The odd thing is that such overwhelming cultural uniformity is also so endlessly touted as the triumph of freedom and individuality over the shackling social conventions of the past (and as if the distinctly regulatory aspect of these arrangements didn't cancel out all such emancipatory claims in advance). Equally rickety is the alternate view that these arrangements somehow derive from natural law—love as an eternal and unchanging essence which finds its supreme realization in our contemporary approach to experiencing it. The history of love is written differently by every historian who tackles the subject; without becoming mired in their internecine debates, we can still say with certainty that

nothing in the historical or the anthropological record indicates that our amorous predecessors were "working on their relationships." Nor until relatively recently was marriage the expected venue for Eros or romantic love, nor was the presumptive object of romantic love your own husband or wife (more likely someone else's), nor did anyone expect it to endure a lifetime: when practiced, it tended to be practiced episodically and largely outside the domicile.

But our focus here is not historical, so let's stick to modern love and its claims. Freedom over shackling social conventions—really? If love has power over us, what a sweepingly effective form of power this proves to be, with every modern psyche equally subject to its caprices, all of us allied in fearsome agreement that a mind somehow unsusceptible to love's new conditions is one requiring professional ministrations. Has any despot's rule ever so successfully infiltrated every crevice of a population's being, into its movements and gestures, penetrated its very soul? In fact it creates the modern notion of a soul—one which experiences itself as empty without love. Saying "no" to love isn't just heresy, it's tragedy: for our sort the failure to achieve what is most essentially human. And not just tragic, but abnormal. (Of course the concept of normalcy itself is one of the more powerful social management tools devised to date.) The diagnosis? It can only be that dread modern ailment, "fear of intimacy." Extensive treatment will be required, and possibly social quarantine to protect the others from contamination.

If without love we're losers and our lives bereft, how susceptible we'll also be to any social program promoted in its name. And not only the work ethic: take a moment to

consider domestic coupledom itself. What a feat of social engineering to shoehorn an entire citizenry (minus the occasional straggler) into such uniform household arrangements, all because everyone knows that true love demands it and that any reluctance to participate signals an insufficiency of love. What a startling degree of conformity is so meekly accepted—and so desired!—by a species, *homo Americanus*, for whom other threats to individuality do so often become fighting matters, a people whose jokes (and humor is nothing if not an act of cultural self-definition) so frequently mock others for their behavioral uniformity—communism for its apparatchiks, lemmings for their skills as brainless followers—yet somehow fails to notice its own regimentation in matters at least as defining as toeing a party line, and frequently no more mindful than diving off high cliffs en masse.

Of course love may have its way with us, but it's also a historical truism that no form of power is so absolute that it completely quashes every pocket of resistance. We may prostrate ourselves to love—and thus to domestic coupledom, modern love's mandatory barracks—but it's not as though protest movements don't exist. (If you're willing to look in the right places.) Regard those furtive breakaway factions periodically staging dangerous escape missions, scaling barbed-wire fences and tunneling for miles with sharpened spoons just to emancipate themselves—even temporarily.

Yes, *adulterers*: playing around, breaking vows, causing havoc. Or . . . maybe not just playing around? After all, if adultery is a de facto referendum on the sustainability of monogamy—and it would be difficult to argue that it's

not—this also makes it the nearest thing to a popular uprising against the regimes of contemporary coupledness. But let's consider this from a wider angle than the personal dimension alone. After all, social theorists and political philosophers have often occupied themselves with similar questions: the possibilities of liberty in an administered society, the social meaning of obligation, the genealogy of morality—even the status of the phrase “I do” as a performative utterance, a mainstay question of the branch of philosophy known as speech act theory. Might we entertain the possibility that posing philosophical questions isn't restricted to university campuses and learned tomes, that maybe it's something everyone does in the course of everyday life—if not always in an entirely knowing fashion? If adultery is more of a critical practice than a critical theory, well, acting out *is* what happens when knowledge or consciousness about something is foreclosed. Actually, that's what acting out is for. Why such knowledge is foreclosed is a question yet to be considered—though how much do any of us know about our desires and motivations, or the contexts that produce them? We can be pretty clueless. We say things like “Something just happened to me,” as if it were an explanation.

Social historians assessing the shape of societies past often do look to examples of bad behavior and acting out, to heretics, rebels, criminals—or question who receives those designations—because ruptures in the social fabric also map a society's structuring contradictions, exposing the prevailing systems of power and hierarchy and the weak links in social institutions. If adultery is a special brand of heresy in the church of modern love, clearly it's a

repository for other social contradictions and ruptures as well.\* This isn't to say that adultery is a new story—it's hardly that. It does mean that it's a story that gets reshaped by every era as required. Ours, for instance, made it into the basis for an extended period of national political scandal—this after decades, if not centuries, of relative inattention to the matter. And after previously handing politicians carte blanche to stray with impunity, suddenly yanking back the privilege. Why?

One consequence (if not a cause) was the opportunity it created for exiled questions about the governing codes of intimate life—including how well or badly individuals negotiate them—to enter the national political discussion. Clearly there's pervasive dissatisfaction with the state of marriage: the implosion rate is high and climbing. Equally clearly, the reasons for that dissatisfaction is a discussion that can't publicly take place. Understandably: consider the network of social institutions teetering precariously on companionate love's rickety foundations—which means, frankly, that large chunks of contemporary social existence are built on the silt of unconsciousness, including large sectors of the economy itself. Given the declining success story of long-term marriages, as reported in the latest census, we're faced with a social institution in transition, and no one knows where it's going to land. The reasonable response would be to factor these transitions into relevant policy and social

\*Of course, heretics also invariably fascinate—entire Inquisitions are devoted to probing their views. (See Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, an ingenious case study of one medieval heretic and the fascination he exerted over his inquisitors.)

welfare decisions; this is apparently impossible. Instead, we're treated to a parade of elected representatives moralizing in public and acting out their own marital dissatisfactions in private, as if the entire subject had been exiled to the outer boroughs of unconsciousness—there to be performed à deux for the citizenry by naked politicians pantomiming the issues like players in some new avant garde form of national political dinner theater. But given the levels of confusion (and disavowal) surrounding these questions, is it so surprising that they just keep popping up unbidden into public view like a chronic rash or an unsightly nervous condition? Or surprising that they'd be channeled into scandal, the social ritual of choice for exposing open secrets (and for ritually shaming anyone they can be pinned to, thus exempting the rest of us and temporarily healing the rupture)? Scandal is the perfect package for circulating such dilemmas. More on this to come.

To recap. Among the difficult (and important) questions our adulterer-philosophers and roving politicians have put before us is this: Just how much renunciation of desire does society demand of us versus the degree of gratification it provides? The adulterer's position—following a venerable tradition of radical social theory—would be: *"Too much."* Or this: Is it the persistence of the work ethic that ties us to the companionate couple and its workaday regimes, or is it the ethos of companionate coupledness that ties us to soul-deadening work regimes? On this one the jury is still out.

Adultery is not, of course, minus its own contradictions. Foremost among them: What are these domestic refuseniks and matrimonial escape artists escaping *to*, with such deter-

mination and cunning? Well, it appears that they're escaping to . . . *love*. As should be clear, ours is a story with a significant degree of unconsciousness, and not a little internal incoherence. (Or as Laura puts it to Alec in *Brief Encounter*, the classic infidelity story: "I love you with all my heart and soul. I want to die.")

Thus, please read on in a tolerant spirit.

If adultery is the sit-down strike of the love-takes-work ethic, regard the assortment of company goons standing by to crush any dissent before it even happens. (Recall too the fate of labor actions past, as when the National Guard was ordered to fire on striking workers to convince them how great their jobs were, in case there were any doubts.) Needless to say, any social program based on something as bleak as working for love will also require an efficient enforcement wing to ply its dismal message. These days we call it "therapy." Yes, we weary ambivalent huddled masses of discontent will frequently be found scraping for happier consciousness in the discreetly soundproofed precincts of therapy, a newly arisen service industry owing its pricey existence to the cheery idea that ambivalence is a curable condition, that "growth" means adjustment to prevailing conditions, and that rebellion is neurotic—though thankfully, curable.

But no rest for the weary when you're in therapy! Resenting the boss? Feeling overworked or bored or dissatisfied? Getting complaints about your attitude? Whether it's "on the relationship" or "on the job," get yourself right to the

therapist's office, pronto. The good news is that there are only two possible diagnoses for all such modern ailments (as all we therapy-savants know): it's going to be either "intimacy issues" or "authority issues." The bad news is that you'll soon discover that the disease doubles as the prescription at this clinic: you're just going to have to "work harder on yourself." If a nation gets the leaders it deserves, can the same be said for its therapies?

Of course according to Freud—arguably a better theorist than therapist himself (he could get a little pushy with the patients)—desire *is* regressive, and antisocial, and *there's no cure*, which is what makes it the wild card in our little human drama. (And also so much fun.) It screws up all well-ordered plans and lives, and to be alive is to be fundamentally split, fundamentally ambivalent, and unreconciled to the trade-offs of what Freud called, just a bit mockingly, "civilized sexual morality."\* But Freud was long ago consigned to conformist therapy's historical ash can, collectively pilloried for his crimes against decency and empiricism (Philip Wylie: "Unfortunately, Americans, who are the most prissy people on earth, have been unable to benefit from Freud's wisdom because they can *prove* that they do not, by and large, sleep with their mothers"). So don't sign up for therapy if you're looking for radical social insights—or social insights at all actually: what's for sale here is "self-

\*And was Freud an adulterer? It seems unlikely, though one of his would-be debunkers, a rather singular historian of psychoanalysis named Peter Swales, has made it his life's work (these debunkers are a zealous bunch) to prove that Freud and his sister-in-law Minna Bernays were an item.

knowledge." (Only a cynic could suspect it of being remedial socialization in party clothes.) As you will soon discover under the tutelage of your kindly therapist, all those excess desires have their roots in some childhood deprivation or trauma, which has led to lack of self-esteem or some other impeded development which has made you unable to achieve proper intimacy and thus prone to searching for it in all the wrong places, namely anywhere outside the home. (You can be fairly certain it's not going to be those social norms that need a tune up; sorry, hon—it's you.) Conflicts in the realm of desire act out something "unresolved" in the self, a deeply buried trove of childhood memories or injuries that you will spend years excavating, in regular office visits and at no small cost. But don't resist! The more you resist the longer it takes, and the more you'll pay—in forty-five-minute increments, and at fees far exceeding the median daily wage. But happily, you will soon be feeling far better about yourself, and at peace with your desires and conflicts; if not, the same results can be attained in easy-to-swallow capsule form. With an estimated thirty million Americans—or around 10 percent of the adult population—having ingested antidepressants to date (GPs apparently hand them out like lollipops), better living through chemistry is now the favored social solution. Just say goodbye to your sex life.\*

Another of the company goons: Culture. Consider the blaringly omnipresent propaganda beaming into our psy-

\*Harvard psychiatrist Joseph Glenmullen, author of *Prozac Backlash*, estimates that up to 60 percent of those who take Prozac or other SSRIs (the most widely prescribed category of antidepressants) experience drug-induced sexual dysfunction as a side effect.

ches on an hourly basis: the millions of images of lovestruck couples looming over us from movie screens, televisions, billboards, magazines, incessantly strong-arming us onboard the love train. Every available two-dimensional surface touts love. So deeply internalized is our obedience to this capricious despot that artists create passionate odes to its cruelty; audiences seem never to tire of the most repetitive and deeply unoriginal mass spectacles devoted to rehearsing the litany of its torments, forking over hard-earned dollars to gaze enraptured at the most blatantly propagandistic celebrations of its power, fixating all hopes on the narrowest glimmer of its fleeting satisfactions. But if pledging oneself to love is the human spirit triumphal, or human nature, or consummately “normal,” why does it require such vast PR expenditures? Why so much importuning of the population?

Could there be something about contemporary coupled life itself that requires all this hectoring, from the faux morality of the work ethic to the incantations of therapists and counselors to the inducements of the entertainment industries, just to keep a truculent citizenry immobilized within it? Absent the sell tactics, would the chickens soon fly the coop, at least once those initial surges of longing and desire wear off? (Or more accurately, flap off in even greater numbers than the current 50 percent or so that do?) As we know, “mature love,” that magical elixir, is supposed to kick in when desire flags, but could that be the problem right there? Mature love: it’s kind of like denture adhesive. Yes, it’s supposed to hold things in place; yes, it’s awkward for everyone when it doesn’t; but unfortunately there are some things that glue just won’t glue, no matter how much you apply.

Clearly the couple form as currently practiced is an ambivalent one—indeed, a form in decline say those census-takers—and is there any great mystery why? On the one hand, the yearning for intimacy, on the other, the desire for autonomy; on the one hand, the comfort and security of routine, on the other, its soul-deadening predictability; on the one side, the pleasure of being deeply known (and deeply knowing another person), on the other, the strait-jacketed roles that such familiarity predicates—the shtick of couple interactions; the repetition of the arguments; the boredom and the rigidities which aren’t about to be transcended in this or any other lifetime, and which harden into those all-too-familiar couple routines: the Stop Trying To Change Me routine and the Stop Blaming Me For Your Unhappiness routine. (Novelist Vince Passaro: “It is difficult to imagine a modern middle-class marriage not synco-pated by rage.”) Not to mention the *regression*, because, after all, you’ve chosen your parent (or their opposite), or worse, you’ve become your parent, tormenting (or withdrawing from) the mate as the same-or-opposite-sex parent once did, replaying scenes you were once subjected to yourself as a helpless child—or some other variety of family repetition that will keep those therapists guessing for years. Given everything, a success rate of 50 percent seems about right (assuming that success means longevity).

Or here’s another way to tell the story of modern love. Let’s imagine that to achieve consensus and continuity, any society is required to produce the kinds of character structures and personality types it needs to achieve its objective—to

perpetuate itself—molding a populace's desires to suit particular social purposes. Those purposes would not be particularly transparent to the characters in question, to those who live out the consequent emotional forms as their truest and most deeply felt selves. (That would be us.)

Take the modern consumer. (Just a random example.) Clearly, routing desire into consumption would be necessary to sustain a consumer society—a citizenry who fucked in lieu of shopping would soon bring the entire economy grinding to a standstill. Or better still, take the modern depressive. What a boon to both the pharmaceutical and the social-harmony industries such a social type would be. These are merely hypotheticals, of course, since it's not as if we live in a society of consumers and depressives, or as if the best therapy for the latter weren't widely held to be strategically indulging in the activities of the former—"retail therapy" in urban parlance.

But perhaps there would be social benefits to cultivating a degree of emotional stagnation in the populace? Certain advantages to social personality types who gulped down disappointment like big daily doses of Valium, who were so threatened by the possibility of change that the anarchy of desire was forever tamed and a commitment to perfect social harmony effortlessly achieved? Advantages to a citizenry of busy utilitarians, toiling away, working harder, with all larger social questions (is this *really* as good as it gets?) pushed aside or shamed, since it's not like you have anything to say about it anyway.

Some of our gloomier thinkers have argued that there is indeed a functional fit between such social purposes and modes of inner life, a line of thinking associated with the gen-

eration of social theorists known as the Frankfurt School, who witnessed the rise of fascism in Germany first-hand and started connecting the dots between authoritarian personality types, the family forms that produced them, and the political outcomes. In fact, according to renegade psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, a Frankfurt School fellow traveler, the only social purpose of compulsory marriage for life is to produce the submissive personality types that mass society requires. He also took the view—along with Freud—that suppressing sexual curiosity leads to general intellectual atrophy, including the loss of any power to rebel. (Not a point destined to attract large numbers of adherents, since, if true, the consequent intellectual atrophy would presumably prevent recognition of the condition.) A variation on the argument has it that social forms—economic forms too—arise on the basis of the personality types already in place. Capitalism itself clearly requires certain character structures to sustain it, and would never have gotten off the ground, according to early sociologist Max Weber, if it weren't for the prep work of religious asceticism. Capitalism only succeeded, says Weber, because it happened along at the heyday of Calvinism, already busy churning out personalities so steeped in sacrifice that the capitalist work ethic wasn't a difficult sell.\* Personality types will continue to be tweaked as necessary: once consumer capitalism arrived it required an overlay of

\*Weber, who coined the term "work ethic": yet another major adulterer. And one so transformed by his belated awakening to erotic experience, according to biographers, that it propelled the direction of his later (some say best) work on the conflicts between eroticism or other varieties of mystical religiosity and the processes of rationality. (Yes, adultery's eternal dilemma.)



hedonism on top of the productivity, at least to the extent that hedonism can be channeled into consumption. Witness the results: a society of happy shopaholics for whom shopping is not just a favored form of recreation, it's an identity.

Though when it comes to repression, perhaps we also come equipped with a secret talent for it? So intimated Freud, its most savvy chronicler. A certain degree of basic repression is necessary for any civilization to survive: if we were all just humping each other freely whenever the impulse arose, what energy would be left for erecting a culture? But with civilization achieved and now on firm enough footing, do we push it further than necessary, churning out *surplus repression*, in the phrase of another Frankfurt fellow traveler, Herbert Marcuse? Could we be a little nervous about the possibility of our own freedom? Consider how little resistance those repressive forces meet as they ooze their way into the neighborhoods of daily life. Resistance? More like mademoiselles greeting the occupying fascist troops with flirtatious glances and coy inviting smiles. "*What cute jackboots, monsieur.*" Basking in their warm welcome from a docile populace, those repressive tendencies, now completely emboldened, reemerge unfettered in the guise of social character types, marching in goose step to the particular requirements of the day: the "professional," the "disciplinarian," the "boss," the "efficiency expert." Observe such types—your friends and neighbors—toiling away at work and home, each accompanied by an internal commanding officer (the collaborationist within) issuing a steady string of silent directives. "Will-power!" "Grow up!" "Be realistic!" "Get busy!" "Don't play around!" And thus we become

psyches for whom repression has its own seductions. How *virtuous* it feels, trading play for industry, freedom for authority, and any lingering errant desires for "mature" realizations like Good Relationships Take Work.

Us, rebel? More like trained poodles prancing on hind legs, yipping for approval and doggie treats. So exiled have even basic questions of freedom become from the political vocabulary that they sound musty and ridiculous, and vulnerable to the ultimate badge of shame—"That's so '60s!"—the entire decade having been mocked so effectively that social protest seems outlandish and "so last-century," just another style excess like love beads and Nehru jackets. No, rebellion won't pose a problem for this social order. But just in case, any vestiges of freedom (or any tattered remnants still viable after childhood's brute socialization) will need to be checked at the door before entering the pleasure palace of domestic coupledness. Should you desire entry, that is. And who among us does not—because who can be against love?

But just for fun, try this quick thought experiment. Imagine the most efficient kind of social control possible. It wouldn't be a soldier on every corner—too expensive, too crass. Wouldn't the most elegant means of producing acquiescence be to somehow transplant those social controls so seamlessly into the guise of individual needs that the difference between them dissolved? And here we have the distinguishing political feature of the liberal democracies: their efficiency at turning out character types who identify so completely with society's agenda for them that they volunteer their very beings to the cause. But . . . *how* would such a feat be accomplished? *What* mysterious force or mind-

altering substance could compel an entire population into such total social integration without them even noticing it happening, or uttering the tiniest peep of protest?

What if it could be accomplished through *love*? If love, that fathomless, many-splendored thing, that most mutable yet least escapable of all human experiences, that which leads the soul forward toward wisdom and beauty, were also the special potion through which renunciation could, paradoxically, be achieved? The paradox being that falling in love is the nearest most of us come to glimpsing utopia in our lifetimes (with sex and drugs as fallbacks), and harnessing our most utopian inclinations to the project of social control would be quite a singular achievement in the annals of modern population management. Like soma in *Brave New World*, it's the perfect drug. "Euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinant," as one character describes it. "All the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects," quips another.

Powerful, mind-altering utopian substances do tend to be subject to social regulation in industrialized societies (as with sex and drugs): we like to worry about whether people will make wise use of these things. What if they impede productivity! So we make them scarce and shroud them in prohibitions, thus reinforcing their danger, along with the justification for social controls.

Clearly love is subject to just as much regulation as any powerful pleasure-inducing substance. Whether or not we fancy that we love as we please, free as the birds and butterflies, an endless quantity of social instruction exists to tell us what it is, and what to do with it, and how, and when. And tell us, and tell us: the quantity of advice on the subject of

how to love properly is almost as infinite as the sanctioned forms it takes are limited. Love's proper denouement, matrimony, is also, of course, the social form regulated by the state, which refashions itself as benevolent pharmacist, doling out the addictive substance in licensed doses. (It could always be worse: the other junkies are forced to huddle outside neighborhood clinics in the cold for their little paper cups; love at least gets treated with a little pomp and ceremony.) Of course, no one is physically held down and forced to swallow vows, and not all those who love acquire the proper licenses to do so, but what a remarkable compliance rate is nevertheless achieved. Why bother to make marriage compulsory when informal compulsions work so well that even gays—once such paragons of unregulated sexuality, once so contemptuous of whitebread hetero lifestyles—are now demanding state regulation too? What about re-envisioning the form; rethinking the premises? What about just insisting that social resources and privileges not be allocated on the basis of marital status? No, let's *demand regulation!* (Not that it's particularly easy to re-envision anything when these intersections of love and acquiescence are the very backbone of the modern self, when every iota of self-worth and identity hinge on them, along with insurance benefits.)

So, here you are, gay or straight, guy or gal, with matrimony (or some functional equivalent) achieved, domestication complete, steadfastly pledged and declawed. A housetrained kitten. But wait: what's that nagging little voice at the edge of your well-being, the one that refuses to

shut up, even when jabbed with the usual doses of shame. The one that says: "*Isn't there supposed to be something more?*" Well maybe there is, but don't go getting any "ideas," because an elaborate domestic security apparatus is on standby, ready to stomp the life out of them before they can breed—stomp them dead like the filthy homewrecking cockroaches they are.

Sure, we all understand jealousy. Aren't all precarious regimes inherently insecure, casting watchful eyes on their citizenry's fidelity, ready to spring into action should anything threaten the exclusivity of those bonds? Every regime also knows that good intelligence props up its rule, so it's best to figure you're always being watched—you never know exactly from where, but a file is being compiled. Like seasoned FBI agents, longtime partners learn to play both sides of the good cop/bad cop routine. "*Just tell me, I promise I'll understand. . . . You did WHAT?!*" Once suspicions are aroused, the crisis alarm starts shrilling, at which point any tactics are justified to ensure your loyalty. Since anything can arouse suspicion, "preventative domestic policing" will always be an option: loyalty tests, trick questions, psychological torture, and carefully placed body blows that leave no visible marks. (Private detectives are also an option, or if you like, a Manhattan company called Check-a-Mate will send out attractive sexual decoys to see if your mate will go for the bait, then issue a full report.)\*

\*Or consider the possibilities opened up by new technologies. A Web site called [Adulteryandcheating.com](http://Adulteryandcheating.com) counsels tactics like satellite tracking and cyber-spying to nab cheating partners; spy equipment stores are

Sure, easy to feel sympathetic to wronged partners: humiliated, undesired, getting fat, deserving better. The question of why someone cheats on you or leaves you can never be adequately explained. ("Intimacy issues," no doubt.) Realizing that people are talking, that friends knew and you didn't, that someone else has been poaching in your pasture and stealing what is by law yours *is* a special circle of hell. And even if you don't much want to have sex with the mate anymore, it's a little galling that someone else does. (Though this knowledge sometimes sparks a belated resurgence of desire: the suspicion-ridden marriage bed can be a pretty steamy place.)

But here's a question for you spouse-detectives as you're combing through credit card receipts, or cracking e-mail passwords, or perfecting the art of noiselessly lifting up phone extensions, counting condoms or checking the diaphragm case: What are you hoping to find? If you're looking, you basically know the answer, right? And if you don't find anything this time, are you willing to declare the matter settled? Hardly! Suspicion is addictive, sometimes even gratifying. After all, rectitude is on your side, and you want those promises kept, damn it. You want those vows *obeyed*. You want security, and of course you want love—since don't we all? But you'll settle for obedience, and when all else fails, ultimatums might work. But it's not as though you

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also promoting new keystroke-capture programs as a surveillance system for suspicious spouses, which, once installed on a home computer, will record your partner's e-mail exchanges and Web site visits for your later review.

don't know when you're being lied to (though what constitutes "knowing" and "not knowing" in this regard could fill another book) and having transformed yourself into a one-person citizen-surveillance unit, how can you not hate the mate for forcing you to act with such a lack of dignity?

Here we come to the weak link in the security-state model of long-term coupledness: *desire*. It's ineradicable. It's roving and inchoate, we're inherently desiring creatures, and sometimes desire just won't take no for an answer, particularly when some beguiling and potentially available love-object hoves into your sight lines, making you feel what you'd forgotten how to feel, which is *alive*, even though you're supposed to be channeling all such affective capacities into the "appropriate" venues, and everything (Social Stability! The National Fabric! Being a Good Person!) hinges on making sure that you do. But renunciation chafes, particularly when the quantities demanded begin to exceed the amount of gratification achieved, for instance when basic monogamy evolves, as it inevitably does under such conditions, into *surplus monogamy*: enforced compliance rather than a free expression of desire. (Or "repressive satisfaction" in Marcuse's still handy, still stinging phrase.) The problem is that maybe we're really *not* such acquiescent worker bees in our desires, and maybe there actually *isn't* consent about being reduced to the means to an end, especially when the end is an overused platitude about the social fabric, whatever that is. Meaning what?—that we'll all just churn out the proper emotions to uphold calcified social structures like cows produce milk, like machines spit out O-rings?

But start thinking like that, and who knows what can happen? And that's the problem with dissatisfaction—it

gives people "ideas." Maybe even critical ideas. First a glimmering, then an urge, then a transient desire, soon a nascent thought: "*Maybe there's something else.*" Recall that the whole bothersome business with labor unions and workers demanding things like shorter workdays started out the same way: a few troublemakers got fed up with being treated like machines, word spread, and pretty soon there was a whole movement. "Wanting more" is a step on the way to a political idea, or so say political theorists, and ideas can have a way of turning themselves into demands. In fact, "wanting more" is the simple basis of all utopian thinking, according to philosopher Ernst Bloch. "Philosophies of utopia begin at home," Bloch liked to say—found in the smallest sensations of pleasure and fun, or even in daydreams, exactly because they reject inhibitions and daily drudgery. Utopianism always manages to find an outlet too, operating in disguise when necessary, turning up in all sorts of far-flung places. Or right under our noses, because utopianism is an aspect of anything that opens up the possibilities for different ways of thinking about the world. For madcap utopian Bloch, the most tragic form of loss wasn't the loss of security, it was the loss of the capacity to imagine that things could be different.

And for us? If philosophies of utopia begin at home, if utopianism is buried deep in those small, lived epiphanies of pleasure, in sensations of desire, and fun, and play, in love, in transgression, in the rejection of drudgery and work, well . . . no one *works* at adultery, do they? If this makes it a personal lab experiment in reconfiguring the love-to-work ratio, or a makeshift overhaul of the gratification-to-renunciation social equation, then it's also a test run for the

most verboten fly-in-the-ointment question of all: “*Could things be different?*” No, it may not be particularly thought-out, or even articulable, but what else is behind these furtive little fantasies and small acts of resistance—playing around, acting out, chasing inchoate desires and longings—but just trying to catch fleeting glimpses of what “something else” could feel like? (Not that anyone here is endorsing adultery! After all, it hardly needs endorsements, it’s doing quite well on its own. New recruits are signing up by the minute.)

Sure, adulterers behave badly. Deception rules this land, self-deception included. Not knowing what you’re doing risks bad faith, and living exclusively in the present, and leaving sodden emotional disasters strewn behind. But note the charges typically leveled against the adulterer: “immaturity” (failure to demonstrate the requisite degree of civilized repression); “selfishness” (failure to work for the collective good—a somewhat selectively imposed requirement in corporate America); “boorishness” (failure to achieve proper class behavior). Or the extra fillip of moral trumping: “People will get hurt!” (Though perhaps amputated desires hurt too.) True, typically in outbursts of mass dissatisfaction—strikes, rebellions, sedition, coups—people sometimes get hurt: beware of sharp rocks and flying debris. But if adultery summons all the shaming languages of bad citizenship, it also indicates the extent to which domestic coupledness is the boot camp for compliant citizenship, a training ground for gluey resignation and immobility. The partner plays drill sergeant and anything short of a full salute to existing conditions is an invitation to the stockades—or sometimes a dishonorable discharge.

Still, conflicted desires and divided loyalties don’t present

a pretty picture when seen up close: the broken promises, the free-range seductiveness, the emotional unreliability, all perched a little precariously on that chronic dissatisfaction, crashing up against the rocky shoals of desperation. Ambivalence, universal though it may be, isn’t much fun for anyone. (Least of all when you’re on the receiving end. Deceived partners everywhere: our sympathies.) Ambivalence may fade into resignation, and given a high enough tolerance for swallowing things, this is supposed to count as a happy ending. But ambivalence can also be another way of saying that we social citizens have a constitutive lack of skill at changing things. Understandably—who gets any training at this? Even when not entirely resigned to the social institutions we’re handed, who has a clue how to remake them, and why commit to them if there could be something better? Unfortunately, “something better” is also an idea so derided it’s virtually prohibited entry to consciousness, and consequently available primarily in dreamlike states: romantic love and private utopian experiments like adultery (or secondhand, in popular fantasy genres like romance and myth). But after all, we don’t make history under conditions of our own choosing, and private life is pretty much all we have to work with when it comes to social experiments in our part of the world these days, where consumer durables and new technologies come equipped with planned obsolescence, and social institutions are as petrified as Mesozoic rock formations.

Still, before signing up for the thrill ride of adultery, a word to the wise. Let’s all be aware that passionate love involves

alarmingly high degrees of misrecognition in even the best of cases (that poignant Freudian paradigm), which means that we players in the adultery drama will be especially beset, madly flinging ourselves down uncharted paths in states of severe aporia, the impediments to self-knowledge joined at the hip to the lures of disavowal. All of us risk drowning in those swirling tidal waves of emotion and lust, cramped up and overwhelmed, having thought ourselves shrewd and agile enough to surf the crest despite the posted danger signs. You may say you're not going to get in too deep, you may say you just want to have fun, but before you know it you're flattened by a crashing wave from nowhere and left gasping for air with a mouthful of sand. (Translation: you're in love, or you're in lust, and not with your mate, and your life feels out of control, and maybe you've been waiting your whole life to feel this way about someone, which means you're in big trouble.)

So watch out, baby—a few missteps, a couple of late-night declarations, and everything could be up for grabs. What started as a fling has somehow turned serious; the supplement has started to supersede the thing that needed supplementing. Perhaps unplanned exposures have forced things into the open, or those “contradictions” of yours have started announcing themselves in some unpleasant somatic form that eventually can't be ignored. Insomnia. Migraines. Cold sores. Digestive ailments. Heart palpitations. Sexual difficulties. (Sometimes bodies just won't play along, even when instructed otherwise.) Choices will need to be made. Choices that you, with your terminal ambivalence and industrial-strength guilt, are not capable of making. Antacids aren't working. Work is suffering. The shrink

just says, “What do you think?” But about what? Love is also a way of forgetting what the question is. Using love to escape love, groping for love outside the home to assuage the letdowns of love at home—it's kind of like smoking and wearing a nicotine patch at the same time: two delivery systems for an addictive chemical substance that feels vitally necessary to your well-being at the moment, even if likely to wreak unknown havoc in the deepest fibers of your being at some unspecified future date.

The best polemic against love would be to mimic in prose the erratic and overheated behavior of its hapless practitioners: the rushes and excesses, the inconsistent behavior and inchoate longings, the moment-by-moment vacillations between self-doubt (“*What am I doing?*”) and utter certainty (“*You're the one*”), all in quest of something transformative and unknown. It would replicate in form the impediments and trade-offs and fumbling around, all the things felt but not understood, and the tension of being caught in-between—between mates and lovers or between rival ways of telling such conflicted tales, each beckoning with its own sultry and alluring vocabulary: social theory and love affairs, Marx and Freud, utopia and pragmatics, parody and sentimentality. “Just pick one and settle down already,” you can hear people saying. But what if you just keep finding yourself looking “elsewhere” as much as you tell yourself not to, because this is really no way to act? Yes, just like all you adultery clowns out there tripping over your big floppy shoes and chasing improbable fulfillment, knowing it has the whiff of a doomed undertaking and making up the rules as you go along, we polemicists too are propelled to (intellectual) promiscuity, rashness and blind

risks and becoming the neighborhood pariah (or joke) just for thinking there could be reasons to experiment with reimagining things.

But to those feeling a little stultified and contemplating a spin down Reinvention Road: do weigh your options carefully. Don't forget that all outbreaks of love outside sanctioned venues still invite derisive epitaphs like "cheating" or "mid-life crisis," while those that play by the rules will be community-sanctified with champagne and gifts in the expensive over-rehearsed costume rituals of the wedding-industrial complex (its participants stiffly garbed in the manner of landed gentry from some non-existent epoch: clearly, playing out unnatural roles is structured into these initiation rites as a test of the participants' stamina for role-playing as a social enterprise and as a measure of their resolve and ability to keep doing so in perpetuity).

Consider this not just a polemic, but also an elegy: an elegy for all the adultery clowns crying on the inside, with our private experiments and ragtag utopias. The elegiac mode traditionally allows a degree of immoderation, so please read on in an excessive and mournful spirit—or at least with some patience for the bad bargains and compensatory forms the discontented classes engineer for themselves in daily life. So many have met such dismal, joyless fates, dutifully renouncing all excess desires, and along with them any hopes that the world could deliver more than it currently does—or could if anyone had the temerity to fight about it, and face down the company goons, then face down the rit-

ual shaming, and last but not least the massive self-inflicted guilt shortly to follow.

But beware their seductive and dangerous lures too, those beguiling adulterers, dangerous as pirate ships lying in wait to cadge any unguarded troves of emotion and pleasure, promises brandished like a swashbuckler's sword, slicing through qualms like they were air. Was ever there a more seductive seducer, or a more captivating captor, than an emotionally starving human with potential ardor in sight? (*"Trust me, things will work out."*) But to all you temporary utopians and domestic escape artists who couldn't sustain your own wishes for more courageous selves or different futures or love on better terms, who could only filch a few brief moments of self-reinvention and fun before being drop-kicked, guilt-ridden and self-loathing, back to the domestic gulags, the compartmentalization, the slow death of "maturity" (because risking stagnation is obviously preferable to risking change in the prevailing emotional economy): we mourn your deaths. We leave big immoderate bouquets at your gravesides.