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978-0-521-12859-9 - The Metaphysics of Love: Studies in Renaissance Love Poetry  
from Dante to Milton

A. J. Smith

Excerpt

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*Preamble:*  
*The Lineage of Love*

The studies in this book follow the conduct of a prolonged debate about the spiritual worth of love. They mark some proving points in a trial of humane values, posing unlike possibilities of love which set each other off the more sharply when we find them realised in great works of art. Love looms so large in spiritual regard from the twelfth century to the seventeenth century because it challenged men's rage for a fulfilment beyond change, bringing home to us human creatures our thralldom to time and circumstance, the contradictions of our nature, the alienness of our environment, the incongruity of our designs with the universe we encounter. Is love strong as death? Or does it betray us to corruption? Seventeenth-century love poets seem peculiarly prone to be caught in two minds because the times made a metaphysical predicament of the frailty of sexual passion in the world as we have it, which was felt most acutely when love itself offered the means to deliver us from ourselves. Donne and Milton, no less than Shakespeare and the Jacobean dramatists, show us lovers whose commitment to their end brings them to an extremity of their entire being.<sup>1</sup>

The attempt to find spiritual value in sexual love becomes urgent when the love of a fellow being is taken to redeem our nature in a corrupted world, or when sexual fulfilment itself is felt to give meaning to life. European writers from Dante to Milton share a concern with the status of love and our sexual nature which impels them to seek metaphysical reassurance in the prospect of a human bond that is not wholly subject to time, of qualities beyond flesh and blood in a fellow creature, of a providence in our chance conjunctures. A conceit which tries temporal circumstances in the order of final truth quite properly 'affects the Metaphysicks', whose categories inform the language of love while love is taken to engage our spirit and our senses together, however individual the vision and whatever the alteration of times.

Dante and Milton were heirs to a platonic tradition of intellectual love and beauty. Yet they drew more directly upon the work of

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Christian metaphysicians who developed the impulse of the Canticles and the Gospels into a universal doctrine of love. These ardent saints and doctors found a common need to regulate spiritual passion; and they sponsored a cult of love which dramatised devotional life. Devotees of divine love diverged chiefly in the way they sought to reconcile themselves with God, some inviting grace through a right understanding of his nature and his works, some by the sheer intensity of their longing for him. Intelligence and feeling began to move apart.

Life in the world posed a harder choice when men's secular concerns were taken for distractions from final truth, or corrupting allurements in themselves. How may our worldly attachments bear upon the love of God? If we consummate our being in the union with our Creator then the love which binds fellow-creatures stands in question, not least sexual love. A man who looks to the beauty of another human being to redeem him from carnal desire, and further the needs of his spirit, makes a large demand upon reason as well as his own nature. Over some four centuries European love poets asked themselves how far our amorous urges simply commit us to change and the frailty of sense. Some of them looked for other ways of approaching God through the love of his creation. None could be indifferent to the metaphysical consequences of their commitment to love.

The present inquiry seeks to follow out a crisis of our European engagement with love by contrasting some writings in which love acutely poses such issues as the relation of the body to the mind and the spirit, the bearing of sexual passion upon spiritual devotion, the consonance of natural life with supernatural being, the prospect of permanence in a universe of flux, the ultimate worth of experience in time. Its particular concern is to mark some shifts of response to these extremities over several centuries, and to see what qualities and character each body of writing owes to its author's individual management of love. All these writers entered the area of a traditional discussion of love, and might draw upon a range of prescribed attitudes to our sexual nature. To track their ideas to the sources would not much illuminate the encounter. Yet the writings discriminate themselves partly by the scope they allow to certain animating conceptions which were formulated in antiquity, in the prime Christian texts, and in the early Renaissance.

All the writings considered here are shaped by the momentous

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assumption that human love in some way rehearses a universal condition. This conceit seized the earliest European metaphysicians, in a debate whose terms still haunted English love poetry in the seventeenth century. Heraclitus of Ephesus (flourished 500 BC) issued a challenge which prompted a cosmology of love. He envisaged a cosmos of atoms in perpetual flux, in which everything that occurs comes about by chance collision. Change and opposition necessarily make up our existence. Things come into being by the death of other things; and this continual tension between becoming and dissolving imposes a kind of equilibrium in which the overall bulk of each form of matter remains the same, even though the particular manifestations of it are continually changing.

Empedocles of Akragas (flourished 460 BC) transformed this stark cosmology when he identified the forces of becoming and dissolving as love and strife. He supposed that the cosmos renews itself by the continual alternation of opposite processes, a drawing together of unlike elements in love followed by their fragmenting themselves again in strife. The mingling of an immortal force of love with mortal matter produces a mixed condition, in which the tension of opposite impulses generates new and wonderful life. Change is perpetual, yet amounts to no more than an unceasing transformation of substance in which nothing is ultimately lost. Behind the appearance of flux the universe continues in eternal stasis. Empedocles adds that the cosmic process simply enlarges the fruitful alternation of impulses we know in our own bodies, between love which draws us to a union of unlikes and strife which elements us again. Yet the stasis he predicates lies beyond our realisation. Neither he nor Heraclitus leave scope in their atomism for our final self-fulfilment in a love beyond change.

In the *Timaeus* Plato (c. 429–347 BC) takes up from Empedocles the bold conceit of a fusion in a single nature of mortal matter and immortal being. But he altogether transforms pre-Socratic thinking when he proposes that the constant pull between these diverse elements may be resolved if they are brought into accord in a single pursuit of ideal form, that intelligible idea of perfection which exists beyond appearances and partakes of the eternal and divine. The myth of a universal work of love has been decisively redefined when love is taken for an attraction to beauty, and beauty itself for a reflection of unchanging idea. Not the least of Plato's legacies to Renaissance thinkers is that he discovers an intellectual quality in physical

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beauty, and gives a spiritual direction to the ideal representation of the body itself. The sheer spiritual purposefulness of the quest for universal beauty is far removed from the fluctuating state which his predecessors prescribe for mankind and all other phenomena:

And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades; for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh; it will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is, but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness; while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole.

*Symposium* 210E–211B<sup>2</sup>

Diotima's doctrine of love, as Socrates recounts it in *Symposium* 201D–212D, is no mere intellectualising of physical attraction. It links in a hierarchy of qualities the particular perceptions of our senses with a universal order of ideal forms, such as pure intellect alone may apprehend. Diotima pictures the lover's ascent up a scale of being, marking out a progress which starts in the perception of the beauty of particular objects, passes to an appreciation of moral and intellectual beauty in general, and is perfected beyond the reach of mere mortality in the vision of ideal beauty itself:

But if it were given to man to gaze on beauty's very self – unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood – if, I say, it were given to man to see the heavenly beauty face to face, would you call *his* . . . an unenviable life, whose eyes had been opened to the vision, and who had gazed upon it in true contemplation until it had become his own for ever? And remember . . . that it is only when he discerns beauty itself through what makes it visible that a man will be quickened with the true, and not the seeming, virtue – for it is virtue's self that quickens him, not virtue's semblance. And when he has brought forth and reared this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of God; and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him.

*Symposium* 211E–212A

Each state marks an advance to a higher condition of love and leaves the earlier stages behind, so that a lover could no longer be wholly content with the beauty of an individual body once he had glimpsed a superior beauty. Nonetheless physical beauty is still truly beauty, and there is certainly no despising of the flesh in itself in

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Diotima's vision, much less a repudiation of bodily grace. All beauty partakes of the universal form of beauty, and draws from the same source. We may love at a lower level or a higher, as we apprehend beauty through the senses or with the mind. Yet the decisive first step is the impulse to love beauty at all; and there is no moral gulf between those who stay at the beauty of the body and those who move beyond the body in pursuit of spiritual beauty.

Aristotle (384–322 BC), Plato's pupil, offers a quite different expectation of love; in fact the two fourth-century academicians open the gap between the ideal and the natural which would continue to perplex love poets. In his *De Anima* Aristotle simply undercuts Plato's scale of transcendence with the formal argument that activities and functions are logically prior to faculties, by which he means that the faculties we ascribe to our nature exist only in what they do (II, 4). Intellect itself has being only when it thinks. The soul, or spirit, is not a separate element but a logical entity only, in the sense that it is nothing more than the name we give to the animating principle of the organism. The soul is what moves the body (II, 2); it is the actuality of a particular body, the realisation in function of that body's potential capacities. The dispositions which we call the attributes of the soul, such as anger, courage, love, are all conjoined with body and attended by some particular affection of the body. Soul neither acts nor is acted upon apart from the body, indeed thought itself cannot be independent of body. In common with all the other processes of thought, love is a function not of the thinking faculty alone but of the entire organism. We must think of it as an attribute of the possessor, not of one particular faculty (I, 4).

Aristotle brings Diotima's endeavour back to earth when he accounts for actions by looking to their biological causes rather than to voluntary ends, as if a moral election simply expresses the needs of the particular organism. He speaks of the very differences between man and man as different responses to the same stimuli, which may be attributed to their unlike bodily constitutions (I, 1). The actions of particular organisms simply give effect to appetites, in as far as they serve the impulse of all living beings to perform their natural functions. In his analytic account of the powers of the soul (II, 2–12) Aristotle indicates the part love plays in the economy of organic nature. He says that the most natural function of all living things is to reproduce their own species, 'animal producing animal and plant plant, in order that they may, so far as they can, share in the

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eternal and the divine. For it is that which all things yearn after, and that is the final cause of their natural activity' (II, 4, 415a, 26–62).<sup>3</sup> Individual beings are incapable of sharing continuously in the eternal and divine because nothing in the world of perishables can abide numerically one and the same. So they partake in the eternal and divine in the only way they can. Each persists in a representative rather than in itself, seeking to renew itself in something which is specifically yet not numerically one with it. Love serves the biological need to perpetuate ourselves in our kin (II, 4).

The aristotelean urge to value an activity by the extent to which it realises the capacities of the whole organism continued to challenge Platonist lovers who found a moral imperative in the order of creation itself. Christian teaching made room for both dispositions. Christians supposed that we inhabit a creation of love, to which a partial or perverse response is a dire self-improvement or worse. Their understanding of love followed Christ's categorical injunctions that we must first love God entirely, and then love our neighbour as ourselves. Love sums up the witness of a master who told his disciples that they must love their enemies as they loved one another, and made it the final proof of love that a man lay down his life for his friends. Christ's teaching does not set sexual love apart from the general love which should link all God's creatures. His estimation of it simply follows out his embodiment of a humanity that reconciles and binds, his disavowal of what divides or excludes. Man and wife are one flesh, joined in inseparable union by God himself. Adultery and whoredom are undoubtedly to be repented and renounced; yet such sins of human kindness better merit forgiving compassion than sins of self-regard:

Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

John 8: 11

Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much; but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

Luke 7: 47

Christ's followers took up his revolutionary testimony of our oneness in God's love and found in love the indispensable saving virtue – 'the greatest of these is charity' (Corinthians 1: 13). Love brings us nearest to God just because it allows us to partake of God's very nature and essence, which he manifested when he gave his only son to die for us, or died for us himself: 'He that loveth not knoweth

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not God; for God is love' (1 John 4:8). God dwells in us, and his love is perfected in us when we love one another; we must love our brother before we can love God. The evidence of the Epistles of St John is that their very vocation of unworldly love soon drew Christians together in a fellowship which set them apart from the world.

For St Paul right love may save us by grace through faith. Yet love avails us only if it detaches us altogether from life without Christ, impelling us to abjure such commitments in the world as divert us from the true object of our devotion. The rigour of St Paul's own repudiation of his secular career is reflected in his separation of worldly attachments from the love of Christ, sexual love from devotion to God. Virginity is a better state than marriage; marriage has the advantage over lust though it must still distract from pure spiritual love; and indulgence of the senses is simply death.

Holy Writ itself seems to offer other attitudes to sexual love, notably the sustained outpouring of sensual passion which interposes so startlingly in the Old Testament between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah under the style of The Song of Solomon:

How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights! This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes. I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples; And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved, that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak. I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.

The Song of Solomon 7: 6–10

On the face of it the Canticles rehearse a dialogue of love, which catches one up in the sheer ecstatic ardour of a sexual awakening:

I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night. I have put off my coat, how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them? My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him. I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock.

5: 2–5

Such a ravishing avowal of unrestrained bodily rapture does not self-evidently chime with St Paul's admonitions against our attachments in the world and indulgence of the senses. The staid orthodox gloss still incites us to take a quite unascetic view of devotional life – 'The church's love to Christ', 'The mutual love of Christ and his

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church.' St Bernard is arrestingly bolder than that. In his sermons on the Canticles he allows full scope to the erotic intensity of the writing, taking the lovers' exchanges for reciprocal expressions of yearning and wooing between the soul and Christ. The way was opened to a theology of love which need not exclude sensual passion.

Opponents of such devotional excesses looked to St Augustine as much as to St Paul. St Augustine of Hippo (354–450 AD), like St Paul a sensualist turned ascetic, formalised the Pauline division of man's nature, positing two warring elements in our make-up which were and ought still to be in harmonious union. He denies that the body is worthless in itself. On the contrary, God is to be praised for creating even in the least fly an animal nature which wondrously and stupendously combines corporeal and incorporeal elements, so that in due proportion flesh mingles with spirit, sense with intelligence, appetite with reason (*De Civitate Dei* xxii, 24). Our human constitution remains wholly praiseworthy while it keeps its right order, which it has when body is subject to spirit and appetite subject to reason, as when man's reason rules woman's sexual nature (*Confessions* XIII, xxxii; *de Genesi contra Manichaeos* ii, 15). In our right state the harmonious equality of mind, love and knowledge corresponds to the order of the Trinity (*De Trinitate* IX, i, iv, 4–5).

In *De Civitate Dei* xiv–xv Augustine categorically distinguishes the unfallen condition of humanity from the fallen condition. He supposes that man's body and spirit were at one before the Fall, and that paradise was for the good of both parts of our nature. Adam's flesh and his mind alike wholly obeyed his will; lust was not necessary to procreation or pain to childbirth, and the human pair felt no shame in coupling. The Fall not only put man's nature at odds with itself but perverted it, so that the carnal state precedes the spiritual state. The effects of a man's corrupted nature must now be evil and carnal at first, and may become good and spiritual only when he is regenerated by Christ. Will and desire work so counter to each other that the flesh will not respond to the wish. Lust is the spur to procreation, and turns to shame the moment it is gratified. A man is constantly racked by the discord between his spiritual will and his carnal will, his soul and his lust.

The *Confessions* makes example of St Augustine's own carnal conflict. He sets out the character of his profligate youth, discovering the evidence of our general perversion in that bondage to sensual



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appetite which corrupted friendship in concupiscence, and turned his pursuit of beauty into a preoccupation with a mere formal symmetry such as lures a man's senses to their own destruction. He takes his youthful state for a compound of all sins since it comprehended in itself the fatal impulses of the Fall, which he distinguishes by their perversion of the several elements of our nature as a commitment to the pleasure of the flesh, self-loving pride, and intellectual curiosity. All these are forms of perverse love, even the last one amounting to a concupiscence of eyes and mind which kindles our lust for vain knowledge; and they must be accounted the primal sins just because they most engrossingly divert us from the love of God.

Augustine looks beyond his own carnal will for the promptings which awakened him to his condition. He tells how he was drawn to struggle upwards from body to soul, sense to intelligence, self to God, a travail which was concluded in a moment by that providential reading of St Paul – 'Tolle, lege'. Romans 13: 13 opens his eyes to the stark contradiction between the life of sense and the love of Christ. His abrupt conversion from delight in sensible allurements to the wholehearted love of God implies an absolute commitment to an unchanging spiritual beauty which altogether transcends all other beauties:

Too late came I to love thee, O thou Beauty both so ancient and so fresh, yea too late came I to love thee. And behold, thou wert within me, and I out of myself, where I made search for thee: I ugly rushed headlong upon those beautiful things thou hast made. Thou indeed wert with me; but I was not with thee: these beauties kept me far enough from thee: even those, which unless they were in thee, should not be at all. Thou calledst and criedst unto me, yea thou even breakedst open my deafness: thou discoveredst thy beams and shinedst unto me, and didst chase away my blindness: thou didst most fragrantly blow upon me, and I drew in my breath and I pant after thee; I tasted thee, and now do hunger and thirst after thee; thou didst touch me, and I even burn again to enjoy thy peace . . .

When I shall once attain to be united unto thee in every part of me, then shall I no more feel either sorrow or labour: yea, then shall my life truly be alive, every way full of thee.

*Confessions* x, xxvii–xxviii\*

Loving God alone, we unify our nature in single constancy; God himself kindles a love that burns but never consumes.

For St Augustine, as for St Paul, right love is the absolute condition of right order in our nature, and it must now be won out of dire struggle with the perverse love which engrosses us in the world. Yet it draws us providentially to its source. Love kindles us to move

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upward from the earth as by the force of a superior gravitational pull, and ascend towards God in stages (*De Civitate Dei* xi, 28). Regenerate love expresses our natural appetite to fulfil our own nature in our due place, drawing us to search through all creation for the marks of God's image, which is our true image also. We move upward towards him as to the object and cause of our love; and in finding him we find ourselves.

What part love may play in the encounters of secular society was a question to which the mediaeval followers of St Augustine returned a bleak answer. St Francis and his adherents practised love in the world, but in the catholic manner of Christ's own ministry. The Humanists of the fourteenth century and fifteenth century mark a turn towards our modern concern with sexual motives. They sponsored a drastic reappraisal of love when they shifted attention from the contemplative ideal of retired piety to the idea of a life of active virtue in the world. The leading Humanists were not theologians but state officials and scholars, such as Petrarch, Salutati, Bruni, Alberti, Poliziano, men who stood close to power in the Curia or the Councils of their own States. Their prime concern was the conduct of government and of civil life; and their revived interest in classical writers as historical figures coincided with, or partly prompted, the rediscovery of ancient codices which themselves called for relative evaluation.

The need to place antique writings historically sharpened men's perception of historical change. History no longer presented itself as a simple continuum of events or a series of absolute gestures, but began to be taken for an evolving process in which a pattern might be discerned. In the sixteenth century Guicciardini, Machiavelli, and Vasari assume the working of a natural law of growth and decline by which entire civil cultures, as well as the virile powers of those who make them, flourish and fail in time.

Organic change implies ripeness, however brief. Humanists cited the civil cultures of Periclean Athens and of Augustan Rome to bear out their assumption that a civilisation consummates itself in a moment of perfect maturity, whose proof is a perfecting of the arts and the language itself. In this succession of ripening and decaying history simply enlarges the order of individual lives, exemplifying in political attitudes the same natural processes of change in time to which all human impulses are subject, not least love. It follows that a man's attitudes and manners cannot be judged absolutely but must