Can Love Last?

The Fate of Romance over Time

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Psyche Revived by Eros' Kiss

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SIGMUND FREUD ONCE ATTEMPTED to account for the widespread resistance to his prodigious contributions to Western culture by positioning his discovery of the unconscious as the third of three powerful blows to human narcissism. The first, the cosmological blow, was the Copernican revolution. If the earth orbits around the sun, rather than the sun around the earth, we are faced with the hard truth that human beings are not located at the physical center of the universe, not at its core, not at its navel. Rather, we ourselves revolve in orbit around another center. The second, the biological blow, was the Darwinian revolution. If we humans have evolved from other animal species, we are faced with the hard truth that human beings were not uniquely created. We were not instantaneously designed, of a piece, by divine inspiration, but rather emerged slowly, over vast periods of time, in fits and starts, as life responded to changing circumstances.
His discovery of the unconscious, Freud reasoned, was the third and most devastating assault, a psychological blow, to our estimation of our own importance. Prior to Freud's revelations, we humans, in our diminished state, one among an infinite variety of life forms, out at the periphery rather than at the center of things—we diminutive humans could at least claim self-governance. But, Freud demonstrated, the human being is not even “master in his own house”: we do not even run our own minds. Mind is, according to Freud, a “hierarchy of superordinated and subordinated agencies, a labyrinth of impulses striving independently of one another toward action.” Our conscious experience is merely the tip of an immense iceberg of unconscious mental processes that really shape, unbeknownst to us, silently, impenetrably, and inexorably, our motives, our values, our actions. This, Freud believed, was hard for us to accept.

I always thought Freud had this wrong. He was right about the immediate injury to the human sense of self-importance inflicted by each of these intellectual revolutions. But from his vantage point in history, Freud could not have imagined that the loss produced by each of these intellectual revolutions would be far outweighed by subsequent gains.

The fuller implications of our Copernican decentering emerged only centuries later. Not only are we not at the center of things, but our impressive sun is just one among billions of other suns, many of them much more impressive. Perhaps even more astounding, it was only with the acceptance of the work of Edwin Powell Hubble, years after Freud's death, that we humans began to realize that many of what we had taken to be other suns, perhaps other planetary solar systems, are actually other galaxies, and that these myriad galaxies, of which ours is only one, are catapulting away from one another at astounding speeds. In light of these developments, I have always felt our ancestors' sense of diminishment at Copernicus's discoveries, although very understandable at the time, to be almost quaint. What did we take ourselves to be, anyway? The center of everything? From our vantage point today, the loss of the overarching self-importance of our ancestors seems less consequential than the gains we have made in our understanding of the awesome, mind-rattling universe of which we are a part. Renouncing our claims to centrality has made it possible to regard ourselves as participants in something so extraordinary, so vast, that it would have been unimaginable to Copernicus, and even to Freud.

Similarly, even though it is nearly a century and a half since Darwin's remarkable genius enabled him to grasp the process of evolution and its basic mechanisms, we are still working out many of the implications of that jolting dislocation of humans from a wholly unique, hallowed position vis-à-vis other forms of life. At first, the immediate challenge seemed to be to theism itself. If we are not the product of an instantaneous creation, it was reasoned by believers and nonbelievers alike, then perhaps there is no creator at all. The loss of humankind's special status among other animals seemed inevitably linked with the loss of a plausible belief in the existence of the Divine itself. It was as if, to paraphrase Nietzsche, God and our elevated sense of importance died together. But in recent years more thoughtful religious thinkers (in contrast to the Creationists) have demonstrated that a belief in a divine design or divine will does not have to fall with evolutionary theory. Rather, theologians have come to appreciate the workings of the Divine in more complex, less simplistic terms than did our ancestors. And, for many nonreligious thinkers, a deeper relationship to nature and to life itself has emerged, across the varieties of environmentalism, as a contemporary secular religion. Regarding ourselves as one species among others in the infinite array of earthly life forms is generally no longer experienced as a diminu-
tion. Rather, an appreciation of our small place (and, perhaps, big responsibility) within the ecosphere has made it possible for many people to experience themselves as an inextricable part of something vast and beautiful—the panoply of life itself.

Decentered as we were within the universe, dislocated within nature, Freud’s destabilization of our vision of the human mind as transparent to itself and ruled by conscious reason seemed yet another loss, difficult to bear. But like the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions, the Freudian revolution has also brought, over time, potential gifts for our always tenuous efforts to bolster our self-esteem. Here too, what we were defending turned out to be worth less than what now became available to us. Our conscious control over our minds is limited, we now realize. But we are not merely our conscious minds. We are also our unconscious processes, although not in quite the same way. What we are called upon to give up is a certain kind of hubris. What we gain is participation in something much richer and more complex than we ever took ourselves to be. We can no longer maintain our prerogatives as rulers over the small fiefdom of conscious rationality; gone forever is the view of ourselves as singular, transparent, self-generating, and self-controlling agents. We are multiplicitous, we have discovered, with areas of experience that are more or less opaque as well as areas of experience that are more or less transparent. Each of us has become a kind of variegated psychic community. Being a person seems now to be much more complicated and involving than ever before; it requires discovering ourselves as well as shaping ourselves, exploring ourselves as well as controlling ourselves.

Practicing psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, as I have done for almost thirty years, provides an interesting, in some respects unique, vantage point for observing and participating in people’s struggle to understand just what and who they are. It is very difficult, I rediscover many times each day, for us to come to terms with the stark limitations on the kinds of control it is possible to maintain over our lives and ourselves. Yet we continue to insist, both consciously and unconsciously, that we have more control than we do over our feelings, our relationships, our fates. Freud’s phrase for such fantasies, introduced nearly ninety years ago, was “omnipotence of thought,” and we are just as committed to omnipotence today as were Freud’s contemporaries. A conviction of being in control is central to our sense of safety; yet the imposition of illusory control chokes the richness out of life. Omnipotence degrades authentic experience into shallow manipulation. The more endangered we feel, the more control we seek; the more illusory are the controls we strive to maintain, the more vitality seeps out of our lives.

This book is about romance and its degradation. It is about romance, because I want to explore the struggle for vitality and meaning in the lives of those of us living at the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Vitality and meaning are not easy to come by, as evidenced by the endless succession of books, magazines, and television shows on self-help techniques, popular psychology, and popular spirituality. Modern life, at all points on the socioeconomic scale, is difficult, draining, and confusing.

What is it that imparts to life a sense of robustness? A quality of purpose and excitement? A feeling that one’s life is worth not only living but also cultivating and savoring? Romance, I am suggesting, has a great deal to do with it.

There are many different forms of romance, including both romance in our relationship to ourselves and romance in relation to the world around us, what we take to be the “natural” as opposed to the humanly constructed world. Self-directed romance has recently been termed “narcissism,” and many psychologists now
consider it to be crucial to our sense of identity. And nature, the
wilderness, is enormously alluring to many people in our time as
something they want to get “back to.” We will be touching on both
of these forms of romance, but we will be primarily exploring
romance as a form of loving others.

Aristotle claimed at the dawn of Western culture that we are
social animals. But it is only in recent decades that we have come to
appreciate just how thoroughly social we are. We are born with
brains requiring extensive social interaction and language to com-
plete their wiring. We become, inevitably and irreversibly, exces-
sionally like the caregivers we require to nurture us through a
lengthy dependency. And we spend our adult lives, to a consid-
erable extent, with other people: actually present people with whom
we live and interact; the ubiquitous virtual people of television, film,
and print media; the past people who reside within us as memories
and internal presences, inhabiting our subjective world even in soli-
tude; and the generic people who have provided us with language
and symbolic systems in which to think and organize experience.
And because our lives are so much with people, the quality of our
relationships with others is central to the emotional quality of our
lives, the very lifefulness of our lives, the texture, the tonal quality,
the verve.

The “romance” is a literary form appealing to emotion, the imagina-
tion, and ideals, and the Romantic movement was a revolution in
consciousness as well as in the arts, a turn toward passion, the tragic,
and personal meaning that has amounted to, according to Isaiah
Berlin “the deepest and most lasting of all changes in the life of the
West.” We will be exploring the ways in which this pervasive histori-
cal shift in human experience comes alive in the individual lives
of people in our time.

The term “romance,” in its common, everyday usage, pertains to
a particular feeling state and a mode of relating to another person,
which generates emotions, stimulates imaginative play, and nurtures
devotion to ideals. Romance emerges in relation to love, a particular
sort of love in which there are powerful erotic currents. Romance is
closer to “falling” in love than to being in love. Romance is also
closely related to meaning, but not the ponderous kind or the impor-
tant sort of meaning that can be generated by suffering and travail.
The kind of meaning associated with romance is the feeling that life
is worthwhile, that important events can and do happen within it.
Yet, because of the inherent instability of romance, the tragic is often
its counterpoint, making “the blues,” with their expression of pathos
and guilt, the quintessential romantic narrative.

People in our time seek romance to give their lives meaning. It
often works—for a while. Romance can be captivating. It takes
things over, adds verve, depth, and excitement about being alive.
Yet what people in our time say about romance, across the spectrum
from high culture to mass market magazines and tabloids, is that
romance fades; it tends to be short-lived. Authentic romance is hard
to find and even harder to maintain. It easily degrades into some-
thing else, much less captivating, much less enlivening, such as
sober respect or purely sexual diversion, predictable companion-
ship, or hatred, guilt, and self-pity.

What is it about romance that makes it so degradable? Most peo-
ple, and most psychological experts, have opinions. Here are some
of the most popular:

Romance fades because time and success are its enemies. Romance
thrives on novelty, mystery, and danger; it is dispersed by
familiarity. Enduring romance is therefore a contradiction in terms.

Romance fades because it is driven by sexuality, and sexuality is
primitive in its very nature. In its raw form, lust is not a pretty thing
and is difficult to reconcile with other features of romantic love,
such as respect and admiration. So romance tends to degrade into
either dispassionate friendship or purely sexual encounters.
Romance fades because it is inspired by idealization, and idealization is, by definition, illusory. We fall in love under the spell of fantasy; time is the enemy of romance because it brings reality and inevitable disillusionment. So romance tends to degrade into either sober, passionless respect or bitter disappointment.

Romance fades because it turns easily into hatred. There is a dark side to human psychology, and the delicacy of romance cannot long sustain itself against the power of innate aggression. Romance is like fireworks in the dark night, thrilling but inevitably transitory. We are lucky if we can simply get along.

Romance fades because nothing stays the same, especially people. We long for constancy in our relations with one another, but we inevitably betray one another miserably. Life itself is fundamentally tragic, and, ultimately, we all end up singing the blues, either about our own regrets (guilt) or about the failings of others (self-pity).

There is a ring of truth to each of these explanations, which is why they have such broad currency. However, their truths are only partial. We will be exploring each one, mining what is useful and reconfiguring partial insights into a fuller account. We will find again and again that it is not that romance itself has a tendency to become degraded, but that we expend considerable effort degrading it. And we are interested in degrading it for very good reasons.

I will be drawing on many sources, the most important of which are the lives of the people I have been privileged to know in my clinical work. Because of the need for confidentiality, these people are carefully disguised. There is nothing here that is simply made up, but often the cases are composites of work with several different patients with similar issues.

Despite popular misconceptions, contemporary psychoanalysis is very different from the “classical” psychoanalysis of the past. Traditional analysts tended to reverently apply Freud’s pansexual imag-