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Obsessive Love

Hakim Bey

“Rough dialectics” allows us to indulge an impure taste for history — a dredging operation — bricolage of “suppressed & realized” bricabrac — foolish unsavory outdated practises such as “obsessive love”. Romance is “Roman” only in a terminal sense, in that it was brought back to “Rum” (the Islamic name for Europe & Byzantium) by Crusaders & troubadours. Crazy hopeless passion (‘ishq) appears first in texts from the Orient such as Ibn Hazm’s *Ring of the Dove* (actually a slang term for for the neck of circumcised cock) & in the early *Layla & Majnun material from Arabistan*. The language of this literature was appropriated by the sufis (‘Attar, Ibn ‘Arabi, Rumi, Hafez, etc.) thus further eroticizing an already eroticized culture and religion.

But if desire pervades the structure and style of Islam, nevertheless it remains a repressed desire. “He who loves but remains chaste and died of longing, achieves the status of a martyr in the Jihad”, i.e., paradise — or so claims a popular but perhaps spurious tradition of the Prophet himself. The cracking tension of this paradox galvanizes a new category of emotion into life: romantic love, based on the unsatisfied desire, on “separation” rather than “union”... that is, on long-

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Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from hermetic.com

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ing. The Hellenistic period (as evoked for instance by Cavafy) supplied the genres for this convention – the “romance” itself as well as the idyll and the erotic lyric – but Islam set new fire to the old forms with its system of passional sublimation. The Greco-Egypto-Islamic ferment adds a pederastic element to the new style; moreover, the ideal woman of romance is neither wife nor concubine but someone in the forbidden category, certainly someone outside the category of mere reproduction. Romance appears therefor as a kind of gnosis, in which spirits and flesh occupy antithetical positions; also perhaps as a kind of advanced libertinage in which strong emotion is seen as more satisfactory than satisfaction itself. Viewed as “spiritual alchemy” the goal of the project would appear to involve the inculcation of non-ordinary consciousness. This development reached extreme but still “lawfull” degrees with such sufis as Ahmad Ghazzali, Awhadoddin Kermani and Abdol-Rhaman Jami, who “witnessed” the presence of the Divine Beloved in certain beautiful boys and yet remained (reputedly) chaste. The Troubadours said the same of their lady-loves; Dante’s *Vita Nuova* represents the extreme example. Christians and Moslems alike walked a very treacherous precipice with this doctrine of sublime chastity, but the spiritual effects could sometimes prove tremendous, as with Fakhroddin ’Iraqi, or indeed Rumi and Dante themselves. But wasn’t it possible to view the question of desire from a “tantrik” perspective and admit that “union” is also a form of supreme enlightenment? Such a position was taken by Ibn ’Arabi, but he insisted on legal marriage or concubinage. And since all homosexuality is forbidden in Islamic Law, a boy-loving sufi had no “safe” category for sensual realization. The jurist Ibn Taimiyya once demanded of such a dervish whether he had done more than simply kiss his beloved.”And what if I did?” replied the rogue. The answer would be “guilty of heresy!” of course, not to mention even lower forms of crime. A similar answer would be given to any Troubadour with “tantrik” (adulterous)

tendencies — and perhaps this answer drove some of them into the organized heresy of Catharism.

Romantic love in the west received energies from neoplatonism, just as the islamic world; and romance provided an acceptable (still orthodox) means of compromise between Christian morality and the rediscovered erotocosm of Antiquity. Even so the balancing-act was precarious: — Pico della Mirandola and the pagan Botticelli ended up in the arms of Savonarola. A secretive minority of Renaissance nobles, churchmen and artists opted out altogether in favor of clandestine paganism; the *Hypnerotomachia* of Poliphilo, or the garden Monsters at Bomarzo, bear witness to the existence of this “tantrik” sect. But for most platonizers, the idea of love based on longing alone served orthodox and allegorical ends, in which the material beloved can only be a distant shadow of the real (as exemplified by such as St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross) and can only be loved according to a “chivalrous”, chaste and penitential code. The whole point of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* is that Lancelot fails to achieve the chivalric ideal by loving Guinevere in the flesh rather than only in the spirit.

The emergence of Capitalism exercises a strange effect on romance. I can only express it with an absurd fantasy: — it’s as if the Beloved becomes the perfect commodity, always desired, always paid for, but never really enjoyed. The self-denial of Romance harmonizes neatly with the self-denial of Capitalism. Capital demands scarcity, both of production and of erotic pleasure, rather than limit its requirements simply to morality or chastity. Religion forbids sexuality, thus investing denial with glamor; capital withdraws sexuality, infusing it with despair. “Romance” now leads to the Wertherian suicide, Byron’s disgust, the chastity of the dandies. In this sense, romance will become the perfect two-dimensional obsession of the popular song and the advertisement, serving the utopian trace within the infinite reproduction of the commodity.

In response to this situation, modern times have offered two judgements of romance, apparently opposed, which relate to our present hermeneutic. One, the surrealist *amour fou*, clearly belongs to the romantic tradition, but proposes a radical solution to the paradox of desire by combining the idea of sublimation with the tantrik perspective. In opposing the scarcity (or “emotional plague” as Reich called it) of Capitalism, Surrealism proposes a transgressive excess of the most obsessive desire and the most sensual realization. What the romance of Nezami or Malory had separated (“longing” and “union”), the Surrealists proposed to recombine. The effect was meant to be explosive, literally revolutionary.

The second point of view relevant here was also revolutionary, but “classical” rather than “romantic”. The anarchist-individualist John Henry Mackay despaired of romantic love, which he could only see as tainted with the social forms of ownership and alienation. The romantic lover longs to “possess” or to be possessed by the beloved. If marriage is simply legal prostitution (the usual anarchist analysis), Mackay found that “love” itself had become a commodity-form. Romantic love is a sickness of the ego and its relation to “property”; in opposition Mackay proposed erotic friendship, free of property relations, based on generosity rather than longing and withdrawal (i.e., scarcity): — a love between equal self-rulers.

Although Mackay and the Surrealists seem opposed, there does exist a point at which they meet: the sovereignty of love. Moreover both reject the platonic heritage of “hopeless longing”, which is now seen as merely self-destructive — perhaps a measure of the debt owed by both the anarchists and the surrealists to Nietzsche. Mackay demands an apollonian eros, the surrealists of course opt for Dionysos, obsessive, dangerous. But both are in revolt against “romance”

Nowadays both these solutions to the problem of romance seem still “open”, still “possible”. The atmosphere may feel yet more polluted with degraded images of desire than in the

days of Mackay or Breton, but there appear to have been no *qualitative* changes in the relations between love and Too-Late Capitalism since then. I admit to a philosophical preference for Mackay’s position because I have been unable to sublimate desire in a context of “hopeless obsession” without falling into misery; whereas happiness (Mackay’s goal) seems to arise from “giving-up” of all false chivalry and self-denying dandyism in favor of more “pagan” and convivial modes of loves. Still, it must be admitted that both “separation” and “union” are *non-ordinary states of consciousness*. Intense obsessive longing constitutes a “mystical state”, which only needs trace of religion to crystallize as full-blown neoplatonic ecstasy. But we romantics should recall that happiness also possesses an element completely unrelated to any tepid bourgeois coziness or vapid cowardice. Happiness expresses a festal and even an insurrectionary aspect which gives it — paradoxically — its own romantic aura. Perhaps we can imagine a synthesis of Mackay and Breton — surely an umbrella and sewing-machine on an operating-table”: — and construct a utopia based on *generosity as well as obsession*. (Once again the temptation arises to attempt a conflation of Nietzsche with Charles Fourier and his “Passional Attraction”...); but in fact, I have dreamed this (I remember it suddenly, as if it were literally a dream) — and it has taken on a tantalizing reality and filtered into my life — in certain Temporary Autonomous Zones — an “impossible” time and space ...and on this brief hint, all my theory is based.