Love is a Many Splintered Thing

Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters: The Power of Romantic Passion. By Ethel Spector Person. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988.

Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters is Ethel Spector Person's attempt to remedy what she sees as this century's lack of serious studies of love. Her approach purports to serve as an antidote to the accounts of reductionistic rationalists and other bunglers who, like early cartographers, mark love's territory with "here bye savages" without troubling to travel its interior. Her study is confined to the form of love most inimical to rational analysis, romantic passionate love. Person, who teaches psychiatry at Columbia, hopes through a combination of Freud, fiction and film to present a lover's-eye view of this passion. Her approach is seasoned with some philosophy, used not unlike the way the Elizabethans used spices, to mask the taste of spoiled meat. The resultant stew wants more seasoning, and far more simmering.

The central thesis of *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* is that love is a powerful agent of change. Person limits the discussion to its passionate form precisely because she considers it "the most complete form of love...the one, above all, that allows for self-transformation and self-transcendence" (p.50). By "self-transcendence" she seems to mean the surmounting of ego boundaries towards

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union with the other, usually effected sexually. She describes it mystically, like a Buddhist describing Nirvana. This merger, as she calls it, has plenty of potential for pathology, becoming not the union of two souls, but the escape of one by submersion, surrender, or enslavement. Person treats these pseudomorphs the same as the genuine article without advice on avoiding the former and attaining the latter. These false forms, by the way, are explained admirably in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, a work Person claims to have read, as flights from self-responsibility into slavishness. Since they are no cause for celebration, they must not be what Person means by love's magical power of change.

Because self-transformation involves a real change and not this loss of self, it is the more promising phenomenon. While Person is far from systematic in specifying change from what, to what, the central notion seems to be that in passionate love we obtain a uniquely insightful perspective on another person. Through love we can grasp another, contra Sartre, not as object but as subject, a soul in its own inwardness. One result of this perception is that we thereby soothe the isolation inherent in the human condition. Person makes much of Aristophanes' myth as told in Plato's *Symposium*. The story is a charming one: Speedy eight-legged, carwheeling, spheres attempt to roll up Olympus and are consequently punished by Zeus to surgical halving; thereafter, love is the longing force by which these aboriginal humans seek their better halves. She takes this tale almost literally, and, by ignoring the rest of the *Symposium*, concludes that love arises from deficiency and is driven by need. If romantic passion restores to us, however fleetingly, this sense of wholeness, to her that is wonder-work enough. The conclusion, however, results from a flawed premise, as we shall later see.

The lovers' unique perspective yields a more noteworthy result, one that Person mentions but does not develop. The lovers incorporate each other into themselves; they see the world through each other's eyes; they share an identity; both stand ready to waive their own interests in behalf of the other. Lust and love contrast sharply here: in the former the other is an object, a means to our own gratification; in love the other is an end whose needs outrank our own and whose joy it is our joy to give. Here is a genuine stretching of ego boundaries, in both psychoanalytic and ethical terms.

Nowhere is this phenomenon better described than by William James in "What Makes a Life Significant:"

> Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers

> are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence, as a fact? Is he in excess, being in this matter a maniac? or are we in defect, being victims of a pathological anaesthesia as regards Jill's magical importance? Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed; surely poor Jill's palpitating little life-throbs *are* among the wonders of creation, *are* worthy of this sympathetic interest; and it is to our shame that the rest of us cannot feel like Jack. For Jack realizes Jill concretely, and we do not. He struggles toward a union with her inner life, divining her feelings, anticipating her desires, understanding her limits as manfully as he can....Whilst we, dead clods that we are, do not even seek after these things, but are contented that that portion of eternal fact named Jill should be for us as if it were not....May the ancient blindness never wrap its clouds about either of them again!...We ought, all of us, to realize each other in this intense, pathetic, and important way.

This "ancient blindness" to others is our normal human state. It is, as James suggests, a serious defect in us, the self-centered stupor from which ethical systems labor to remove us. Toward one other person at least, Jack has achieved the moral point of view. Stolid onlookers advance the notion that love is blind in order to exculpate themselves; what Jack sees in Jill is both real and right.

The onlookers' dismissal of the lovers may stem from the fact that Jack and Jill see in each other what we do not, or that they fail to see in us that same specialness. But there is a more likely source. Passionate lovers are notorious for their exclusion of the world beyond that encircled by their embraces. Face to face, the lovers block out the world, rendering it superfluous, an exile to which the world does not take kindly. In this the lovers are at fault; but we, who wonder "What does he see in her?," are worse.

What do the lovers see that we do not? Person is unsure. In one sense or another, the lover has idealized the beloved. It could be that he has heaped on her all the qualities his own fantasy demands. This process is described as "crystallization" by Stendhal, and it ends badly, as it was begun, by the lover denuding the beloved of the virtues he invented for her. (Person celebrates love's imaginative power because of events such as this.) Alternatively, the lovers could be seeing past the dross into some true best self implicit in the other. In this vein, Person says:

> Because of the way in which each lover sees the other as his best self, the worth of each, previously buried or unrealized, is allowed to surface. It is this goodness towards which love strives. The lover feels expanded, conscious of new powers and a new-found goodness within himself. He attempts to be his best self....The beloved sees good in the lover, of which the lover was only dimly aware. Often what allows us to fall in love is the lovely picture of ourselves reflected in the lover's eyes. (p.68)

Although she doesn't say so, this is the Platonic view, and there is no question that for Plato this true best self is real, albeit in the mode of potentiality. The lover perceives truly; he does not invent. If so, it is hard to see why Person believes that even this form can end in deidealization. The other's good remains good regardless of whether we remain in love with it. Yet there is a puzzle there, too, for how can anyone, in Plato's view, fall out of love with Good, except through ignorance? Love—Eros—for Plato is the motive force of life towards goodness, ever impelling us upward in the direction of perfection. Were the beloved to forsake her own potential good by lapsing into indifference to it or by actively pursuing evil, these would be excellent grounds indeed for disaffection with her. But this is not, strictly speaking, a deidealization, since the beloved's good remains good, although unactualized.

While Plato colors much of Person's discussion of love as an agent of change, there is an acute divergence between them. In the above quotation, Person seems certain love strives towards goodness. But that remark is atypical, suffocated under numerous others wherein love brings change for good OR ill. While Platonic Eros is always agathotropic, growing towards good, Person seems to applaud change per se. Note that disease and disaster both wreak change, but only a callous novelty-seeker would welcome them in themselves.

Whether love sees a true or false idealization of the beloved, James is clear on the good use to be made of this superior insight. Here again Person ambivalates. The lover may

> ...go so far as to renounce his very right to possess the beloved or to be with her. In so doing he asserts his altruism, his goodness, his capacity for self-sacrifice on behalf of the beloved. He achieves a kind of moral superiority and one of the 'purer' forms of love: the ability to put the beloved first. (p.118)

Thus granting the other's viewpoint the same stature as one's own is what James had in mind. But, according to Person, the lover is as likely to see in the beloved's "palpitating little life-throbs" only

the capacity to arouse and gratify his own. The lover has both "a need to love...a need to minister to the beloved," and the capacity to "idealize" the beloved's usefulness to him: "It is not just the physical or spiritual person per se who is idealized; it is the potential ability of the beloved, as imagined by the lover, to gratify him" (p.120). In addition, while the lover is ministering to the beloved he is also identifying with her; thus, "through his identification with his beloved he shares vicariously in the pleasure of being ministered to" (p.121), a kind of auto-eroticism. Self-sacrifice, altruism's highest flying arrow, is here bent back into the boomerang of egoism, however indirect. Person will not say which of these motivates true love, nor to which love ought aspire.

Perhaps Person conceives the enterprise of *Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters* to be strictly descriptive. I fear I find such normative nonchalance offensive. Why write a book on love and why read one except to sort out pathology from paradigm? Our personal experience of love is, of necessity, limited (unless we boast with Don Juan "a thousand and three in Spain alone"), and we seek to supplement it. Love tainted or love true are equally instructive, equally something to steer by, provided someone exercises the judgment to label them both.

Dreams of Love and Fateful Encounters is fatally flawed by a lack of this judgment. Hence, true Platonic idealization, Stendhalian crystallization, and self-serving egoistic constructions are all on equal footing. Similarly, while she vaunts love's power to change the lover she is unconcerned with distinguishing better from worse. At fault are several factors that conspire against the inquiry at the outset.

The first is Person's practice as a psychiatrist. The "talking cure" of psychoanalysis requires a disciplined nonjudgmental acceptance on the part of the analyst, regardless of the patient's depravity. While Person does not, for obvious reasons, include patient material from her own practice, she makes use of that of other psychiatrists. All of it is presented in the same supposedly straightforward and descriptive manner with which she approaches fiction and film. Some jarring juxtapositions of street-talk and muse-inspired poetry result. An unrepentant rationalist would note here that a sample drawn from psychiatric patients, Hollywood, and contemporary fiction is representative of exactly nothing. In fact, such samples are biased towards the crash and burn victims. Combined with her "let-it-all-hang-out" attitude is her apparent belief that exhaustive description is the necessary purgative for the reductionism she attributes to other accounts of love.

Consequently, the book has a catalogue quality. Numerous pages proceed "for some,...for others,...and still others," etc. in an enumerative steeplechase that never sights a conclusion to merit the hunt. This book romps over a lot of turf without covering much ground. The struggle against reductionism need not condemn us to such unsorted and amorphous heaps of multiplicity.

Secondly, there is Person's fixation on passionate romantic love. In this stage, the lovers are where we left them, face to face, their backs to the world. Falling in love boots us out of our self-absorption into this rapt attention with another, where we are privileged to the insight James describes. The process is aptly defined by Ortega as a "phenomenon of attention" (*On Love, Aspects of a Single Theme*, Chap. 2). Allowed to stay here, however, the lovers can expand only so far as the egoism of two that Person describes. Normally, the world intrudes: who, after all, is that endlessly fascinating? Simone de Beauvoir, who also appears in Person's bibliography, is correct in stating that "two lovers destined solely for each other are already dead: They die of ennui, of the slow agony of a love that feeds only on itself" (*The Second Sex*, Chap. 23), a statement Person overlooks. The lesson learned, we are meant to move on and make use of it.

The transition beyond the obsession of passionate love is often accomplished through the birth of a child, although this is by no means the only way. In Person's view, this is hardly a blessed event. Citing several convoluted psychological causes, and overlooking all the obvious physical ones for the woman, Person has childbirth spelling the death of sexual passion and the beginnings of disillusionment. The only reason to regard it as such, I maintain, is this intransigent allegiance to love's obsessive phase. Notions of duty, responsibility, and commitment enter with the birth of the child. Person is inclined to use such terms pejoratively. For her they always characterize passion's remains, the ashes and embers of wildfire domesticated, what she calls "affectionate bonding." On this subject, Person does for once give us the benefit of her judgment: "In affectionate bonding, the form of love most highly touted by mental health professionals, a couple gradually develops deep and reliable ties of mutual caring, interests and loyalty. They come to believe in one another and to feel assured of the ongoing sustaining nature of their relationship." So far, so good; but she continues, "Not Romeo and Juliet, but Ma and Pa Kettle are the exemplary pair" (pp.51-52). Having thus forestalled disagreement, who would dare to champion "affectionate bonding"? Person is biased toward the preservation of passion in a Peter Pan love that refuses to grow up.

While "mutual caring, interests and loyalty" are nice,

throughout the book she regards them as tepid leftovers. She underrates these virtues by comparing them, anachronistically, to the intensity and excitement of passion's stage. While lamenting that passion is short-lived and unreliable, she is unwilling to credit "affectionate bonding" with the concomitant virtues of longevity and steadfastness. A lack of subtlety and a faulty quantitative model seem to lurk behind Person's treatment of the birth of a child. She envisages the lovers paring their portions of love for each other in order to share with the child, thus diminishing their own store. While the lovers' attention is distinctly divided by the child, their love, I suggest, is increased. Love is not like money depleted by spending; it is more like light played upon mirrors, magnified by the number if plays upon. The child forces the lovers' attention outward toward another. Now, in Saint-Exupery's phrase, "love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in gazing outward in the same direction." Through this movement, love has qualitatively improved, deepened, grown constant and endlessly renewable in a joint venture of unequalled importance. The insight into another's subjectivity and specialness now extends to a third person. From there, in thinking beings and in theory, it should be capable of extension by inference to the vast portion of the world not made up of loved ones. Person construes this major moral work as a loss.

Instead, she advocates desperate measures toward the preservation of passion. She offers this advice:

> Excitement can be fostered by uncertainty, by periodic separations, by unconventionality, and, most importantly, perhaps, by ready access to the unconscious and the primitive reaches of one's own and one's lover's soul. It can be renewed by threats of triangulation [i.e., "affairs"]....And intensity can sometimes be maintained courtesy of particular neurotic fits (pp.330-331).

(Person is unaware of the ambiguity of "neurotic fits," by which I believe she means neuroses tailored to the contours of one's own, not contrived conniptions.) She speaks of a dance of give and take in which the lovers alternate the roles of parent and child (p.122). And she celebrates the "delights of regression" (p.336).

And that brings us to the final flaw of the book, Person's relentless Freudianism. It is not possible in this space to investigate the limits of the theory itself, but only to suggest the particular ways in which it hobbles Person's enterprise. Primarily at fault are the theory's developmental impoverishment and its inadequate notion of health.

Person credits Freud with "fleshing-out the Platonic insight" (via Aristophanes' myth) that love is a re-finding. She says:

> It was Freud's genius to see that all the lover's unfulfilled yearnings are transferred to the beloved, who is as a consequence experienced as the reincarnated source of all that is potentially good. The enormous power the beloved seems to exert on the lover can in part be explained by the love object having been invested with the mystique of all the lost objects from the past (p.114).

Love "seeks (unconsciously) to undo the losses of early life, to gratify unfulfilled and forbidden childhood wishes" (p.115). What we hope to restore through love is the purportedly Edenic state of childhood where we basked in our own narcissistic perfection. Sane and sick alike, we all seek to return to childhood, recover oneness with mother, restore the infantile belief in our own omnipotence, and resolve old Oedipal conflicts. Love lightens the load of the baggage we bear from our pasts, by making pack-mules of our lovers, but we are constricted by a "straightjacket of repetition" (p.247).

Plato and Freud agree that Eros is the force that propels us. Here Person turns Whitehead's observation that everything is a footnote to Plato, and all of history, on their heads by remarking that "The traditional philosophic view *echoes* the psychoanalytic" (p.325, my emphasis). But the direction of Freudian movement is backwards, regressive where Plato is progressive. As adults we go back to the ideal state we imagined as infants. In what sense exactly is this growth? We never outgrow this chrysalis; we are condemned to creeping caterpillarhood. What is accomplished by this regression other than a return to the starting block? Where ought we to go from there?

The essential difference between children and adults in the Freudian scheme seems to be only one of size. As children we stuff the unconscious full of the slings and arrows of Oedipal misfortune. As we grow larger, the unconscious also enlarges, much in the way spleens and appendices do, stuffed full of inflamed repressions. Dysfunction apparently results from something like a burst unconscious. On this view, "normal" people have the same repressions, but not, by definition, more than the unconscious can handle. Freudians posit repressions in the healthy by the evidence of the sick, evidence which comes *ex post facto*. There is, then, a thin line between normal and abnormal, and about the best we can say of the former is "you haven't cracked, yet."

The interesting question is of course how some can cope with

these repressions while others cannot. Similarly, how do some lovers do more with love than daunt it with this dalliance with childhood? Person, unhelpfully, credits chance. Never does she discuss recognizably healthy forms of relationships without employing the language of luck. For example, she says one can overcome the power struggle she claims essential to love "only if he has the good fortune to become his own authority" (p.183). IF one has negotiated one's childhood dilemmas successfully, IF one is not cursed with a harsh superego, IF one was blessed with particularly understanding parents, etc., THEN it appears one can escape this regression to make an autonomous authority of oneself. But if some can escape these Freudian determinants, then surely others can, too, a fact that repudiates their power as determinants at all. What is a causal determinant in the dysfunctional patient appears as no more than a factor in the functional.

It is interesting to note that passion happens to us; it is undergone; affectionate bonding, however, is willed, a work of choice, not chance. While attempting to convince herself of some virtues in affectionate bonding (she protests too much), Person notes some interesting things. The first is that the envy which stokes those Oedipal furies "may well have its origin in the feelings of exclusion experienced by the child vis-à-vis his parents, particularly and paradigmatically when the parents seek the communion of love behind closed doors" (p.323). On the other hand, she notes that children consider themselves fortunate if their parents' love is of the companionate form, that is, affectionate bonding. She says, parenthetically, "Perhaps the reason is that these relationships leave room for the children while the more passionate variety sometimes does not" (p.327). Taken together, these two observations would seem to suggest that the health of all concerned might be obtained through the achievement of affectionate bonding. Because it is chosen, affectionate bonding is not the result of a deterministic repetition of childhood. It is the work of autonomous adults, an achievement, not an accident. Because they have moved on from obsession with each other, as parents they are capable of including their children in their love. The children, consequently, need not compete like Oedipus or Electra for the love they require. Thus, this whole Freudian cycle can be avoided.

Others have amply noted the scientific deficiencies of Freudian theory. (See Ernest Nagel et al., in *Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method, and Philosophy*, edited by Sidney Hook, for example.) Because it is a theory of unconscious motivation, it is not confirmable by observation. Its best evidence is that of the analyst's

interview, evidence that is tainted by the analyst's interpretation and that lies beyond objective scrutiny. Person employs the fallacy of the invincible thesis throughout the book by claiming that a complex exists regardless of one's awareness of it. Often the analyst reads in the patient's resistance to the suggestion of a complex further proof of its existence. In this regard the theory is also unfalsifiable. Add to these a view of love that renders us utterly feckless, unlucky in love and life. Pray, why keep the theory?

When not overly stretched, Freudian metaphor can explain much. In Person's hands it is Procrustean, demonstrating that it is not reductionism she abhors, but only other people's. Bishop Thomas Wilson is credited with the remark, "love is a talkative passion." The length of this book demonstrates that. Perhaps Person hoped to effect her own "talking cure." But as I understand it, the "talking cure" works, if at all, by bringing the dark demons of the unconscious into the light of the conscious mind where they can be dealt with. This view attributes certain powers to the conscious mind, and chief among them must be the tools of reason. Only by employing them—to sort out paradigm from pathology—can Person enable her readers to achieve their growth.

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