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# LOVE, COMMITMENT AND THE PURE RELATIONSHIP

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In the late 1980s, Sharon Thompson carried out an investigation of the attitudes, values and sexual behaviour of 150 American teenagers from different class and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> She found major differences between the ways in which the boys discussed sex (they did not often speak of love) in the course of her lengthy interviews with them and the responses of the girls. The boys appeared unable to talk about sex in a narrative form, as a connection to an envisaged future.<sup>2</sup> They spoke mainly about sporadic sexual episodes, such as early heterosexual play or diverse sexual conquests. When she questioned the girls, on the other hand, Thompson found that almost every individual she talked to, with little prompting, could produce lengthy stories 'imbued with the discoveries, anguish, and elation of intimate relations'.<sup>3</sup> The girls, she says, had something approaching the skills of professional novelists in their ability to recount a detailed and complex tale; many talked for several hours with little contribution needed from the interviewer.

The fluent nature of these narratives of self, Thompson argues, derived in large part from the fact that they had been rehearsed. They were the result of the many hours of conversations teenage girls have with one another, during the course of which feelings and hopes are discussed and

shaped. Thompson accepts that, as an individual from an older generation, the narratives recounted may have been partly edited for her benefit. But she was also drawn in as a sounding-board for reflexive interpretation on the part of the interviewees. She felt she 'had been entrusted with something as valuable, as telling and prophetic as a first love when the lover reads it, like an omen, for the future'. For, as a further reflexive resonance, she herself admits to an 'addiction to romance'.<sup>4</sup>

### The quest-romance

The main thematic device of the girls' stories was what Thompson labels the 'quest-romance'. Romance gears sexuality into an anticipated future in which sexual encounters are seen as detours on the way to an eventual love relationship. Sex is, as it were, a sparking device, with romance as the quest for destiny. The search for romantic love here, however, no longer means deferring sexual activity until the desired relationship comes along. Having sex with a new partner may be the start of the fateful encounter which is sought after, but more than likely it is not.

The following is a description given by an interviewee of a romance:

We discovered that we lived sort of in the same neighbourhood, and we started taking the bus home together. Then we discovered we didn't want to take the bus home together. We wanted to walk because it meant more time talking. Both of us had our own ideas about the world . . . We'd start talking about school, and we'd end up talking about the situation in China . . . and within three months, I was so in love . . . it was amazing.<sup>5</sup>

Amazing, yes – or it would have been to a researcher on teenage sexuality twenty-five years earlier – because the romance in question was a lesbian one. One of the findings that comes through strongly in Thompson's work is that sexual diversity exists alongside the persistence of notions of romance, although sometimes in an uneasy and conflictual relation. The lesbian girls among Thompson's interviewees appeared to find romance as compelling as did the heterosexuals.

'Loss of virginity' for a boy, as from time immemorial, continues today to be a misnomer: for boys, first sexual experience is a plus, a gain. It is a talisman which points to the future; not, however, in respect of core aspects of the self, but as one among other emblems of male capability. For girls, virginity is still something seen as given up. The question is not, for most, whether or not to do so as part of early sexual experience, but how to choose the right time and circumstance. The event connects directly to romantic narratives. Boys expect to force the issue of sexual initiation, girls to 'slow things down'. The query girls pose to themselves, as well as implicitly to their first partner, whoever he (or she) may be, is: will my sexuality allow me to determine the path of my future life? Will it give me sexual power? First sexual experience is for many a test of whether or not a future romantic scenario can be achieved.

As the term suggests, the quest-romance is not for these girls a passive set of aspirations – 'some day my prince will come'. Painful and anxiety-ridden in many respects, it is nevertheless an active process of engagement with future time. Echoing Rubin, Thompson found that the girls she spoke to did not have to fight to achieve sexual freedom: such freedom exists, and the problem is to make something of it in the face of male attitudes which still carry more than an echo of the past. The girls therefore emerge as the main social experimenters here. Thompson expresses this very well:

To an extent, teenage girls are struggling with the problem nineteenth-century feminists predicted when they argued against breaking the connection between sex and reproduction on the grounds that it constituted the only way women had to persuade men to commit themselves to a relationship. But it is, finally, not a problem of enforcement, but of vision. It demands facing the deconstruction of sex, romance and intimacy and renegotiating the bargain between the genders.<sup>6</sup>

Under the strain of these tasks, some girls try to retreat to pre-existing ideas and modes of behaviour – acceptance of the double standard, ‘flypaper dreams of motherhood’, hopes for eternal love. Most find themselves breaking away from earlier-established norms and taboos, adapting them in ways in which a great deal of emotional energy is invested, but which are quite provisional and open to restructuring in the light of possible future events.

By their late teens, many of the girls have already had experience of unhappy love affairs, and are well aware that romance can no longer be equated with permanence. In a highly reflexive society they come into contact with, and in their television watching and reading actively search out, numerous discussions about sex, relationships and influences affecting the position of women. The fragmentary elements of the romantic love complex with which these girls are grappling in seeking to take practical control of their lives are no longer linked wholly to marriage. Virtually all recognise that they will be in paid work for much of their lives, and most see the importance of work skills as a basis for their future autonomy. Only a few of the girls among Thompson’s interviewees, however – mostly those from middle-class backgrounds – regard work as a major source of meaning for their future. Thus one girl said, ‘My idea of what I want to do right now is to get a career that I love . . . if I marry somebody or even live with somebody and they leave me, I won’t have anything to worry about because I’ll

be totally independent.' Yet, as Thompson found with others, she quickly reverted to matters of romance and sexuality: 'I want the ideal relationship with a guy. I guess I want someone to love me and care about me as much as I do them.'<sup>7</sup>

### Women, marriage, relationships

It is only over the past generation that striking out on one's own, for women, has meant leaving the parental home. In previous periods, for all but a small proportion of women, leaving home meant getting married. In contrast to most men, the majority of women continue to identify entering the outside world with forming attachments. As many commentators have noted, even when an individual is still single and only anticipating future relationships, men normally speak in terms of 'I', whereas female narratives of self tend to be couched in terms of 'we'. The 'individualised speech' apparent in the above quotation is qualified by a surreptitious 'we' – someone who will 'love and care' and make a 'we' from the 'me'.

In contrast to those in younger age-groups today, the experience of older women was almost always framed in terms of marriage, even if the person in question did not marry. Emily Hancock investigated the life-histories of twenty American women, from various class origins, aged between thirty and seventy-five in the late 1980s. Some were still in their first marriages, others had remarried, were divorced or widowed. Marriage was to them the core experience of a woman's life – although many have had retrospectively to reconstruct their past, because when they first got married, marriage was very different from what it is now.

Let us follow for a little while the history of Wendy, who

was thirty-nine when Hancock interviewed her. Wendy's life-story demonstrates an increasing reflexive awareness of self, brought about partly by outside social changes, and partly by personal crises and transitions that she has had to surmount. Wendy is the oldest of four children from an affluent New England family in which the parents followed fairly strict codes of 'proper behaviour'. She broke away from her parents' control by means of marriage, and did so actively and consciously, through an elopement (a term which, during a period of a few decades, has become archaic). Wendy saw marriage as equivalent to entry into adulthood. She thought of it as 'a re-creation of a cocoon at the same time that you're also a fully grown butterfly'.

Her attachment to her prospective husband facilitated her independence, at least as she saw things then: 'This relationship with a new person was the first really independent action I took. So many other things followed from that one.' Yet her act of autonomy was also one presuming material dependence. 'I suppose it would have been more radical not to have married at all. That would have been the most radical thing, but that was never an option for me. I never thought of myself as a person who would not be married. It was a given.' She didn't want only to be a housewife, and was determined not to have as parochial a life as her mother, whose prime concern had always been the home. Wendy became a schoolteacher and found the career satisfying. She did not give up the job when she became pregnant, but moved to half-time teaching.

Then her husband was killed in a freak accident. She underwent a severe crisis, and lost her grip on her sense of her adult self. It was not just the bereavement, but the loss of the attachment upon which she had based her feelings of security and accomplishment which were traumatic. She felt 'thrust back into adolescence', even though she had a child to look after. Her parents expected her to go back and live with them; she successfully resisted after having come to

realise how much she had depended upon the marriage for a sense of integrity. Her second marriage, like her first, was entered into for love, and was 'part of putting myself back together'. But by this point she 'had more perspective' than when she married for the first time: 'It is doing these things with a self-consciousness that comes after scrambling that helps you realise potential. You shape it in a clearer way, like a sculpture.' Wendy had further children by her second marriage; she was content with her life, still found satisfaction in her paid work, but was not ambitious for further career achievement.

Compare Wendy's experience with that of Helen, aged forty-nine when contacted by the researcher. When she was growing up Helen had, in her own words, 'lacked self-confidence to a pathological degree'. At college, she met and married a professor who was rapidly making a reputation for himself in his chosen field. Having abandoned her education in order to get married, her sense of self-worth became largely dependent upon her involvement with the aspirations and achievements of her husband. She occupied part of his life, as she later put it, as 'a tenant' or 'a janitor'. She and her husband were living in university housing when he announced he wanted a divorce; since he was the one with the faculty position, she had to leave, taking their child to live with her. Unlike Wendy, her parents did not invite her to come back home or offer much moral or material support.

Overwhelmed at first by desperation and beset by loneliness, Helen eventually managed to go back to college part-time and finish her degree. None the less, she found herself for some while stuck in low-grade 'women's jobs' until she managed to get a post in publishing, and had at the time of the research become a successful editor. She is described by Hancock as a person with a sharp, sarcastic manner, given to sardonic wit. Yet her surface competence disguised attitudes of despair and self-hate with which the ending of her

marriage had left her and from which she had never recovered. She felt caught up in a life that was 'empty and arid'. Rather than seeking to shape her future, she was continuing 'to drift toward infinity'. She concluded: 'You ask me what my adult life has been? A vacuum, that's what it's been. By the age of thirty-five, I was a corpse. And now I am almost fifty and I can't even account for the intervening fifteen years. I've brought up my child, but my sense of time has disappeared.'<sup>8</sup>

A reasonably contented and fulfilled woman, a lonely, embittered one: banal enough stories, each of them, although in both cases infused with considerable pain. What do they tell us about love, since love is not a dominating theme in the narratives of either individual? It would be easy to say, and impossible to dispute, that marriage was a trap for both women, even if a trap into which each deliberately plunged. Wendy was able to recover from the loss of her husband, whereas Helen could not do so, and became bowed down by the oppressive force of circumstances which women alone so often face. Each married for love – Wendy twice – but each, without fully realising it, married as an assertion of independence and as a means of forging a definite self-identity. Who knows whether Wendy would still be able to take effective charge of her life if her second husband left her?

Like most of the women interviewed by Hancock, both sought to get away from the lives their mothers lived, which they identified with constrained domesticity. The process was tensionful, because each sought to distance herself from her mother without rejecting femininity. We do not see here the perpetuating of attitudes linking love and marriage as a 'final state'; but nor is there an attempt simply to enter a male world through the adoption of instrumental values. These women, as with the others portrayed in Hancock's book, are in a real sense pioneers moving through unmapped territory, who chart out shifts in self-identity as



they confront and are confronted by changes in the nature of marriage, the family and work.

The paradox is that marriage is used as a means of achieving a measure of autonomy. Romantic love, I suggested earlier, is a gamble against the future, an orientation to the control of future time on the part of women who became specialists in matters of (what now has come to be understood as) intimacy. There was an almost inevitable connection between love and marriage, for many women, in the earlier periods of modern development. But even then, quite apart from the interventions of foresightful feminist authors, women were *de facto* exploring other paths. The severance between marriage and its traditional roots in 'external' factors imposed itself much more forcefully upon women than men, who could find in marriage and the family primarily a refuge from economic individualism. For men, colonising the future in terms of an anticipated economic career tended to push out of the reckoning the parallel, but substantively very different, form of colonising time offered by romantic love. For them, on the surface, at least, love remained closer to *amour passion*.

Marriage for Wendy and Helen, when they first entered it, was already contradictory, but also on the point of becoming infused with a higher level of reflexivity. It had not yet been prised free of its 'external' anchors, and provided a distinct status for women as wives and mothers. Yet, even in the early part of their lives, it was already not just for them a question of 'finding a man', but linked to asks and concerns quite different from those of their mothers' generation. Women like Wendy and Helen helped prepare the way for a restructuring of intimate life behind which stands the whole weight of the changes discussed in Chapter 1. If the teenage girls do not speak much about marriage, it is not because they have successfully made a transition to a non-domestic future, but because they are participants in, and contributors to, a major reorganisation

in what marriage, and other forms of close personal tie, actually are. They talk of relationships rather than marriage as such, and they are right to do so.

The term 'relationship', meaning a close and continuing emotional tie to another, has only come into general usage relatively recently. To be clear what is at stake here, we can introduce the term *pure relationship* to refer to this phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> A pure relationship has nothing to do with sexual purity, and is a limiting concept rather than only a descriptive one. It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. Love used to be tied to sexuality, for most of the sexually 'normal' population, through marriage; but now the two are connected more and more via the pure relationship. Marriage – for many, but by no means all groups in the population – has veered increasingly towards the form of a pure relationship, with many ensuing consequences. The pure relationship, to repeat, is part of a generic restructuring of intimacy. It emerges in other contexts of sexuality besides heterosexual marriage; it is in some causally related ways parallel to the development of plastic sexuality. The romantic love complex helped carve open a way to the formation of pure relationships in the domain of sexuality, but has now become weakened by some of the very influences it helped create.

### Women, men, romantic love

All this so far has been mostly about women. If the romantic love complex has been developed, and also later in some part dissolved, primarily by women, what has happened to

men? Have men remained untouched by the changes which women have helped bring about, save in their role as reactionary defenders of entrenched privilege? That men are participants in the everyday experiments described in this book goes almost without saying. But I feel justified in offering an interpretation of the transmutation of romantic love which largely excludes men. Men are the laggards in the transitions now occurring – and in a certain sense have been so ever since the late eighteenth century. In Western culture at least, today is the first period in which men are finding themselves *to be* men, that is, as possessing a problematic 'masculinity'. In previous times, men have assumed that their activities constituted 'history', whereas women existed almost out of time, doing the same as they had always done.

Men, like women, fall in love and have done so throughout the recorded past. They have also over the last two centuries been influenced by the development of ideals of romantic love, but in a different way from women. Those men who have come too much under the sway of such notions of love have been set apart from the majority as 'romantics', in a particular sense of that term. They are, as it were, foppish dreamers, who have succumbed to female power. Such men have given up the division between unsullied and impure women so central to male sexuality. The romantic does not, nevertheless, treat women as equals. He is in thrall to a particular woman (or to several women in sequence) and he would build his life around her; but his succumbing is not a gesture of equality. He is not really a participant in the emerging exploration of intimacy, but more of a throwback to previous times. The romantic in this instance is not someone who has intuitively understood the nature of love as a mode of organising personal life in relation to the colonising of future time and to the construction of self-identity.

For most men, romantic love stands in tension with the

imperatives of seduction. This observation means more than just that the rhetoric of romantic love is stock in trade for most Lotharios. Since the beginnings of the transformations affecting marriage and personal life, men by and large have excluded themselves from the developing domain of the intimate. The connections between romantic love and intimacy were suppressed, and falling in love remained closely bound up with access: access to women whose virtue or reputation was protected until, at least, a union was sanctified by marriage. Men have tended to be 'specialists in love' only in respect of the techniques of seduction or conquest.

There has always been a gulf between the sexes in terms of experience, upbringing and education. 'Those impossible women! How they do get around us! The poet was right: can't live with them or without them' (Aristophanes). In the nineteenth century, however, for reasons already discussed, women became opaque to men in a new way. They were rendered mysterious, as Foucault maintains, by the very discourses that sought to know them, which made female sexuality a 'problem' and treated their diseases as forms of social disqualification coming from murky depths. But they also became puzzling by virtue of the very changes they were helping to introduce.

What do men want? In one sense the answer has been clear and understood by both sexes from the nineteenth century onwards. Men want status among other men, conferred by material rewards and conjoined to rituals of male solidarity. But the male sex here misread a key trend in the trajectory of development of modernity. For men self-identity was sought after in work, and they failed – we always have to add, by and large – to understand that the reflexive project of self involves an emotional reconstruction of the past in order to project a coherent narrative towards the future. Their unconscious emotional reliance upon women was the mystery whose answer they sought in women themselves; and the quest for self-identity became

concealed within this unacknowledged dependence. What men wanted was something which women had in some part already achieved; it is no wonder that male authors, including the narrator of *My Secret Life*, became obsessed with the secret that only women could reveal, but which the piling up of amorous conquests wholly failed to disclose.

### Romantic versus confluent love

In the current era, ideals of romantic love tend to fragment under the pressure of female sexual emancipation and autonomy. The clash between the romantic love complex and the pure relationship takes various forms, each of which tends to become more and more displayed to general view as a result of increasing institutional reflexivity. Romantic love depends upon projective identification, the projective identification of *amour passion*, as the means whereby prospective partners become attracted and then bound to one another. Projection here creates a feeling of wholeness with the other, no doubt strengthened by established differences between masculinity and femininity, each defined in terms of an antithesis. The traits of the other are 'known' in a sort of intuitive sense. Yet in other respects projective identification cuts across the development of a relationship whose continuation depends upon intimacy. Opening oneself out to the other, the condition of what I shall call *confluent love*, is in some ways the opposite of projective identification, even if such identification sometimes sets up a pathway to it.

Confluent love is active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex. The 'separating and divorcing society' of today here appears as an effect of the emergence of confluent love rather than its cause. The more confluent

love becomes consolidated as a real possibility, the more the finding of a 'special person' recedes and the more it is the 'special relationship' that counts.

In contrast to confluent love, romantic love has always been imbalanced in gender terms, as a result of influences already discussed. Romantic love has long had an egalitarian strain, intrinsic to the idea that a relationship can derive from the emotional involvement of two people, rather than from external social criteria. *De facto*, however, romantic love is thoroughly skewed in terms of power. For women dreams of romantic love have all too often led to grim domestic subjection. Confluent love presumes equality in emotional give and take, the more so the more any particular love tie approximates closely to the prototype of the pure relationship. Love here only develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other. The masked emotional dependence of men has inhibited their willingness, and their capacity, to be made thus vulnerable. The ethos of romantic love has in some part sustained this orientation, in the sense in which the desirable man has often been represented as cold and unapproachable. Yet since such love dissolves these characteristics, which are revealed as a front, recognition of male emotional vulnerability is evidently present.

Romantic love is sexual love, but it brackets off the *ars erotica*. Sexual satisfaction and happiness, especially in the fantasy form of romance, are supposedly guaranteed by the very erotic force which romantic love provokes. Confluent love for the first time introduces the *ars erotica* into the core of the conjugal relationship and makes the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved. The cultivation of sexual skills, the capability of giving and experiencing sexual satisfaction, on the part of both sexes, become organised

reflexively via a multitude of sources of sexual information, advice and training.

In non-Western cultures, as mentioned earlier, the *ars erotica* was usually a female speciality, and almost always limited to specific groups; erotic arts were cultivated by concubines, prostitutes or the members of minority religious communities. Confluent love develops as an ideal in a society where almost everyone has the chance to become sexually accomplished; and it presumes the disappearance of the schism between 'respectable' women and those who in some way lie outside the pale of orthodox social life. Unlike romantic love, confluent love is not necessarily monogamous, in the sense of sexual exclusiveness. What holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, 'until further notice', that each gains sufficient benefit from the relation to make its continuance worthwhile. Sexual exclusiveness here has a role in the relationship to the degree to which the partners mutually deem it desirable or essential.

One further very important contrast between romantic and confluent love should be noted: like the pure relationship in general, confluent love has no specific connection to heterosexuality. Ideas of romance have been extended to homosexual love, and have some purchase upon femininity/masculinity distinctions developed among same-sex partners. I have already pointed out that romantic love contains features which tend to override sexual difference. None the less, the romantic love complex plainly has been oriented mainly towards the heterosexual couple. Confluent love, while not necessarily androgynous, and still perhaps structured around difference, presumes a model of the pure relationship in which knowing the traits of the other is central. It is a version of love in which a person's sexuality is one factor that has to be negotiated as part of a relationship.

I want to leave aside for the time being how far confluent

love in practice forms part of sexual relationships today. For there are other aspects and implications of the pure relationship, and its association with self-identity and personal autonomy, which have first of all to be discussed. In such discussion, I shall quite often – although in critical vein – take therapeutic works and self-help manuals as my guide. Not because they offer accurate accounts of the changes affecting personal life: most in any case are essentially practical handbooks. Rather, they are expressions of processes of reflexivity which they chart out and help shape. Many are also emancipatory: they point towards changes that might release individuals from influences which block their autonomous development. They are texts of our time in a comparable sense to the medieval manuals of manners analysed by Norbert Elias, or the works of etiquette utilised by Erving Goffman in his studies of the interaction order.

## NOTES

- 1 Sharon Thompson: 'Search for tomorrow: or feminism and the reconstruction of teen romance', in Carole S. Vance: *Pleasure and Danger. Exploring Female Sexuality*, London: Pandora, 1989.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 350.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
- 5 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 361.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 360.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 356.
- 8 All quotations are from Emily Hancock: *The Girl Within*, London: Pandora, 1990.
- 9 Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991.