

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Literature*

ON ROMANCE AND INTIMACY

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ABSTRACT

We can't seem to avoid romance and sex, except in works of philosophy. Why? How should we place romantic love and intimacy in a full human life? The jolt and surprise of romantic love, its physicality and yet its transporting otherworldliness, its radical *unselfing*, are signs and metaphors for meaning in life. Between extreme responses of the monk and the addict is what might be called a heroic take. Romantic love goes right when we gratefully allow it to manifest itself in our calling, our insight, and our sharing and service.

On Romance and Intimacy

Suddenly, my research was brusquely interrupted by romance. Conceptually, that is. The precipitant was an essay by Becca Rothfeld about the collected letters of Iris Murdoch. Murdoch was a philosopher at Oxford who strayed, and flourished, as a novelist. “Her scholarly area was ethics, and her primary preoccupation was love, both romantic and platonic,” Rothfeld writes. “This was a topic whose manifest importance she felt was chronically neglected by her peers, most of them analytic philosophers.”¹

Murdoch is right, I thought. Socrates and friends, lolling around the Symposium talking about beauty and boys, downplayed the physical side of romantic love (thus “Platonic love”). Dante chastely chased his beloved Beatrice into paradise. Romantic love is not featured in the philosophy of, say, Immanuel Kant.² Didn’t someone once say it’s impossible even to imagine a Mrs. Kant, a Mrs. Socrates, a Mrs. Nietzsche?

Ah, Nietzsche. It is said that he was once smitten, that he so informed the young lady most awkwardly, then proposed marriage to her in a letter delivered through a friend who also liked her: a letter she never answered, perhaps never received (soon she had started living with the friend).³ Is that why in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche says that women always put on an act, men must dominate, and romantic love is just an illusion, “the most ingenuous expression of egoism,” a manifestation of that acting and that pretense of dominating?⁴

And so, I grabbed some of Murdoch’s work, and I sent an email of praise to Rothfeld. She turned out to be finishing her first year as a graduate student in philosophy at Harvard. What, so young and already so wise? Which may recall a line by the great physicist Wolfgang Pauli—who at age 22 had written a 237-page monograph on quantum mechanics that is still used today—concerning a youthful candidate for a faculty position: “So young and he has already contributed so little?”⁵

Later I was visiting Harvard and invited Rothfeld to have breakfast. I asked her how she thought philosophy should incorporate romantic love. She said—please forgive me, Ms. Rothfeld, for this summary that reflects my ignorance more than your answer—“I don’t know.”

I didn’t, either. But clearly Murdoch and Rothfeld were right. Romantic love is part of the ideal of a full human life for many people. Including me. And yet, I had left it out of my research entirely.

In a book I am writing, Thomas à Kempis is the foil for a view of a full human life that, well, avoids being fully human. His book *The Imitation of Christ* (1442) was directed at his fellow monks, even though it became the most read book in Christianity apart from the Bible.⁶ Avoid the world out there, Thomas admonished again and again; it is a threat to your life in Christ. He didn’t mention romance and intimacy, but he did warn against women. “If I were you boys, I wouldn’t talk or even think about women. It ain’t good for your health.”

Actually, that’s not Thomas à Kempis speaking. It’s Howard, the saintly old prospector in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. But Thomas would concur.

In contrast to this monkish avoidance of the world, my research considers the addict, or rather an extreme type of addict, someone prone to grab and grab some more of what he wants in the world, someone voracious and, eventually, insatiable. It is controversial among scientists whether a person can have an “addiction” to sex and romantic conquest.⁷ Whatever: in my exaggeration, the addict ends up alone in a cell. It is not the cell of a monk, but both experience a kind of living death.

Beyond the monk and the addict, I have been investigating a different ideal type, a hero⁸ found in many traditions around the world in many forms and legends. Here is the pattern:

- The hero receives a calling.

- The hero discovers or is sent an insight that is specific to him or her and also resonates with the challenges of many.
- And the hero responds by sharing and serving, not remaining in a cell or in a castle but foraying out into the real world.

The hero is an archetype of a full human life.

And now, prodded by Becca Rothfeld and Iris Murdoch, I venture to consider how romantic love and intimacy might fit.

First, a reminder. In this endeavor, we're not describing neurological states; not statistically charting how many of what kinds have how much; and not calculating cultural, socioeconomic, or historical correlations. We do not aspire to necessary or sufficient conditions for a full human life. We've been working schematically, impressionistically. "Consider a kind of hero who... And even though you and I are not heroes, let's see what we might learn."

And then, an acknowledgement of awkwardness. Romantic love is entwined with sex, a subject notoriously difficult to approach deftly. Some of us have more trouble with the subject than others. The anthropologist Raymonde Carroll wrote that Americans can't stand it when French friends go on and on about their sexual conquests (and the French can't abide the American tendency to blab about money).⁹ But French, Americans, whoever nowadays: even if we feel uncomfortable, we can't seem to get away from romance and sex. They are everywhere.

LOVE LIFE LOW AND HIGH

For example, the other day while browsing the anything-but-sexy website TechCrunch.com, I came across a news story with this opening paragraph: "Let's admit it, you probably aren't reading that romance novel for the plot. Or its literary value. Audible knows this, and is today launching a new collection of romance-themed

audiobooks that come with a handy feature that let's you skip right to the action. Called 'Take Me to the Good Part,' the feature will fast-forward you to the steamy section..."¹⁰

Ah, those steamy sections. But they're not just in trash novels. Audible® might consider adding Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, written around 1350.¹¹ Joan Acocella calls *The Decameron* "probably the dirtiest great book in the Western canon."¹²

Like romance novels today, *The Decameron* was written for "gracious ladies" and "amiable ladies" fascinated by the passions of love. "I offered this effort of mine," says the narrator at the end, "to ladies living in idleness rather than to anyone else... to dispel the melancholy with which ladies are afflicted."

In *The Decameron* ten friends go wandering in the Florentine countryside. Each day for ten days, each one tells a story to the rest about an assigned topic, such as cleverness or generosity. The resulting 100 tales cover over 800 pages.

Most of the stories include saucy accounts of sexual encounters, using euphemisms like "beating the fur," "delightedly making the nightingale sing over and over again," and "since they had only traveled six miles that night, they went two more before they finally got out of bed." One unfaithful wife spends her first night with "a handsome, lusty young man" teaching him "how to sing a good half-dozen of her husband's hymns."

One of the longer stories is the saga of Alatiel, a woman so beautiful that she cannot escape the passions she inflames over a series of husbands and lovers, some of whom kill each other for her. There is a happy-ever-after when, finally, she becomes the wife of the King of Algarve. "Although she had slept with eight men perhaps ten thousand times, she not only came to the King's bed as if she were a virgin, but made him believe she really was one, and for a good many years after that, lived a perfectly happy life with him as his Queen."

The Decameron's narrator reports that, as they were hearing this tale, "the ladies sighed repeatedly over the lovely lady's various misadventures, but who knows what may have moved them to do so? Perhaps some of them sighed as much out of a desire for such frequent marriages as out of pity for Alatiel."

In another story, a lovely, "lofty" lady overflows with passion. She is not punished for cheating on her husband because, she has the husband admit before the judge and audience, she never ever turned him down for sex, as many times as he wanted. Then she asks the judge and audience, "If he's always obtained what he needed from me and was pleased with it, what was I supposed to do—in fact, what am I supposed to do now—with the leftovers. Should I throw them to the dogs? Isn't it much better to serve some of them up to a gentleman who loves me more than his very own life than to let them go to waste or have them spoil?"

It's a story of true love—but yes, it's her allusion to steamy leftovers that make her audience laugh. And the judge lets her off.

Boccaccio's stories celebrate *ingegno*, meaning thinking on your feet with cleverness and grace. Translator Wayne A. Rehorn notes that the tricks and wit in pursuit of sex are why *boccaccio* in Italian is synonymous with "licentious."

FALLING IN LOVE

The naughty stories attract us, and so does the prospect of true love. Iris Murdoch observed, "Falling in love is for many people their most intense experience, bringing with it a quasi-religious certainty, and most disturbing because it shifts the center of the world from ourself to another place."¹³

Consider Zoë Folbigg's personal account of love at first sight.¹⁴

"I can't explain it. Something about him looked like he was a good soul," she said of a fellow passenger she saw one morning on her commuter train to London. "Just something about him felt comforting and that everything was right with the world."

And he was reading García Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a book Zoë adored. It was a sign of connection. This, too, was romantic.

She told her co-workers, fellow twenty-somethings, about her crush. They nicknamed him Train Man. They urged her daily to do something, say something. She couldn't. For weeks she was on the train with him; the two never even locked eyes. After eight months, she schemed to drop a ticket on the floor near him. This would start a conversation. Heart racing, she did it. He said, "Excuse me, you dropped this"; and all she could do was squeak and move away.

Finally, two months later, she emboldened herself to write him a note. "It's my birthday," it said, "and I think everyone should do one crazy thing on their birthday and here's my thing." The note went on: she thought he looked lovely and if he would like to have a drink with her tonight, here was her email address. If not, she wished him well and good travels.

But she just couldn't bring herself to give him the note.

This went on for over a week. Her colleagues hounded her. Finally, eleven days later, Zoë handed him the note, smiled, and walked away "as fast as my legs could take me" to the next carriage, where she slumped into a seat, feeling drained.

All that day, Zoë and her co-workers excitedly awaited a message. Nothing. Finally, at five o'clock came an email entitled "the guy on the train."

"Thank you, that was a lovely thing to do, but unfortunately I have a girlfriend." He went on to wish her well.

"It was a nice rejection," she recalled.

Zoë wondered if she should henceforth take a different train. She didn't. The next day, he and she happened to board at the same time and said hello. Both smiled, both blushed.

Life for her went on. But she was still smitten with Train Man. She went out with other people, but kept asking herself why. She just wasn't interested.

Another eight months later, on a Friday she received an email from him. "If you still fancy that drink, I'd love to go out."

Zoë was delighted but mortified. She said to herself, I know I've built him up to an impossible height. This can go badly.

They met for the drink. "He really was that lovely!" She found they had humor in common, interests in common, "the same hopes and dreams."

Fast forward. Zoë and Mark—he now had a name—went traveling together for a year. After six months, at sunset on a railway trip in rural Australia, Mark proposed. Train Man!

Fast forward further: now twelve years on, two sons, together in love. And in 2017, Zoë Folbigg published an autobiographical novel about their romance.¹⁵

"I KNOW AND AM RIGHT FOR YOU"

"Falling in love," wrote Annie Dillard in her remarkable 2007 novel *The Maytrees*,¹⁶ "like having a baby, rubs against the current of our lives: separation, loss and death. That is the joy of them."

In *The Maytrees*, true love is entwined with true sexual passion.

It began when Lou Bigelow and Toby Maytree first met. He was back home in Provincetown after the war. Maytree first saw her on a bicycle. A red scarf, white shirt, skin clean as an eggshell, wide eyes and mouth. She stopped and leaned on a leg to talk to someone on the street. She laughed, and her loveliness caught his breath. He thought he recognized her flexible figure. Because everyone shows up in Provincetown sooner or later, he had taken her at first for Ingrid Bergman until his friend Cornelius straightened him out.

He introduced himself. –You’re Lou Bigelow, aren’t you? She nodded. They shook hands and hers felt hot under sand like a sugar doughnut. Under her high brows she eyed him straight on and straight across. She had gone to girls’ schools, he recalled later. Those girls looked straight at you. Her wide eyes, apertures opening, seem preposterously to tell him, I and these my arms are for you. I know, he thought back at the stranger, this long-limbed girl. I know and am right for you.

And so Toby courted Lou, who for her own part was soon enthralled.

She followed him up and down high dunes at the world’s ledge. She looked at his neck. What kept him from taking her hand? In this charged air any touch would probably arrest her heart and disarticulate her joints, and so forth, but he should act soon because it could only get worse.

She was twenty-three. She could not imagine that a brave man could shrink from risking one woman’s refusal. She wanted only a lifelong look at his face and his long-legged, shambly self, broken by intervals of kissing. After a while she might even, between kisses, look into his eyes. No time soon.

What could she do? She had gauged Maytree well: He never touched her. That is beauty’s one advantage, she always thought, and might be its downfall. In town he left her at her walkway and waved off breakfast. She had been liking the way his hips set loosely, his shoulders tightly, his long wide-smiling face, pale eyes back under thick brows, alert. She stood in danger outside her door. What was she afraid of? Of his heartbeat, of his over-real eyes, of her breathing, everything.

Their love soon prospered in passion. In their early, heady days together, Lou, “shipwrecked on the sheets,” “opened her eyes and discovered where on their bed she had fetched up.”

For lovemaking nearly killed Lou. Was she all right? Abashed, he held her steady until she opened her eyes. Was he a brute? What ailed her? -- Whoa, she answered once, and another time, Yike. He stopped worrying. Hours afterward he used to see her, firm and young as she was, gripping the rail to check her descent downstairs.

Intimacy could not be unique to her and Maytree, this brief blending, this blind sea they entered together diving. His neck smelled as suntan does, his own oil heated, and his hair smelled the same but darker. He was still fresh from an outdoor shower. Awareness was a braided river. It slid down time in drops or torrents. Now she knew he woke. The room seemed to get smarter. His legs moved and their tonus was tight. Her legs were sawdust; they were a line of old rope shreds on sand. All her life the thought of his body made her blush.

FULFILLMENT

Beyond the intoxication of union, there can be deep meaning in finding that special, unique someone. Beyond magic is fulfillment.

"Let's face it," Sylvia Plath wrote in her journal at age 21, "I am in danger of wanting my personal absolute to be a demigod of a man, and as there aren't many around, I often unconsciously manufacture my own, and then, I retreat and revel in poetry and literature where the reward value is tangible and accepted ... I want a romantic nonexistent hero."¹⁷

Three years later she found him. To her mother she wrote, "I feel that all my life, all my pain and work, has been for this one thing. All the blood spilt, the words written, the people loved, have been a work to fit me for loving Ted."

Ted Hughes was not just her romantic hero but also her "male counterpart." To her brother she explained, "I am now coming into the full of my power: I am writing

poetry as I never have before ... because I am in love with the only man in the world who is my match.”

For special souls like Sylvia Plath, romantic intimacy connects with intellectual and spiritual union. Take the oh-so-bookish John Stuart Mill meeting Harriet Taylor at a dinner in 1831. He was 24, she 22.

Harriet was beautiful, big-eyed, with “a swan-like throat”—and oh yes, very intelligent. But married to another man since she was 18.

Before long, Harriet and John became inseparable—long talks, carriage rides, and despite the disdain of scandal-sensitive friends, perhaps sexual intimacy. There is little direct evidence of the last; many of the couple’s letters were later destroyed; but clearly, they fell in love. Two years later, Harriet wrote John, “Far from being unhappy or even *low* this morning, I feel as tho’ you had never loved me half so well as last night.” A year later, she wrote him: “I am glad that you have said it—I am *happy* that you have—no one with any fineness or beauty of character but must feel compelled to say *all*, to the being they really love, or rather with any *permanent* reservation it is not *love*—while there is reservation, however little of it, the love is just *so much* imperfect.”¹⁸

In 1834, Carlyle relayed the rumor that Mill had “fallen *desperately in love* with some young philosophic beauty” and been “lost to all his friends and to himself.” Perhaps true of her, too, as captured in this note from Harriet to John: “When I think that I shall not hold your hand until Tuesday the time is so long & my hand so useless. Adieu my delight.”¹⁹

For Mill, as for Plath, being in love with that special, superior someone catalyzed his thinking and writing. In his *Autobiography*, John acknowledged Harriet copiously. Hear how she inspires:

Her intellectual gifts did but minister to a moral character at once the noblest and the best balanced which I have ever met with in life. Her unselfishness was

not that of a taught system of duties, but of a heart which thoroughly identified itself with the feelings of others, and often went to excess in consideration for them by imaginatively investing their feelings with the intensity of its own. The passion of justice might have been thought to be her strongest feeling, but for her boundless generosity, and a lovingness ever ready to pour itself forth upon any or all human beings who were capable of giving the smallest feeling in return.²⁰

BEING UNDERSTOOD

Vladimir Nabokov wrote unforgettably about *eros* and romance. In real life, too, Nabokov memorably fell in love. In May of 1923, he met Véra Slonim at a ball for the Russian émigré community of Berlin. She was 21, he 24.

Over the previous two years, Véra had been admiring Vladimir's work in local publications, clipping and saving his poems. That night she approached him wearing a harlequin mask of black silk. She told him she loved his writing. She explained why; he could scarcely believe it. She recited some of his poems from memory. Véra and Vladimir wandered the streets long into the night, mutually entranced.

She daringly followed up with several letters. He was overwhelmed by the audacity of sudden love and understanding. Genius captured, prodding him to do even more. He did not answer her directly, but while he was away on a trip, he published in Berlin a poem alluding to their first meeting in a way he knew that only she would capture.

Romance and intimacy.

And then, in July, he wrote his first letter to her. It began without salutation (the ellipses are in the original):

I won't hide it: I'm so unused to being—well, understood, perhaps—so unused to it, that in the very first minutes of our meeting I thought: this is a joke, a masquerade trick ... But then ... And there are things that are hard to talk

about—you'll rub off their marvelous pollen at the touch of a word...They write me from home about mysterious flowers. You are lovely ... And all your letters, too, are lovely, like the white nights.

It continued boldly: "Yes, I need you, my fairy-tale. Because you are the only person I can talk with about the shade of a cloud, about the song of a thought."²¹

Their love flourished. Early in the next year, her wrote her: "My delightful, my love, I don't understand anything: how can you not be with me? I'm so infinitely used to you that now I feel myself lost and empty: without you, my soul. You turn my life into something light, amazing, rainbowed—you put a glint of happiness on everything." And this short letter a few months later: "I love you. Infinitely and inexpressibly. I've woken up in the middle of the night and here I am writing this. My love, my happiness."

From the first moments, Vladimir felt that Véra was destined to share his life. He wrote her, "It's as if in your soul there is a preprepared spot for every one of my thoughts." For the next 54 years, he was inseparable from the brilliant, elegant woman who became Mrs. Nabokov. Among her many roles, Véra was amanuensis, translator, chief correspondent, teaching assistant, literary agent, chauffeur, Scrabble partner, and butterfly-catching companion. She was the first reader of all her husband's works, as well as critic, editor, and inspiration.²² The dedication page of every Nabokov novel reads, "To Véra."

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

In *The Maytrees*, a "wider life" breathed in Toby: "Only the lover sees what is real, he thought... Far from being blind, love alone can see." This point is taken up by Iris Murdoch and later, in a paper about her, by Martha Nussbaum. "One of Murdoch's major philosophical themes," Nussbaum notes, was "the relationship between erotic love and the true vision of other people."²³

When Iris Murdoch was 24, she wrote to a male school friend, “Oh so much in need of intellectual intimacy. The patient mind which is prepared to comprehend my own and toss me back the ball of my thought.” She found some of that a few years later in Europe. She adored Parisian café life, met Sartre and Derrida, and in 1946 encountered the avant-garde French writer Raymond Queneau. Murdoch regarded Queneau as her intellectual soulmate, and her letters tell of her unrequited longing and “her final dignified settling for his friendship.”²⁴

But Murdoch wanted more. For her, sexual union and falling in love were personally and philosophically central. She described herself as having “an endless capacity for new loves”—especially men, sometimes women, and when in her fifties, what her editors call “complex and unwise emotional imbroglios” with two of her students. An emeritus professor ended his book review of her letters this way: “One closes this astonishing volume with the thought that in her creative years the sexual act was anything but ridiculous for Iris Murdoch. Indeed, it may have been as important as writing itself.”²⁵ Like the “amiable ladies” who heard Boccaccio’s story of Alatiel, we don’t quite know if the good professor suffered through Murdoch’s romantic travails or sighed over them.

Murdoch certainly got the sighing part:

Intense mutual erotic love, love which involves with the flesh all the most refined sexual being of the spirit, which reveals and perhaps even *ex nihilo* creates spirit as sex, is comparatively rare in this inconvenient world. This love presents itself as such a dizzily lofty value that even to speak of “enjoying” it seems a sacrilege. It is something to be undergone upon one’s knees. And where it exists it cannot but shed a blazing light of justification upon its own scene, a light which can leave the rest of the world dark indeed.²⁶

But this magic also has a philosophical valence. In her letters as well as in her novels and philosophical writings, Murdoch speculated that romantic passion and intimacy enable a deep seeing of the other and, through love, of real presences beyond. Toward

the end of her life, she returned to philosophy with a tome with the imposing title *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. “We may also see how sex can be the image of spirituality as well as its substance... A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it can be no longer separate; or it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself.”²⁷

THE GLORIES AND DESECRATIONS OF LOVE

One more time: “Where the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself.” What a wonderful dimension of romantic love. And as we have seen, there are more:

- Mutual love with a person who “just makes the world seem right.”
- Sexual union that turns your legs into “sawdust, a line of old rope shreds on sand.”
- Being seen and understood, “as if in your soul there is a preprepared spot for every one of my thoughts.”
- Encountering the beloved so deeply that you are “unselfed.”
- Forging an intimate partnership to pursue a calling, together.

Chorus: “You are lovely; you are admirable! I am awed! And you see me; you understand! I see you, and through you, so much more! All of this, all of you, inspire me to create a fuller human life!”

Bravo!

But one more time, too, from Murdoch: “A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate.”

Take Murdoch's own romance novels. "Above all," say Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, editors of her letters, "she was superb at portraying the madness of love and the way it can transform ordinary people into crazed and possessive beings."²⁸ Many of *The Decameron's* stories end like sexy fairy tales. But translator Wayne A. Rehorn notes that sadism lurks: romantic passion sometimes contains, or becomes, the urge to harm and humiliate. "Desire in all its forms is something that intelligence is primed to serve, but desire, like intelligence, can also be a threat both to people and to the society they live in. A balancing act of sorts is thus absolutely necessary, the *Decameron* seems to suggest, but how to achieve such a balancing act is never clearly defined, making desire a mixed affair, to say the least."²⁹

These days, sexual predators dominate the news. Their victims, in the beginning perhaps flattered by attention from a powerful man, end up spiritually and sometimes physically injured. Not loved, but exploited; not enthralled, but disgusted; not uplifted, but degraded. And some of the "patterns of predation, especially in the cases of Weinstein and C. K., have a grotesqueness that discourages fantasy." "These men exposed and pleased themselves in front of horrified women. Restate what they did, and it sounds like the worst sex life you could aspire to: frantically trapping people in a room, people who are disgusted to be there, while you engage in the most arid form of sexual pleasure possible."³⁰

No wonder Thomas à Kempis was worried.

Thomas probably didn't ask the monks to focus their Bible studies on Solomon's Song of Songs. In fact, if Audible® books did the Bible, that new "Take Me to the Good Part" feature might jump, with a breathy female narrator, to Song of Songs 7:11-13:

¹¹ Come, my love, let's go to the field; let's spend the night among the henna blossoms.

¹² Let's go early to the vineyards; let's see if the vine has budded, if the blossom has opened, if the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love.

¹³ The mandrakes give off a fragrance, and at our doors is every delicacy— new as well as old. I have treasured them up for you, my love.

Thomas commanded his charges to spurn the vineyards and mandrakes. For him and his monks, chastity is the solution to the desecrations of romantic love.³¹

Our stylized addict responds, nonsense, get as much as you can. Demystify romantic love, enjoy “zipless sex.”³² The male addict may dream of the avatar in the 2017 film *Blade Runner 2049*: an Ana de Armas who reads you and then morphs to exactly the person you need right now, and even grows to love you. The avatar who is your “Cool Girl”:

Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. ... It may be a slightly different version—maybe he’s a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he’s a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes everything he likes and doesn’t ever complain.³³

But the hero’s full human life avoids these extremes. It neither spurns the world nor voraciously elevates worldly experiences to ultimate goals. In the world yet outside himself (or herself), the stylized hero is magnified by his calling, defined by his insight, and fully engaged with us in sharing and service. Just so for romantic love as well. Iris Murdoch’s philosophical treatise *The Sovereignty of Good* argues that “We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.”³⁴ In philosophy, and in a full human life.

The narrator of Iris Murdoch’s novel *The Black Prince* says, “Love sees truly, in part, because it *does* see divinity rather than the muddled everyday.”³⁵ In Platonic terms that Thomas à Kempis might appreciate, *The Sovereignty of Good* talks about the full

human life as one that sees the Good. The Good is metaphorically like the sun, metaphorically a magnetic center. We can discern light coming from the sun, and through iron shavings the forces of a magnetic field, but we “do not and probably cannot know, conceptualize, what it is like in the center.”

There is a way to get there, “though one rarely mentioned by our contemporary philosophers, and that is Love.” Including, as always for Iris Murdoch, romantic love and intimacy. “Good is the magnetic center towards which love naturally moves... When true good is loved, even if impurely or by accident, the quality of love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived as lying beyond it...”

Murdoch perceives that “when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object *via* the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just.”

And here is how *The Sovereignty of Good* concludes: “[Love] is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good.”

A GIFT

“When we try perfectly to love what is imperfect...” It is the purity of our effort in love that matters, not our prowess or the radius of our talents and influence. When we receive the gift of love, we feel deep down that it is all right for us to be imperfect, all right to be human beings, all right to be confused about what to do and how.

In Lewis Hyde's remarkable book *The Gift*,³⁶ the true artist welcomes creative gifts—both talent and “a specific intuition or inspiration”—and in turn imparts gifts of art. To Hyde, the trajectory of art is receiving and giving, receiving again and giving again. Although there exist objects of art that are bought and sold, just as there exist sex objects, their commodification does violence to the artistic spirit, just as it does to romantic love and intimacy. Recall the “lofty” married lady in *The Decameron* who gave away in love her extra helpings of passion. After her acquittal, the story concludes, the town's law on adultery was changed to forbid only the sale of sex, not receiving it or giving it away.

The original 1979 edition of Hyde's book was subtitled “Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property.” “It is this element of relationship,” he explained, “which leads me to speak of gift exchange as ‘erotic’ commerce, opposing *eros* (the principle of attraction, union, involvement which binds together) to *logos* (reason and logic in general, the principle of differentiation in particular).”

“A gift is a thing we do not get by our own efforts,” Hyde insisted. “We cannot acquire it through an act of will. It is bestowed upon us... Although a talent can be perfected through an effort of the will, no effort in the world can cause its initial appearance.”

The same goes for the gift of romantic love. Recall how the psychologist Abraham Maslow described “self-actualized lives”:

One can fairly use the old words vocation, or calling, or mission to describe their passionate, selfless, and profound feeling for their “work” ... I hesitate to call this simply “purposefulness” because that may imply that it happens only out of will, purpose, decision, or calculation, and doesn't give enough weight to the subjective feeling of being swept along, of willing and eager surrender, or yielding to fate and happily embracing it at the same time...

The best way to communicate these feelings to someone who doesn't intuitively, directly understand them is to use as a model “falling in love.” This

is clearly different from doing one's duty, or doing what is sensible and logical. And clearly also "will," if mentioned at all, is used in a very special sense. And when two people love each other fully, then each one knows what it feels like to be a magnet and what it feels like to be iron filings, and what it feels like to be both simultaneously.³⁷

Like falling in love.

The jolt and surprise of romantic love, its physicality and yet its transporting otherworldliness, its radical *unselfing*, are signs and metaphors for meaning in life. In *The Maytrees*, the transcendence of sexual intimacy was so wondrous as to confound. "Love so sprang at her, she honestly thought no one had ever looked into it. Where was it in literature? Someone would have written something. She must not have recognized it. Time to read everything again."

Time to read everything again, together; and to create something new, together. The lover, like the artist, takes risks, embraces life's transience and the real presences beyond, and creates something unique and beautiful.

And we don't have to be Nabokov or Harriet Taylor, not the lofty lady or Zoë Folbigg. Romantic love goes right when we gratefully allow it to manifest itself in our calling, our insight, and our sharing and service. Whoever we are.

In 1958, John Steinbeck's son wrote him from boarding school, saying happily but worriedly that he thought he had fallen in love. Steinbeck's response was sweet and wise.

First — if you are in love — that's a good thing — that's about the best thing that can happen to anyone. Don't let anyone make it small or light to you.

Second — There are several kinds of love. One is a selfish, mean, grasping, egotistical thing which uses love for self-importance. This is the ugly and crippling kind. The other is an outpouring of everything good in you — of kindness and consideration and respect — not only the social respect of

manners but the greater respect which is recognition of another person as unique and valuable. The first kind can make you sick and small and weak but the second can release in you strength, and courage and goodness and even wisdom you didn't know you had.³⁸

A little later in the letter, Steinbeck wrote: "What you wanted me to help you with was what to do about it—and that I can tell you. Glory in it for one thing and be very glad and grateful for it."

¹ Becca Rothfeld, "Affliction and Salvation," *The Nation* (September 9, 2016).

² He did say: "Love is a matter of *feeling*, not of willing, and I cannot love because I *will* to, still less because I *ought* to (I cannot be constrained to love); so a *duty to love* is an absurdity." Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1785]), p. 161.

³ Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), pp. 55-56.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, (2003 [1882]) *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common, Paul V. Cohn, and Maude D. Petre (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003 [1882]), §14, §363.

⁵ Gino Segrè, *Faust in Copenhagen: A Struggle for the Soul of Physics and the Birth of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 268

⁶ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1952 [1441]). On it being the most widely read, see "Imitation of Christ," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

⁷ Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Hanna Pickard, "What Is Addiction?" in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*, ed. K. W. M. Fulford *et al.* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2013), pp. 851-864, especially p. 860. But consider Bonnie Phillips, Raju Hajela & Donald L. Hilton Jr., “Sex Addiction as a Disease: Evidence for Assessment, Diagnosis, and Response to Critics,” *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* 22 (2015): 167-192.

⁸ Or *heroine*; throughout, please consider “hero” as genderless, as “actor” now is.

⁹ Raymonde Carroll, *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Sarah Perez, “Audible’s New Romance Audiobooks Learning to Jump to the Sex Scenes,” *TechCrunch* (November 1, 2017).

¹¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York: Norton, 2013 [1353]).

¹² Joan Acocella, “Renaissance Man: A New Translation of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*,” *The New Yorker* (November 11, 2013).

¹³ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ “A Commuter Romance,” *Outlook*, BBC World Service, broadcast November 2, 2017.

¹⁵ Zoë Folbigg, *The Note* (London: Aria, 2017).

¹⁶ Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

¹⁷ Quotes taken from Elaine Showalter, “Sunny Sylvia.” *Literary Review* (November 9, 2017), a review of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath: Volume I, 1940–1956*, ed. Peter K. Steinberg & Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber & Faber, 2017).

¹⁸ John M. Robson, and Jack Stillinger, “Introduction,” in *Autobiography and Literary Essays, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 1*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Oxford: Routledge, 1981), p. xvii.

¹⁹ Quoted in Cass Sunstein, “John and Harriet: Still Mysterious,” *New York Review of Books* (April 2, 2015).

²⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography and Literary Essays, Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Vol. 1*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Oxford: Routledge, 1981), p. 195.

²¹ Brian Boyd, “Envelopes for the *Letters to Véra*,” in *Letters to Véra*. Ed. and trans. Olga Veronina and Brian Boyd (New York: Knopf Borzoi Books, 2014), p. xxvi.

²² Lauren Acampora, “Véra Nabokov: Vladimir Nabokov’s Wife,” in *The Who, the What, and the When*, ed. Jenny Volvovksi, Julia Rothman, and Matt Lamothe (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), p. 16.

²³ Martha Nussbaum, “‘Faint with Secret Knowledge’: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*,” in *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 135-153.

²⁴ Avril Horner and Anne Rowe, “Introduction,” in Iris Murdoch, *Living on Paper: Letters from Iris Murdoch, 1934-1995*, ed. Avril Horner and Anne Rowe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. xii.

²⁵ John Sutherland, “‘Living on Paper: Letters From Iris Murdoch, 1934-1995’,” *New York Times Book Review* (January 22, 2016).

²⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Sacred and the Profane Love Machine*, p. 261, quoted in Nussbaum, “‘Faint with Secret Knowledge,’” p. 145.

²⁷ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 16-17.

²⁸ Horner and Rowe, “Introduction,” in Iris Murdoch, *Living on Paper*, p. xiii.

²⁹ *The Decameron*, p. xliv.

³⁰ Leah Libresco Sargeant, “Consent and Louis C.K.” *First Things* (November 21, 2017).

³¹ The apostle Paul was asked if people should abstain from sex. Best, he replied, to be chaste like me—unless you can’t control yourself, in which case get married so that you don’t just “burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:1-9).

³² Apologies to Erica Jong for toning down her epic phrase, which urbandictionary.com defines as “a sexual encounter between strangers that has the swift compression of a dream and is seemingly free of all remorse and guilt. It is absolutely pure, there is no power game and it is free of ulterior motives.” Erica Jong’s character liked the idea, but “it is rarer than the unicorn. And I have never had one.” Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Henry Holt, 1973).

³³ Lightly edited quote from the film “Gone Girl” (2014), cited in Becca Rothfeld, “Gone Girl’s Feminist Update of the Old-Fashioned Femme Fatale,” *The New Republic* (October 9, 2014).

³⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*. (Oxford and New York: Routledge Classics, 1970).

³⁵ Nussbaum, “Faint with Secret Knowledge,” p. 148.

³⁶ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2007 [1979]).

³⁷ Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 1971), pp. 301, 303.

³⁸ *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, ed. Elaine Steinbeck and Robert Wallsten (New York: Viking, 1975).