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On Reading Love, With Resistance

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Love, Subjectivity, and Truth is an erudite, intricate, and moving book. It takes on important philosophical questions—most crucially, what is the relationship between love and knowledge, and between love and self-knowledge? Although these could easily stand alone, Rick Anthony Furtak chooses to address them in a reading of *In Search of Lost Time*. In fact, Marcel, "Proust's narrator," who "tries to understand philosophically" what "arises from his life," (2023, xi) becomes to a large extent the protagonist of Furtak's book. Like an existential philosopher, Marcel (as distinguished from Proust) is occupied with the question of what it means to understand oneself "in the midst of existence" (x). Marcel "meanders" on a continuous search for "the meaning of it all" (xi), accompanied, as it were, by Furtak. The philosopher does not give up on Marcel, even when the latter is "mistaken" (119), when he "gets *himself* wrong" (118), or is "in denial" (8), or is "in a state of bad faith" (120), or, finally, when he stubbornly holds on to a "positivistic, skeptical or meaningless interpretation" of love (69), an interpretation that is radically different from the one proposed by Furtak in this book and in his other work.

Furtak is patient with Marcel, reading him through "loving eyes" (xi), and argues that the protagonist and narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* eventually comes to his own philosophical conclusion about the nature of love—as that which brings the truth of the subject to light (a conclusion which Furtak, too, affirms). True to his vision of philosophy as a form of thinking that "need not strive to transcend the personal 'style and idiosyncrasy' of the individual person but can rather emphasize the particularities of temperament and personality" (126), Furtak argues that, despite not being always consistent, and despite not always being aware of it himself, Marcel's "singular identity" (127) is constituted by love. If "our distinct individuality," he holds, is to be known, this can be "only by virtue of our romantic encounter with the world of others" (130–31). This view is put into practice in his philosophical account, which stages his readerly encounter with Marcel.[1] *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth* becomes, consequently, a book both of and about love. What Furtak takes to be Marcel's main discovery, namely "that the cohesion of his life depends on a series of loves" (140), is exemplified by his loving reading of Proust, who is thus able to hold a "magnifying glass up to our own experience" (138). In Furtak's reading, Proust shines light on the fact, central to the weaving of "love," "subjectivity," and "truth," that in life, just as in literature, romantic love discloses to the loving person "the highest truth that is attainable for an existing person" (143), just as it endows the person with "the courage … to trust in the veracity of what love has disclosed" (141).

1. Furtak's project is a kind of labour of love. For him, love reveals for the lover "the truth about—not only *his* world, but *the* world … the content of subjective truth … the highest truth … attainable" (143). In reading, I often felt that *In Search of Lost Time* is such a love object, one which discloses and affirms to Furtak his subjective truth, allowing him to articulate what is so meaningful to him about love. Indeed, we learn in the preface that *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth* is part of Furtak's *project*; it is a book "not merely compatible, but continuous with my (other) written work about emotion, literature, and existential thought" (xi).

Perhaps because I read *Love, Subjectivity, and Truth* in a year marked by a genocidal war, surrounded by stories of violence, death, and displacement, I found myself resisting the idea that love has a privileged position in human life, that it is unique among human emotions in its ability to create meaning, disclose the truth of both self and other, and consolidate and reveal one's project.[2] I was, perhaps, like one of the characters in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* described so aptly by Furtak; my "sedimented history" outlines my affective and cognitive possibilities (25). I want very much to believe in love as a central, creative force in human life, but looking around, beyond intimate and personal encounters, I sadly do not see much love. And even personal, intimate encounters are more often than not structured and governed by sentiments other than love—possession, jealousy, hatred, frustration. Proust, I think, provides powerful descriptions of such sentiments consuming people. In fact, often the very thing Furtak takes as evidence in Proust for the transformative and revelatory nature of love, I understood as a desire for possession and objectification which I find hard to reconcile with love (although Furtak thinks of these as potential aspects of love, calling Marcel, for example, a "jealously possessive lover" (11)).[3] In what follows, I want to elaborate on these points, first by examining the more general assumption about the centrality of love in human life, and then by questioning the role that Furtak assigns to love more specifically with respect to *In Search of Lost Time*.

Love, says Furtak, partakes in "the emotional a priori" (3), his term for the affective ground that is fundamental to human experience. The notion of the emotional *a priori* belongs to a phenomenological tradition that holds that humans are in principle receptive and attuned to the world, and that they exist in such a way precisely by virtue of having moods.[4] The world, in which we are emotionally and pragmatically involved (never being detached spectators), is always a matter of care or concern; it always matters to humans in one way or another. Furtak puts it well: "Without … love, care, concern, or interest … nothing in the world around us would be more salient than anything else" (3). I find the idea that the world is always revealed by some mood or another very compelling, and am in complete agreement with Furtak that moods, affections, or emotions should not be seen as secondary, subjective responses to an objective reality, a reality independent of humans. What he calls "dispositional affects" (3) are a condition for the world, for the appearance of a meaningful environment in which we are grounded (such that we are able to respond to it, act in it in appropriate ways, and so on). I am just not certain that any of this entails that love has a privileged position and that we can conclude with Furtak that "our life in the world is experienced as meaningful *because* we are fundamentally loving beings" (1) or that "love and care … constitute the emotional a priori" (2).

In suggesting that love is *constitutive* of the emotional *a priori*, or that it is essential to our experience of the world as meaningful (claims that give love significant weight, over and above other emotions), Furtak views it not as one mood among others, a particular mode that discloses the world, but rather a value, the standard

2. Of course, *In Search of Lost Time* is also marked by a horrible war, which finds its way into the novel. Some of the epistemic issues provoked by the war in the novel (among them a form of scepticism, but also, on the opposite spectrum, a question about how the real is to be represented—and with it the unexpected, surprising intrusion of the reality of war into life) are discussed in Mahuzier 2005.

3. Furtak's main objective is to reject the idea that love is "merely" subjective, in the sense of a fictional or illusionary projection of the lover, one which discloses nothing about the "truth" of the beloved. Focusing on the idea that love can disclose truth while at the same time being perspectival, anchored in one's subjective manner of approaching the world ("subjective" in the broad sense of the subject's meaning-giving activity), he emphasises that love is always an orientation towards a person as "what she is or may be *to me*." (10) Love, in that sense, is always interested, always disclosing the specific location of the loving subject. Whereas some may not turn these interests into an "overly demanding" relation towards the beloved, others may be demanding, "jealously possessive," but still loving and manifesting care towards the beloved. While I agree that love is rarely disinterested, I am uncomfortable with the idea that possessive jealousy is a kind of love (and I think that this possessiveness is often clearly demarcated along gendered lines, the women becoming the object to possess, to "conquer." It is certainly that way in Proust).

4. I am thinking, at this point, of Heidegger's claim that moods make up our "Befindlichkeit," our ability to find ourselves in the world in one way or another (translated at times as "disposedness" or "attunement"; both terms are central to Furtak's discussion of the emotional *a priori* (see §29 and §30 in *Being and Time*)).

of a meaningful life. Love is assigned the greatest importance in the life of the individual, positioned as an ideal form of relationship to others and to oneself (because it is "a prerequisite of veridical apprehension" (xii)). This, I think, puts an unnecessary strain on love. Others matter to us first and foremost as objects of love, Furtak argues. Love just *is* the recognition and confirmation of the other as "worthy of existence" (11). In a similar manner, we mourn those whom we have lost, because we loved them (7), and the more profound our love, the more profound our grief over their loss. But we don't feel such love for most of the people with whom we come in contact. Do we have to affirm that they are somehow less worthy of existence or, more accurately, that we feel that they are so? Or should we alternatively "stretch" love so that it will also cover relations of care towards others which are neither romantic, close, or intimate?[5] Can we not envision a non-loving encounter with the other in which their singularity shines through, and is also affirmed and highly valued (perhaps through fascination, curiosity, or respect, emotive attitudes that are not tantamount to love)? Similarly, do we not mourn those whom we do not love (either romantically or in any other way), those whom we have perhaps not even met?[6] If love is a condition for the ability to care about others, to genuinely feel that they are worthy of existence and that their non-existence is a genuine loss, then we either demand too much of love, or too little of our non-loving dispositions towards others.

Addressing the question of whom and how we love, a question that touches upon the relationship between ethics and love, which is central to the point I made above, Furtak declares that he is focused "more on the personal aspect of existence than on the socio-political" (110), so that his account of love is based on, and relevant for, the intimate, amorous encounters between self and other. In such settings we encounter the "existing individual" (114), for whom love is a way of affirming the truth of existence. It is true, says Furtak, that love draws on public, shared meanings and ways of being, that it is structured by and responds to social conventions (how and whom is it normal to love and in what ways). Yet love always reflects, even within such contexts, a choice that individuals make. "Some cultures practice tattooing and others do not," says Furtak, pointing to how the broader social and political contexts in which we find ourselves lay out what can be deemed meaningful and laudable activities and choices. "Well and good. But our existential imperative is to choose whether to be tattooed or not" (114). Like the person choosing whether to be tattooed or not in a society in which tattooing is meaningful (or even a norm), the loving person chooses a way of life, chooses to affirm what may have by now consolidated into habits and routines, chooses to value the beloved, and thus the loving person gains purchase on life and commits to the "truth" of his or her existence. Well and good. But love, although described as emerging amidst the particularities of place and time, remains a completely abstract and universal "disposition" in this account. Might it not be the case that love as an individuating, "authenticating" activity ("truthfulness" consists "in … authenticity" (132)), as Furtak understands it, is itself born from certain shared matrices of meaning? It seems, first and foremost, to depend on a conception of the self born in a specific historical moment. Only individuals who have "true" cores, whose experience is or can be unified, can be discovered and affirmed by love, as Furtak understands it. Indeed, the book in its entirety takes for granted the existence of subjects whose experiences lend themselves to such ways of loving. Since both self and other are understood as entities that can affirm "life in its unique particularity" (125), they can love and discover each other's truth through love.

5. And what about those we despise? Hate too makes some things "more salient" then others, to borrow Furtak's term (3). Furthermore, couldn't we say that, at times, hate is, just like love, "an attunement, an emotional orientation, towards the possibilities" (26) that the other, or the world, hold? Why prioritise love over many of the other ways in which we relate to others?

6. Furtak does not strictly equate "love" with "romantic love," mentioning Marcel's love for his grandmother along with his love for Gilberte and Albertine. But it seems that all love, for him, is modelled on romantic love and involves intimacy and passion (even if not sexual in nature).

My final comment is related to the issue raised above, but bears more directly on Furtak's reading of Proust, and the question of how subjectivity and truth relate to each other in the novel. According to Furtak, Marcel is mistaken in thinking that since love is subjective, it cannot be the basis for the discovery of the truth of the individual. However, he continues, Marcel comes to amend his mistaken conception and "eventually learns" (119) that, despite the fact that love is always embedded in a specific vantage point (the loving individual's), it is nonetheless not illusory, but in fact discloses the meaning of his life ("the joy of rediscovering what is real," as Furtak quotes Marcel (131)). But is love the medium in which "the real" is rediscovered? For if there is no such unity of the self that can be affirmed and brought out by love, then love is deprived of one of its cardinal roles. Marcel's "scepticism," which touches upon the question of the unity of the self, is eventually overcome not by love, but by literature, which transforms lived life. Thus, in the final tome of the novel, *Le Temps retrouvé*, Marcel affirms that "real life, life as it is laid bare and illuminated—the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived—is literature" (1993, 298).[7] Later in this passage, as well as in other instances, Marcel refers to the retrospective nature of such illumination. The appearance of the real involves a purposeful disengagement from the activity of living as well as of loving. Furthermore, there is a dimension of retrospectivity in many of our experiences, which materialise as they are only with the passing of time:

> What we take, in the presence of the beloved object, is merely a negative that we develop later, when we are back at home, and have once again found at our disposal that inner darkroom, the entrance to which is barred to us so long as we are with other people. (2015, 490)[8]

I don't see it as a sceptical argument, just as the expression of the idea that memory, and later literature, are crucial for the materialisation of meaning and truth (which is not necessarily related to love). Furtak himself argues at one point that literary art is the key to a meaningful life, for the emergence of a true self. But this is not because literature retraces routes already taken in concrete experiences of love ("A tribute to them," as he describes Marcel's conception of his literary art (132)), but rather because literature gives love, indeed life as a whole, its meaning.[9]

The relationship between life, philosophy, and literature is a frequent theme in Furtak's work, and this book is itself a testament to the power of literature, its "valuable contribution to cognitive awareness" (131). Since I am in the habit of thinking of the relationship between philosophy and art with the aid of Jean-Paul Sartre, I could not at this point refrain from thinking of another "sceptic," whose life, devoid of love, emptied of meaning, called him to reflect on the relationship between writing and living. I am referring to Roquentin, the protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's *La Nausée*, who while no doubt different from Proust's Marcel, nonetheless reaches a similar decision towards the end of the novel. Roquentin, too, decides that the only redemption from the meaninglessness of existence (and the specific suffering that it brings) lies in the transmutation of life into art; *Nausea* ends with Roquentin's decision to write "[a] book. A novel" ([1938] 2007). Roquentin no doubt presents a much grimmer account of human life, but his commitment to the redemptive power of art is similar to Marcel's. Thus, he says, for example, that "nothing happens while you live. … But everything changes when you tell about life," and he expresses the hope that the moments making up his life, devoid of love, devoid of meaning, would "follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered" (39–40). I cannot pursue the relationship between Marcel and Roquentin beyond this initial similarity, but I hope that in drawing on

7. "La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par consequent pleinement vécue, c'est la littérature" (IV, 474).
8. "Ce qu'on prend en présence de l'être aimé n'est qu'un cliché négatif, on le développe plus tard, une foi chez soi, quand on a retrouvé à sa disposition cette chambre noir intérieure dont l'entrée est condamnée tant qu'on voit du monde" (II, 227).
9. A recent account of the relationship between literature, love, and truth, which emphasises the role of the transmutation of life into art, and nonetheless remains in line with Furtak's interpretation of the individualising role of love, is developed in Buijs 2022.

it I am able to gesture towards the need to think about literature's relationship to "love," "subjectivity," and "truth," in the context of Proust's novel, to supplement the rich account created by Rick Anthony Furtak, whose work shows how natural and fruitful it is to think together about existential themes in Proust and in life more broadly.[10]

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