

In praise of romantic love

I mean to praise romantic love, that poor, despised cast-off

by Tom Henighan
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all, there's something extraordinarily good about being alive in our universe.

It's odd, but when you

child of modern culture, a wonderful experience that has been ignored, made fun of, deconstructed, and otherwise tossed on the rubbish heap of hip modern life.

What is romantic love? It is that delightful, terrifying feeling that possesses you when Reality focuses on a single Other, the beautiful friend, the lover, the person whose soul you simply cannot do without. You meet someone in an ordinary social context, politenesses are exchanged, functions exercised, then, lo and behold! Something happens. At some moment - it is almost impossible to say when - the social trappings fall away and you are face to face with a real person. Not just a common person socially perceived, but a person you look upon with joy, a person whose face and manner are ingrained upon your consciousness, perhaps forever.

Such a person, when you come upon them unexpectedly, has the power to startle you into a recognition of blessedness; it is joy simply to be with them, and sorrow to be cut off. Do you want to test your experience of romantic love? Ask yourself if it would be heaven to spend six hours with your lover in the waiting room of an airport. Ask yourself if you can see them in all their plainness, with faults or wrinkles, and rejoice that, after

first "recognize" the loved person you know them almost as well as you ever will. You may know almost nothing about them - and may have to spend months or years acquiring facts about them - but you will never know them better than at that first moment. This is where the "eternal" comes in.

We live in a time-bound world, stretched on the rack of minutes, hours and years. Everyday life is often routinized and depressing; it lacks "annunciations." But the moments spent with your lover seem to defy time. A sceptic would declare this a form of illusion - but scepticism dissolves in the texture of such an experience.

We live in an age of "nothing but's." Romantic love is "nothing but" addiction, "nothing but" a power-trip, "nothing but" sex in disguise. Of course there are such components in romantic love, but even so, what a glorious experience it is in its wholeness and complexity, how marvellously it can enrich the person, what a complex, tender and funny world emerges for you, when it has you in its grasp! In such a state everything takes on a newness and an unexpected beauty: a simple meal shared becomes a feast, a common melody raises you to the skies, sunshine on a frosty window makes you want to cry for joy. You can sit in a shopping mall with your lover and be supremely happy. A magic shell encloses you: people pass by, count their money, scold their children or yawn, someone empties a trash can. It is all supremely funny and delightful, like the discovery of a mysterious dimension in the heart of our everyday banality.

This is true joy - but is it possible to incorporate it into an ordinary marriage? Alas, probably not. Marriage and romantic love - each wonderful in its own way - contradict one another.

Marriage at its best encourages a mutual soul-making under the pressure of domestic routine. Romantic love asserts its faith in the miracle of the occasional encounter, the secret meeting, the unexpected insight. It is often carried on at a distance - thinking about the other person, performing uncalled-for acts of devotion, filling up one's dream-time with a real presence.

Do romantic lovers always end up in bed? Not always. Such love can exist even where sexual consummation is impossible, or must be

long delayed, or where there is no possibility of transforming it into married love. I think of Andrew Wyeth and his secret paintings of the other woman (which his wife referred to as "acts of love"), of Evelyn Waugh, the novelist, and Lady Diana Cooper, carrying on a long-distance but intimate correspondence for twenty years.

In romantic love at its best there is joy and service, companionship amid absence, passion even without consummation, the triumph of energy and ecstasy over the tedium of our sad existence, and above all, the knowledge that in this lonely and often daunting world, you have a friend.

