

## ROMANTIC LOVE AND OTHER ATTACHMENTS

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'Love', Bronislaw Malinowski observes in his study of the Trobriand Islanders, 'is a passion to the Melanesian as to the European, and torments mind and body to a greater or lesser extent; it leads to many an *impasse*, scandal, or tragedy; more rarely, it illuminates life and makes the heart expand and overflow with joy.'<sup>1</sup> Numerous examples of love poetry survive among the relics of Ancient Egypt, some dating back from more than 1000 BC. Love is there portrayed as overwhelming the ego, and thus akin to a kind of sickness, although also having healing powers:

The sight of her makes me well!  
 When she opens her eyes my body is young,  
 Her speaking makes me strong;  
 Embracing her expels my malady –  
 Seven days since she went from me!<sup>2</sup>

While the secular use of the word 'passion' – as distinct from its older usage, meaning religious passion – is relatively modern, it makes sense to regard passionate love, *amour passion*,<sup>3</sup> as expressing a generic connection between love and sexual attachment. Passionate love is marked by an urgency which sets it apart from the routines of everyday life with which, indeed, it tends to come into conflict. The

emotional involvement with the other is pervasive – so strong that it may lead the individual, or both individuals, to ignore their ordinary obligations. Passionate love has a quality of enchantment which can be religious in its fervour. Everything in the world seems suddenly fresh, yet perhaps at the same time fails to capture the individual's interest, which is so strongly bound up with the love object. On the level of personal relations, passionate love is specifically disruptive in a similar sense to charisma; it uproots the individual from the mundane and generates a preparedness to consider radical options as well as sacrifices.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, seen from the point of view of social order and duty, it is dangerous. It is hardly surprising that passionate love has nowhere been recognised as either a necessary or sufficient basis for marriage, and in most cultures has been seen as refractory to it.

Passionate love is a more or less universal phenomenon. It should be differentiated, I shall argue, from romantic love, which is much more culturally specific. In what follows I shall try to identify certain distinctive features of romantic love and pursue their implications. My purpose is primarily analytic; I am not concerned to write a history of romantic love, even in miniature. However, to begin with, a very brief historical interpretation is needed.

### **Marriage, sexuality and romantic love**

In pre-modern Europe, most marriages were contracted, not on the basis of mutual sexual attraction, but economic circumstance. Among the poor marriage was a means of organising agrarian labour. A life characterised by unremitting hard labour was unlikely to be conducive to sexual passion. It has been claimed that among the peasantry in seventeenth-century France and Germany, kissing, caress-

ing and other forms of physical affection associated with sex were rare among married couples. Opportunities for men to engage in extramarital liaisons, however, were often quite numerous.<sup>5</sup>

Only among aristocratic groups was sexual licence openly permitted among 'respectable' women. Sexual freedom follows power and is an expression of it; at certain times and places, in aristocratic strata, women were sufficiently liberated from the demands of reproduction, and from routine work, to be able to pursue their independent sexual pleasure. Of course, this was virtually never connected with marriage. Most civilisations seem to have created stories and myths which drive home the message that those who seek to create permanent attachments through passionate love are doomed.

The differentiation drawn between the 'chaste' sexuality of marriage and the erotic or passionate character of extramarital affairs was quite common among other aristocracies besides those of Europe. Specific to Europe was the emergence of ideals of love closely connected to the moral values of Christianity.<sup>6</sup> The precept that one should devote oneself to God in order to know him, and that through this process self-knowledge is achieved, became part of a mystical unity between man and woman. The temporary idealisation of the other typical of passionate love here was joined to a more permanent involvement with the love object; and a certain reflexivity was already present even at an early date.<sup>7</sup>

Romantic love, which began to make its presence felt from the late eighteenth century onwards, drew upon such ideals and incorporated elements of *amour passion*, while nevertheless becoming distinct from both. Romantic love introduced the idea of a narrative into an individual's life – a formula which radically extended the reflexivity of sublime love. The telling of a story is one of the meanings of 'romance', but this story now became individualised, inserting self and

other into a personal narrative which had no particular reference to wider social processes. The rise of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel: the connection was one of newly discovered narrative form.

The complex of ideas associated with romantic love for the first time associated love with freedom, both being seen as normatively desirable states. Passionate love has always been liberating, but only in the sense of generating a break with routine and duty. It was precisely this quality of *amour passion* which set it apart from existing institutions. Ideals of romantic love, by contrast, inserted themselves directly into the emergent ties between freedom and self-realisation.

In romantic love attachments, the element of sublime love tends to predominate over that of sexual ardour. The importance of this point can hardly be overstressed. The romantic love complex is in this respect as historically unusual as traits Max Weber found combined in the protestant ethic.<sup>8</sup> Love breaks with sexuality while embracing it; 'virtue' begins to take on a new sense for both sexes, no longer meaning only innocence but qualities of character which pick out the other person as 'special'.

Romantic love is often thought of as implying instantaneous attraction – 'love at first sight'. In so far as immediate attraction is part of romantic love, however, it has to be separated quite sharply from the sexual/erotic compulsions of passionate love. The 'first glance' is a communicative gesture, an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other. It is a process of attraction to someone who can make one's life, as it is said, 'complete'.

The idea of 'romance', in the sense which the term came to assume in the nineteenth century, both expressed and contributed to secular changes affecting social life as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Modernity is inseparable from the ascendancy of reason, in the sense that rational understanding of physical and social processes is supposed to replace the arbitrary rule of mysticism and dogma. Reason has no place for emotion,

which simply lies outside its domain; but in fact emotional life became reordered in the changing conditions of day-to-day activities. Up to the threshold of the modern age, love charms, philtres and aphrodisiacs were the stock in trade of 'cunning' men and women, who could be turned to in order to help control the vagaries of sexual involvements. Alternatively, the priest could be consulted. The fate of the individual, however, in personal attachments as in other spheres, was tied to a broader cosmic order. 'Romance', as understood from the eighteenth century onwards, still had resonances of prior conceptions of cosmic fate, but mixed these with an attitude that looked to an open future. A romance was no longer, as it generally had been before, a specifically unreal conjuring of possibilities in a realm of fiction. Instead, it became a potential avenue for controlling the future, as well as a form of psychological security (in principle) for those whose lives were touched by it.

### Gender and love

Some have said that romantic love was a plot engineered by men against women, in order to fill their minds with idle and impossible dreams. Yet such a view cannot explain the appeal of romantic literature, or the fact that women played a large part in its diffusion. 'There is scarce a young lady in the kingdom', a writer in *The Lady's Magazine* observed, with some hyperbole, in 1773, 'who has not read with avidity a great number of romances and novels.' These publications, the writer went on to add sourly, 'tend to vitiate the taste'.<sup>10</sup> An increasing tide of romantic novels and stories, which has not abated to this day – many written by women – flooded the bookstores from the early nineteenth century onwards.

The rise of the romantic love complex has to be understood in relation to several sets of influences which affected

women from about the late eighteenth century onwards. One was the creation of the home, already referred to. A second was the changing relations between parents and children; a third was what some have termed the 'invention of motherhood'. So far as the status of women was concerned, all of these were quite closely integrated.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not childhood itself is a creation of the relatively recent past, as Ariès has so famously claimed, it is beyond dispute that patterns of parent-child interaction altered substantially, for all classes, during the 'repressive' Victorian period. The strictness of the Victorian father is legendary. Yet in some respects patriarchal power in the domestic milieu was on the wane by the latter part of the nineteenth century. For the direct rule of the male over the household, comprehensive in nature when it was still the centre of a production system, became weakened with the separation of the home and the workplace. The husband held ultimate power, to be sure, but a growing emphasis upon the importance of emotional warmth between parents and children frequently softened his use of it. Women's control over child-rearing grew as families became smaller and children came to be identified as vulnerable and in need of long-term emotional training. As Mary Ryan has put it, the centre of the household moved 'from patriarchal authority to maternal affection'.<sup>12</sup>

Idealisation of the mother was one strand in the modern construction of motherhood, and undoubtedly fed directly into some of the values propagated about romantic love. The image of 'wife and mother' reinforced a 'two sex' model of activities and feelings. Women were recognised by men to be different, unknowable – concerned with a particular domain alien to men. The idea that each sex is a mystery to the other is an old one, and has been represented in various ways in different cultures. The distinctively novel element here was the association of motherhood with femininity as qualities of the personality – qualities which certainly

infused widely held conceptions of female sexuality. As an article on marriage published in 1839 observed, 'the man bears rule over his wife's person and conduct. She bears the rule of his inclinations: he governs by law; she by persuasion . . . The empire of the woman is an empire of softness . . . her commands are caresses, her menaces are tears.'<sup>13</sup>

Romantic love was essentially feminised love. As Francesca Cancian has shown, prior to the late eighteenth century, if love was spoken about at all in relation to marriage, it was as companionate love, linked to the mutual responsibility of husbands and wives for running the household or farm. Thus in *The Well-Ordered Family*, which appeared just after the turn of the century, Benjamin Wadsworth wrote of the married couple that 'the duty of love is mutual, it should be performed by each to each'.<sup>14</sup> With the division of spheres, however, the fostering of love became predominantly the task of women. Ideas about romantic love were plainly allied to women's subordination in the home, and her relative separation from the outside world. But the development of such ideas was also an expression of women's power, a contradictory assertion of autonomy in the face of deprivation.

For men the tensions between romantic love and *amour passion* were dealt with by separating the comfort of the domestic environment from the sexuality of the mistress or whore. Male cynicism towards romantic love was readily bolstered by this division, which none the less implicitly accepted the feminisation of 'respectable' love. The prevalence of the double standard gave women no such outlet. Yet the fusion of ideals of romantic love and motherhood did allow women to develop new domains of intimacy. During the Victorian period, male friendship lost much of the quality of mutual involvement that comrades held for one another. Feelings of male comradeship were largely relegated to marginal activities, like sport or other leisure pursuits, or participation in war. For many women, things

moved in the opposite direction. As specialists of the heart, women met each other on a basis of personal and social equality, within the broad spectra of class divisions. Friendships between women helped mitigate the disappointments of marriage, but also proved rewarding in their own right. Women spoke of friendships, as men often did, in terms of love; and they found there a true confessional.<sup>15</sup>

Avid consumption of romantic novels and stories was in one sense a testimony to passivity. The individual sought in fantasy what was denied in the ordinary world. The unreality of romantic stories from this angle was an expression of weakness, an inability to come to terms with frustrated self-identity in actual social life. Yet romantic literature was also (and is today) a literature of hope, a sort of refusal. It often rejected the idea of settled domesticity as the only salient ideal. In many romantic stories, after a flirtation with other types of men, the heroine discovers the virtues of the solid, reliable individual who makes a dependable husband. At least as often, however, the true hero is a flamboyant adventurer, distinguished by his exotic characteristics, who ignores convention in the pursuit of an errant life.

Let me sum up to this point. Romantic love became distinct from *amour passion*, although at the same time had residues of it. *Amour passion* was never a generic social force in the way in which romantic love has been from somewhere in the late eighteenth century up to relatively recent times. Together with other social changes, the spread of notions of romantic love was deeply involved with momentous transitions affecting marriage as well as other contexts of personal life. Romantic love presumes some degree of self-interrogation. How do I feel about the other? How does the other feel about me? Are our feelings 'profound' enough to support a long-term involvement? Unlike *amour passion*, which uproots erratically, romantic love detaches individuals from wider social circumstances in a different way. It



provides for a long-term life trajectory, oriented to an anticipated yet malleable future; and it creates a 'shared history' that helps separate out the marital relationship from other aspects of family organisation and give it a special primacy.

From its earliest origins, romantic love raises the question of intimacy. It is incompatible with lust, and with earthy sexuality, not so much because the loved one is idealised – although this is part of the story – but because it presumes a psychic communication, a meeting of souls which is reparative in character. The other, by being who he or she is, answers a lack which the individual does not even necessarily recognise – until the love relation is initiated. And this lack is directly to do with self-identity: in some sense, the flawed individual is made whole.

Romantic love made of *amour passion* a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence; romantic love may end in tragedy, and feed upon transgression, but it also produces triumph, a conquest of mundane prescriptions and compromises. Such love projects in two senses: it fastens upon and idealises another, and it projects a course of future development. Although most authors have concentrated on the first of these traits, the second is at least equally as important and in a sense underlies it. The dream-like, fantasy character of romance, as described in the popular literature of the nineteenth century, drew scorn from rationalist critics, male and female, who saw in it an absurd or pathetic escapism. In the view suggested here, however, romance is the counterfactual thinking of the deprived – and in the nineteenth century and thereafter participated in a major reworking of the conditions of personal life.

In romantic love, the absorption by the other typical of *amour passion* is integrated into the characteristic orientation of 'the quest'. The quest is an odyssey, in which self-identity awaits its validation from the discovery of the other. It has

an active character, and in this respect modern romance contrasts with medieval romantic tales, in which the heroine usually is relatively passive. The women in modern romantic novels are mostly independent and spirited, and have consistently been portrayed in this way.<sup>16</sup> The conquest motif in these stories is not like the male version of sexual conquest: the heroine meets and melts the heart of a man who is initially indifferent to and aloof from her, or openly hostile. The heroine thus actively produces love. Her love causes her to become loved in return, dissolves the indifference of the other and replaces antagonism with devotion.

If the ethos of romantic love is simply understood as the means whereby a woman meets Mr Right, it appears shallow indeed. Yet although in literature, as in life, it is sometimes represented in this way, the capturing of the heart of the other is in fact a process of the creation of a mutual narrative biography. The heroine tames, softens and alters the seemingly intractable masculinity of her love object, making it possible for mutual affection to become the main guiding-line of their lives together.

The intrinsically subversive character of the romantic love complex was for a long while held in check by the association of love with marriage and motherhood; and by the idea that true love, once found, is for ever. When marriage, for many of the population, effectively *was* for ever, the structural congruence between romantic love and sexual partnership was clear-cut. The result may often have been years of unhappiness, given the tenuous connection between love as a formula for marriage and the demands of getting on later. Yet an effective, if not particularly rewarding, marriage could be sustained by a division of labour between the sexes, with the domain of the husband that of paid work and the wife that of the home. We can see in this regard how important the confining of female sexuality to marriage was as a mark of the 'respectable' woman. For this at the same time allowed men to maintain their distance from the

burgeoning realm of intimacy and kept the state of being married as a primary aim of women.

## NOTES

- 1 Bronislaw Malinowski: *The Sexual Life of Savages*, London: Routledge, 1929, p. 69.
- 2 Quoted in Martin S. Bergmann: *The Anatomy of Loving*, New York: Columbia, 1987, p. 4.
- 3 The term is Stendhal's, but I do not follow his meaning of it, or the classification of types of love that he offered. One might note in parenthesis that, in the early period of its development, social science was closely intertwined with speculation about the nature of love, and also about the divisions between the sexes. Stendhal was strongly influenced by Destutt de Tracy and referred to his work on love as 'a book of ideology'. He meant by this a 'discourse on ideas', but it also takes the form of a social investigation. Comte's fascination with love is documented in his later writings and evidenced by his association with Clothilde de Vaux. By the 'classic' period of the formation of modern sociology, however, these influences had become submerged. Durkheim, for example, who drew extensively on Comte in other respects, had little time for Comte's later work and referred to it with some scorn.
- 4 Francesco Alberoni: *Falling in Love*, New York: Random House, 1983.
- 5 Michael Mitterauer and Reinhard Sieder: *The European Family*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982, pp. 126-9. These claims are controversial among historians, however.
- 6 This is discussed in a particularly subtle way in Niklas Luhmann: *Love as Passion*, Cambridge: Polity, 1986, ch. 5.
- 7 Beatrice Gottlieb: 'The meaning of clandestine marriage', in Robert Wheaton and Tamara K. Hareven: *Family and Sexuality in French History*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980.
- 8 Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1976.
- 9 Lawrence Stone: *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1982, pp. 189ff.

10 Ibid., p. 189.

11 Ann Dally: *Inventing Motherhood*, London: Burnett, 1982. See also Elizabeth Badinter: *Myth of Motherhood*, London: Souvenir, 1981.

12 Mary Ryan: *The Cradle of the Middle Class*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 102.

13 Francesca M. Cancian: *Love in America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 21.

14 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 15.

15 Nancy Cott: *The Bonds of Womanhood*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977; Janice Raymond: *A Passion for Friends*, London: Women's Press, 1986.

16 Janice A. Radway: *Reading the Romance*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.