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Where is Reciprocity?

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Let me get one thing out of the way: Rick Furtak has written a magnificent book: subtle, profound, exploring both epistemological issues and issues of loving perception with a rare depth. He has written it as a study of Proust, but it is really very original, using materials from Proust but correcting what I believe to be the deficiencies of that remarkable author out of his own (I believe) far healthier ethical sensibility. I will now focus on something that Proust and even Furtak leave out (as indeed I did in *Upheavals of Thought* (2001)), but this in no way detracts from his achievement.

Two accounts of love stand at the start of the ancient Greek philosophical tradition. One belongs to Plato, the other to Aristotle. I shall spend little time on Plato, because Proust follows Plato, and it is this account of love as a perception of value and specialness that Furtak investigates so well. Plato's account focuses on erotic love, but love can have many objects, as the ascent of love makes clear, including laws and institutions, and eventually the ideal form of Good itself. Love is unidirectional, and is fully compatible with non-reciprocation, or even the absence, death, or inertness (laws are not alive) of the object.[1]

Aristotle's account is very different. He uses a different word to begin with: not *erôs*, but *philia*, which is not a word for a perceptual attitude, but for a relationship. But he is not just changing the topic. As recent scholars (particularly Anthony Price (1989)) have ably insisted, erotic and romantic love may also be *philia*, if the right conditions are met. *Philia* does see a special type of value in the object, and acquires knowledge of that value, but Aristotle insists from the beginning that reciprocation is also essential. You may be a wine-lover, *oinophilos*, he says, but that isn't really *philia*, because the wine can't love you back. In addition to reciprocation he insists on mutual awareness of the loving attitudes, and, what is all-important, actions reciprocally promoting the good of the two parties as ends in themselves. This requirement, in turn, has demanding preconditions. The *philoi* must trust one another, and that takes time; so *philia* can't spring up in an instant. And beyond this, the *philoi*, in order to express their love and to choose activities that mutually promote their good, must spend a lot of time together sharing pursuits, whether they be political or athletic, or whatever.

Aristotle is plainly aware of Plato's account; indeed elsewhere he refers directly to the *Symposium*, and his little joke about wine-lovers is probably best taken as a jibe in Plato's direction. What he says to Plato, in effect, is this: loving attitudes and perceptions are important, but they are just necessary for love and not sufficient. We must look to see what the lovers actually *do*, how they do or do not promote one another's good. This sharing of cherished activities and this reciprocal good-promoting are absolutely essential.

1. The *Phaedrus* takes a different, more Aristotelian view, in which reciprocally benefiting action is essential: see my *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (1986, ch. 7).

To see what Aristotelian love looks like in a work of art I now present two pairs of Aristotelian lovers in Mozart's operas (on which I am currently writing a book[2]). One is a case of friendly love, one of romantic love, but Aristotelian love includes both—and so does Furtak's conception of love. For the first, let me turn to a scene from the *Marriage of Figaro* in which Susanna and the Countess write a letter together (as part of a scheme to restore both of their marriages). As the Countess dictates the letter and Susanna writes it down, the women take inspiration from one another's musical phrases, exchanging ideas with a sinuous capacity for response and a heightened awareness of the other's pitch, rhythm, and even timbre. They begin by exchanging phrases, as in a conversation. As the duet continues, however, their reciprocity becomes more intimate and more complex, as they wind around one another, ultimately achieving closely-knit harmony. Their musical partnership expresses a kind of friendly attunement that is, we might say, an image of mutual respect, but also a reciprocal affection that is deeper than respect.[3] Neither runs roughshod over the utterance of the other, and yet each contributes something distinctive of her own, which in turn is recognised by the other, and carried forward. They have a shared purpose, in the service of which they show respect, ingenuity, playfulness, and a nuanced sense of one another's particularity. Clearly they have a vision of the world, but they have, and especially they do, a lot more.

My second case is one of romantic love—a case of love overcoming the barrier imposed by national difference. In *Idomeneo*, The Trojan princess Ilia loves the Greek prince Idamante, and eventually they see their way clear to a life together, resolving to take considerable risks for this end. It takes her two acts to learn to trust him, and this is movingly shown, bit by bit. All along she sees him as having a special radiance, but the final step into reciprocity has to await the advent of trust. In the duet "S'io non moro a questi accenti" ("If I do not die at these words"), the two voices, in close-knit harmony, express the joy of trusting reciprocity looking forward to happiness: "Ah, our happiness overcomes the cruel anguish we have suffered. Our passion conquers all." At first they exchange separate phrases like Susanna and the Countess, then, in an ecstatic dancelike 3/8 rhythm, they celebrate their freedom from fear and superstition. The radiant music expresses a joyous, playful vision of happiness, and of one another's particularity, but it also expresses a freedom of action in which each is prepared to face death itself for the other's sake. In the end each does face death for the other's sake, although, because this is a Freemasonic opera, Reason triumphs and nobody dies. Indeed, the decree of an unnamed Voice, who displaces the old gods, is that this loving couple should rule the city, turning it from a realm based on superstition and grovelling to a realm ruled by love.

This is Aristotelian love: plenty of radiance, lots of vision, but also trust, shared pursuits, and reciprocal actions benefiting one another out in the world.

I think Proust is an unregenerate Platonist, taking love to consist in a pattern of vision and concluding that one might love without doing anything good for the object of love, or engaging in the nuanced back-and-forth of Aristotelian shared activities. It appears that Marcel does not treat Albertine very well—abusively, indeed; but we have little to go on, because Proust is not very interested in showing patterns of action between the two, and he also has independent reasons for thinking trust impossible. Indeed, for reasons given in the final volume, he concludes that one loves best when one retreats from active life altogether, pursuing a life

2. *The Republic of Love: Opera, Breath, and Freedom* (forthcoming).

3. The music of this scene has become famous in popular culture through its role in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, where Tim Robbins plays it on the prison PA system, and the prisoners are deeply moved by it without knowing what it is about. As Morgan Freeman's character remembers the moment later: "I have no idea what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are better left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singing about something so beautiful, it can't be expressed in words, and it makes your heart ache because of it … and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free."

of contemplative literary art. But before I can confront this issue in Furtak's book, I must first address a key methodological issue: what to do about an unreliable narrator.

Whenever Marcel's ethical deficiencies as a lover become glaringly evident, Furtak is inclined to blame Marcel. He even says more than once that Marcel is lying about himself to himself. But this stratagem, which allows Furtak to insert his own sane judgments whenever we run across Marcel's particular obsessiveness, his jealous indifference to the well-being and agency of Albertine, raises a problem: how do we distinguish the narrator from the point of view of the author when that narrator is the only voice we hear for three thousand pages?

Many authors create unreliable narrators whose skewed visions of the world their readers are invited to unmask. Henry James, for example, is especially adept at this. So how do we figure out that Stransom in *The Altar of the Dead* (1895) (for example) is unreliable, and that we must try our best to distinguish his view of things from that of James the author? First of all, Stransom's view of the world strikes us as obsessive and weird. But that surely is not enough, for many artists have had obsessive, weird views of life, and I believe that Proust is one of them. Second, the view comes in for criticism from other characters in the work, and those characters' words (which, being quoted, appear to have at least some independent authority) supply a distinct and critical perspective on Stransom. Third, at times the narrator criticises himself and regrets his earlier views, though with Stransom we really can't tell which phase of Stransom is weirder and more obsessive. Above all, however, we figure things out because we read widely in James's works, becoming aware of a characteristic "take" on the world that is quite different from that of Stransom. This "take" shows up in his choices of characters and plots, but also in the way his prose presents them.

With Proust we are unable to do this, because he has chosen to create a single monumental artwork and to express all his insights through the mind of its narrator. We get occasional opportunities to do the second and third, but it seems to me dubious whether those elements, particularly Marcel's shift to a life of contemplative creativity, remedy the defect that concerns me: a lack of interest in the reciprocal interactions of lovers as a necessary element of genuine love. Although my paradigms of reciprocity were characters in a musical work, literary works are perfectly capable of showing reciprocal interaction and assessing it from an ethical viewpoint. Theatre perhaps is best placed to do this, but novels have many ways of performing the same task. George Eliot shows us clearly, in *Middlemarch* (1993), that both Casaubon and Dorothea are defective lovers, capable of certain (different) types of idealising perception, but utterly lacking in other elements without which love cannot exist: in Casaubon's case a regard for Dorothea's freedom, in Dorothea's a self-respect that will in due time curb her immature style of self-dramatising selflessness. Tolstoy too is a master of portraying both incomplete love and its growth into something far more complete, as both Levin and Kitty, in *Anna Karenina* (1995), begin with an immature vision and perfect it through the trials and errors of actually living together and having daily choices of actions to make. Meanwhile, both Anna and Vronsky have rich erotic visions of the world without having, either of them, the slightest capacity to love in a full Aristotelian sense. Their choices are self-serving and childish, and it is no surprise that these non-lovers end up destroying one another. I believe Tolstoy thought that intense erotic love is always incompatible with mature loving, but I need not argue that here, as it is irrelevant to my point. The point is, novels can show us lovers whose love has a rich vision-aspect, but because that love is so lacking in the domain of Aristotelian action (shared pursuits, reciprocal benefiting), the conclusion to be drawn is that they *actually don't love the other party at all*, they just have a self-serving fantasy that masquerades as love.

In these two cases I am confident that the novelists want us to see the relationships as cases of failed non-love and the vision of each as splendid but emptily self-serving. I draw this conclusion because *Middlemarch* shows Dorothea evolving into a woman really capable of love and because *Anna Karenina* contains other contrasting characters who show what real love (for Tolstoy) consists in. Tolstoy might have written a novel entirely about Anna, in which she would figure as someone who really loved and then tragically lost. Some readers and film producers think he did so. However, he did not.

I am strongly inclined to think that Marcel is like these defective lovers, seeing the world in a way tinged by erotic radiance, but not actually managing to love at all, so deficient is he in the reciprocal-benefiting and shared-activity department. His relationship with his grandmother looks like it promises to become a real loving relationship, but that is an exception. The "general form" of his loves begins with his relationship to his mother, which is entirely selfish and controlling, a form of infantile need that does not deserve the (full) name of love according to Aristotle. It looks as if the relationship with Albertine is hardly better: just as he tries to keep his mother in his room against her will, so he jealously imprisons Albertine. But in this case we are faced with a virtually insoluble question: does Proust mean to represent Marcel the way Tolstoy represents Anna, namely as so destructive and selfish that we should not count her as loving, or does he want us to see Marcel's vision of the world as a case of genuine love?

Before we get to the main issue, reciprocity, let me concede to Furtak that Marcel does attain a type of sensory knowledge of Albertine: as he says (117), relying on Anne Carson, we get at least fifty-nine bits of knowledge of Albertine in the text. These do not greatly move me, because some of them are dubious (her bisexuality may be a creation of his jealous fantasy, for example), and the rest are mainly observed physical attributes that do not add up to a character portrait of the type we get from Tolstoy or George Eliot. Still, I can agree with Furtak that she is not a mere fantasy: after all, if she were, he would not be agonised by his inability to control her. Thus I agree with Furtak in finding Marcel's sceptical claim in the final volume a bit extreme: the people we love, Marcel concludes (in a passage discussed by Furtak), are the ones we see least clearly of all: they are merely "a vast, vague arena in which to exteriorise our thoughts…And it was perhaps my fault that I did not make a greater effort to know Albertine in herself." Even here, however, he doesn't say that he knows nothing; he says that he did not make a sufficiently great effort.

Why not? The answer is that jealousy is a central part of his love, and jealousy directs his mind away from the woman who is with him toward anxious fantasies of what she could be doing when she is not, and related plans to control her more successfully. Albertine can escape from his jealousy only when she is unconscious and has ceased, for the time, to be a separate human being:

> When I returned she would be asleep and I saw before me the other woman that she became whenever one saw her full face…I could take her head, lift it up, press her face to my lips, put her arms round my neck, and she would continue to sleep, like a watch that never stops, like a climbing plant, a convolvulus which continues to thrust out its tendrils whatever support you give it. Only her breathing was altered by each touch of my fingers, as though she were an instrument on which I was playing and from which I extracted modulations by drawing different notes from one after another of its strings. My jealousy subsided, for I felt that Albertine had become a creature that breathes [*un être qui respire*] and is nothing else besides. (Proust 1981, 109)

> In this way, her sleep realised to a certain extent the possibility of love… By shutting her eyes, by losing consciousness, Albertine had stripped off, one after another, the different human personalities with which she had deceived me ever since the day when I had first made her acquaintance. She was animated now only by the unconscious life of plants, of trees, a life more different from my own, more alien, and yet one that belonged more to me. Her personality was not constantly escaping, as when we talked, by the outlets of her unacknowledged thoughts and of her eyes. (*ibid.*, 64)

Thus is it only when a human being becomes a plant that she can be loved without anxious self-preoccupation and studied with real care.[4] I feel that this material is a clear concession that Marcel does not know all that much about Albertine—because of his jealousy; but it seems to me that Proust unequivocally asserts that jealousy is integral to all erotic love.

However: even if he had been able to know her without this huge impediment, that would still be insufficient for Aristotelian love. So let me return now to the reciprocity question. The problem is that Proust the author seems to lack interest in reciprocity-in-action, and does not spend much time on it. If he thought, like Aristotle, that Marcel's deficiency in this regard disqualifies him from real love, we'd expect him to devote more attention to this question. So I am strongly inclined to think that he believes Marcel's love for Albertine to be a genuine case of love, and is not bothered by the glaring absence of (what I take to be) a central necessary condition of love. Certainly the wonderful material about knowledge of love on which Furtak writes so well treats the Marcel–Albertine relationship as a central case of love, rather than as (what I would call) a case of failure to love. So too does the material about the pattern of one's loves in the final volume—where again I would be inclined to say that we uncover a pattern of egoistic fantasy that doesn't come close to love. I suspect that Furtak already uses criticism of Marcel more than he is entitled to without further argument, given the novel's monophonic form. But surely he seems committed to saying that Marcel's relationship with Albertine (warts and all) is seen by Proust as a real case of love and of knowledge of love.

There is material late in the novel that complicates the story I have just told, suggesting that, after all, Proust the author (and Marcel in his later life) does recognise the deficiencies endemic to all human loving (because the desire to control the loved one is, he thinks, ineliminable), and, in consequence, does indeed treat ordinary love as not genuine love.[5]

In an important passage in which Marcel describes his thoughts on the death of Bergotte, the novelist, he turns to Plato's theory of recollection, announcing that the novelist bears into this world trace memories of moral obligations contracted in another world—and, realising that he cannot fulfil these obligations in ordinary human relations, he realises them through his art.

> All that we can say is that everything is arranged in this life as though we entered it carrying a burden of obligations contracted in a former life; there is no reason inherent in the conditions of life on this earth that can make us consider ourselves obliged to do good, to be kind and thoughtful, even to be polite…All these obligations, which have no sanction in our present life, seem to belong to a different world, a world based on kindness, scrupulousness, self-sacrifice, a world entirely different from this

4. Since Furtak refers often to Iris Murdoch, it is worth noting that this passage is the basis for John Bayley's account, in *Elegy for Iris* (1999), of his own attitude to (his wife) Iris, as she sank deeper into Alzheimer's dementia: he finds himself liberated from anxious fantasies about her many lovers and able to love her as she is—an animal body.

5. The following three paragraphs (ending at "reciprocal rather than solipsistic") are quoted from chapter 10 of my *Upheavals of Thought* (2001).

> one and which we leave in order to be born on this earth, before perhaps returning there to live once again beneath the sway of those unknown laws which we obeyed because we bore their precepts in our hearts… (Proust 1981, 186)

Proust is making more than one claim here. One claim is that the artist's dedication to art is the only example of pure dedication we have in this world. But he also says that this dedication is an example of "kindness" and "self-sacrifice"—because he thinks of the novel as a gift to readers. Only in this act do we see selfless giving to others—every face-to-face human relationship being marred by jealousy and possessive desire. The relationship between author and reader is free from excessive crippling dependency, free from ambivalence, even free, in a necessary way, from partiality—for the work addresses itself to all alike. It does not know where it is placed in the lives it addresses.

Nor is this the end of the artist's gift: for the gift also creates for the reader a possibility of unselfish and undemanding love, and therefore of knowledge of another's mind. All our attempts to know the mind of another real person are doomed by our jealous projects: we are always seeing some aspect of our own needs and wishes. Before the work of art, by contrast, these obstacles fall away and true knowledge can take place. An artist's style:

> Is the revelation, which by direct and conscious methods would be impossible, of the qualitative difference, the uniqueness of the fashion in which the world appears to each one of us, a difference which, if there were no art, would remain for ever the secret of every individual. Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon. (Proust 1981, 931–32)

And this means that art offers us the only possibility of genuine human contact, and therefore the only possibility of a love that is reciprocal rather than solipsistic.

This material shows that Proust is aware of another quite different type of love, in the light of which he seems to judge daily human love inferior. He never quite says that his conclusion is that the artist–reader relationship is the only real love, and all the rest is non-love, but he surely moves in that direction.

The artist–reader relationship, however, would surely not satisfy Aristotle, nor should it. There are no shared activities, no mutual knowledge of particularity, no trust, no clear intention to benefit. After all, why should we believe the author wrote the novel we are reading to benefit us for our own sake, rather than to acquire fame or to make money? And does this matter to our experience as readers? On the reader side, the author, if sensible, ought to recognise that readers come in many types, and that some have no interest in a loving bond with the author. They may be reading the book because it is a course assignment. Or they might want to investigate a world-view that they actively dislike, as is my case with Wagner—and, indeed, Proust. So I think Furtak is well advised not to grab on to this part of the text as evidence that Proust actually had a sane view of love. This one is crazy in a different way.

In the end, then, my questions for Furtak are: where are the shared activities? Where is reciprocal benefiting? And in the absence of these, can we really say that Proust's novel shows us genuine love?

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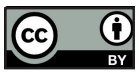
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