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The Indiscreet Charm of Romantic Ideals

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Skye Cleary, *Existentialism and Romantic Love*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan 2015, 208 pages

In her brilliant book, Skye Cleary undertakes a challenging task of the mutual confrontation of perhaps the two greatest ideals of modern culture—that of romantic loving and that of autonomous and authentic individual evoked with so much ado by existentialism. Obviously, if I call them ideals, I do not intend to depreciate them, to deny the truth(s) inherent to them or their own evidence. It seems that the power of cultural ideals lies precisely in the fact that their truth cannot be simply denied—long before (and always after) we make any attempt to do that, we understand ourselves on their basis, in their vague light. Furthermore, they have an essential tendency to proliferate, to take on different forms and expressions. The main aim of *Existentialism and Romantic Love* is to show the results of analyzing one such ideal by using the basic motives of the other. In this sense, it is an ambitious hermeneutic project, which required not only the broadened research concerning the main motives of both ideals, their transformations and transfigurations, but also a very careful attempt of transposing the motives from one field onto the other field. While the first task—although challenging—can be brought down to a simple historical reconstruction, the second one requires a very careful, detailed, critical, and circular analysis. It is not only about searching for the common ground or the common motives within both fields—first and foremost it is about the clash of ideas, motives, and imaginaries; it is about challenging one perspective by the other. What is at stake in this hermeneutic project is the scope of possible changes in our understanding of what genuine love can mean and whether it can go hand in hand (and if so, then to what extent) with our sense of being a person.

There is no doubt that the ideal of romantic love belongs to the most dominant, omnipresent, culturally overwhelming imaginaries. It attacks us not only from

pop-cultural productions such as movies, TV shows, commercials, journals, and newspapers; it is also the recurrent theme of the great narratives of our culture. It haunts our dreams and day-dreams, regardless of whether it really fits into our needs and preferences. It permanently tries to convince us that human life cannot be really fulfilled without experiencing romantic love. One can say that there is something highly suspicious about this cultural “life” of the ideal, which in most cases is presented in the images of almost eternal happiness of the two individuals which being created for each other are “condemned” to live a life devoid of misunderstandings, collisions of goals and interests, disappointments, and so forth. Most of these images join, in quite an unproblematic way, complete devotion with personal self-realization, harmony with individual differences, striving for a complete union with the respect for another person’s uniqueness.

This shows—Cleary argues—that the concept of romantic love is notoriously unclear. Even this provisional insight into its cultural expressions indicates that we are confronted with an essentially ambiguous phenomenon. In fact, there is no particularly dominant view of how romantic love should be conceived. Cleary states that we can point to at least at six different ways in which it was described in the course of the history of the Western culture. From these descriptions she derives five crucial features of the ideal, and those are: passion (at least, implying sexual desirability); personal character (its object is always a concrete individual, and love is based on a deep respect for his/her personal uniqueness); a strong tendency to create a kind of union (“This is described in a myriad of forms, such as desire to merge, to create a shared identity, to share selves, to become interdependent, to intertwine lives, that the lover’s boundaries are blurred or overcome, or to expand oneself.”¹); permanent character of the union (best expressed through marriage and the deep belief that this union “would transform lovers’ lives to such an extent that everything would take on a new meaning and even become the meaning of life itself”²); companionship and intimacy (best understood as a genuine concern for the beloved’s well-being). Obviously, these characteristics are far from being unproblematic and self-justifying. Quite on the contrary, they already imply a series of paradoxes and conflicts inherent to romantic loving. According to Cleary, it can be clearly visible when we look at the subject matter through the glasses of existential philosophy with all its stress upon individual uniqueness, freedom and choice, responsibility, authenticity, anxiety, the idea of leaping based on unconditional faith and, last but not least, human situatedness.

1 S. Cleary, *Existentialism and Romantic Love*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 7.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

Especially the latter by implying human being-with-others, i.e. underscoring the importance of interpersonal relations suggests that this line of interpretation can be very promising. It provides a possibility of critique of romantic loving, “critique that helps us to understand both how romantic loving can go awry and how it can be reinvigorated.”³

In her double-reading, Cleary not only shows very broad knowledge and deep insight into the philosophical nuances of existentialism, and not only does she investigate in a very scrupulous way the explicit propositions about love which can be found in the works of particular thinkers and then compares those with the ideal of romantic loving, but she makes her project much broader: “I consider romantic loving not only as philosophers conceptualized it but also as they concretely lived, described, and reflected on it through their writing. This approach provides a means for practical reflection on the experience of romantic loving rather than abstract philosophical discourse.”⁴ In this sense, the undertaking is not only purely hermeneutical, which would risk being lost in the complexities of textual interpretation or at best provide an impressive but abstract and rigid description of ‘the thing itself.’ It is essentially supplemented by the phenomenology of the lived experience. That means, Cleary constantly moves between the explicit statements about love formulated by existential thinkers, the possible implications of their work for our understanding of loving, and the real experiences of the protagonists of her story, as they were presented in their letters, diaries, and as they were told by their friends and lovers.

This strategy creates a rather unique picture of possibilities and limitations of both ideals, which—in Cleary’s eagle eye—unfold their different dimensions and inherent paradoxes. Above all, this strategy perfectly shows how these ideals were realized (or betrayed) in a real experience of those who make a double effort of systematic philosophical reflection on them and putting them into practice in real life. Thus, the reader can learn from the book: how Stirner’s ideal of ‘self-ownness’ makes him incapable of engaging into any serious long-lasting relationship;⁵ how Kierkegaard with his highly elevated and sublime imperative of willing one and only one thing was not able to realize this willingness in his own interpersonal experience;⁶ how Nietzsche, being aware of the limitations of love understood as a “complete (life-long) union” and the power of love (as “the only, the final possibility of life”),⁷ was trying (desperately

3 Ibidem, p. 2.

4 Ibidem, p. 16.

5 Ibidem, p. 34.

6 Ibidem, pp. 62–64.

7 Ibidem, p. 80.

and unsuccessfully) to enter into a kind of love-friendship relation which—in accordance with his own advice—should not last longer than two years;⁸ how Sartre's attempt of a reconciliation of his idea of absolute freedom with loving relationships led one of his lovers to a suicide and the other one to a mental breakdown;⁹ how Sartre–Beauvoir relationship was a perfect example of life-long love based on freedom, authenticity, and mutual respect for a unique character of both partners, but also included the elements of devotion, which apparently stand in opposition to certain explicit premises of their thought.¹⁰

According to Cleary, there are at least five key-points which make this comparative analysis especially promising. First, if one of the crucial points of the ideal of romantic loving is replacing two separate individuals by creating an inseparable union, it necessarily provokes the question about the independent nature of these individuals. Also, if the above mentioned postulate appears as problematic, then to what extent lovers can serve for each other as a means to self-knowledge. It seems that here we are on the verge of sensibility of the ideal of romantic loving.

Second, existentialism quite consistently presents the human being as a 'creative nothingness,' i.e. a constant process of creating the meaning of his/her life; if that is so, one of the main components of our spiritual/mental characteristics is anxiety. That poses another problem which can be formulated in the following way: "can romantic loving validly relieve anxiety by creating meaning in life, and if so, to what extent?"¹¹

Third, it seems that there is a fundamental tension between the necessity of the existential choice and its contingent character (which always makes questionable the element of reciprocity), on the one hand, and passionate elements of romantic loving, on the other hand.

Fourth, since existential thinkers evoked the very specific understanding of human freedom, it appears questionable whether romantic love can be reconciled with the very idea of that freedom. In other words, is the former a kind of supplement to the latter or it rather creates an unsurpassable limitations to that freedom. If the latter is the case, then another question arises immediately: "whether it is existentially valid to choose to restrict one's freedom."¹²

Fifth, it is well known that in the existential perspective one of the crucial characteristics of human being is authenticity. That poses another problem—whether

8 Ibidem, pp. 73, 88–89.

9 Ibidem, pp. 116–117, p. 151.

10 Ibidem, pp. 116–117, 150, 153.

11 Ibidem, p. 14.

12 Ibidem, p. 14.

individuals can be authentic while being in a relationship based on the ideal of romantic loving. On the one hand, the essence of human being is nothing always already established, rather it is in the constant process of becoming, and it is so also by means of/on the basis of different forms of relationships. On the other hand, being in a loving relationship is always accompanied by the series of sacrifices and negotiations, and they often lead to quite significant modifications of one's own goals or priorities. The problematic character of the romantic loving lies precisely in the fact that it is difficult to distinguish between the authentic choices made for the sake of the beloved and the choices which are made exclusively for the sake of the beloved. The latter, in the existential perspective, are nothing else than a negation of freedom and authenticity. Or—to use Sartre's terminology—'bad faith.' It seems that we are faced here with the paradox inherent to both ideals (that of romantic loving and of human freedom and authenticity as they were presented by existential thinkers). It is not only a contradiction between them, as Cleary seems to suggest.

In accordance with the very thoughtful construction of the book, after the broadened introduction (where the author has laid down her method, the main ways of thinking about the romantic love, key-points of existentialism, and the above mentioned key-points for a double interpretation of both ideals), a reader will find an impressive and exhaustive analysis of explicit and implicit statements on romantic love, as they were presented in the works of five existential thinkers: Max Stirner, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir. Every chapter consists of: 1. a general introduction to the work of the particular thinker; 2. a critical presentation of what each of them wrote about love (and what was his or her real experience in that matter)—why and how it appeared problematic for him/her and what are the possible solutions and scenarios for a potential reconciliation of both ideals; 3. a concluding part in which Cleary, led by the above mentioned key-points, tries—in a critical and creative way—to provide an image of the genuine love, as it could be derived from the work of each thinker after a critical reading. The last chapter provides—as a result of critical and, so to speak, synoptic reading—the overall picture of the romantic love in the perspective of existentialism as such.

The main point here is that what makes the ideal of romantic love so tempting and charming—its passionate character, long-lasting/life-long relationship, the idea of merging ('we' instead of two 'I's'), intimacy, personal character, companionship, deep care for the well-being of the beloved—at the same time decides about its essentially problematic status. It is to be passionate, but it can very often lead to losing control over one's passions. It is to be realized as a creation of a "mystical" union, but it is marked by a possessive nature, where slavishness and dominance play a crucial

role. In this way, it can lead to the annihilation of the personal freedom of an individual. A love relationship is to be life-long, but it is too often based on an unreflective and reckless decision made by sensually enchanted individuals, who do not take into consideration that the proper element of their existence is a permanent process of becoming. Because of its intimate character, romantic love is to be ‘the royal road’ to know oneself through the other, but the scope and reliability of an intimate relationship are, in many cases, highly questionable. “Lovers long for connection between them, but the bridges we build are fragile.”¹³ It is to be personal, but it is also dependent on the reciprocity of the beloved and, because of that, highly contingent. It is to be based on a kind of friendship, but the latter too often turns into power struggles.

As I have already mentioned, the existential stance is not to deny the importance and power of romantic loving, which most of the protagonists of Cleary’s story (with many reservations and suspicions) treated as “the greatest stimulus of life” (to use Nietzsche’s phrase). The main point is to remain faithful to one’s self in the first place, to be the master of one’s self or—to use Stirner’s idiom—to remain always a self-owner. If that is so, all existential solutions to the paradoxes of the romantic love are created with regard to the idea of individual freedom. It is true that a human life devoid of passions, desires, or excitements would become inhuman, but they should always be somehow directed, subordinated to a subject’s will and awareness. They should be, as Max Scheler would put it, heart-ordered.

It is true that romantic love often includes petty power struggles (which imply possession, subordination, oppression), but they should be transformed into a creative, critical, and constructive conflicts which could lead to the intellectual and spiritual enrichment of both partners. This point also implies that: “Although being with others is an integral dimension of being human, the existential philosophers acknowledge the benefits to be had through appreciating distance, differences, and otherness, such as different perspectives, ideas, and challenges, and also keeping a little mystery, surprise, wonder, and a sense of discovery alive.”¹⁴ It seems that it would not be possible without the distance and space into which both individuals can separately withdraw; without fulfilling this condition a loving relationship is either condemned to become nothing else but a worn coin or an empty shell, or if the relationship is still passionate, it falls into the trap of the above mentioned petty power struggles. Both cases show how love can turn into an uncreative relationship which, in fact, is a denial of both: individual freedom, as well as the ideal of genuine love.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 167.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 171.

Another aspect of a loving relationship is that partners too often rely unreflectively on the socially and culturally established norms and patterns of behavior. Love—according to existential thinkers—should not be based on the blind acceptance of social roles and customs. Rather, it should be a matter of a conscious and courageous decision of both partners. It should be a kind of Kierkegaardian leap or Nietzschean great ‘yes.’ In other words, what is at stake in genuine love is not the blind fulfillment of the dominant images and patterns (as if they were the absolute and cogent criteria of authentic love), but rather an existential capacity to make the loving relationship one’s own actuality. But the latter is not to be opposed to possibility. Quite on the contrary, a genuine love is a real disclosure of the realm of possibilities. Perhaps that is the reason why most of the existential thinkers saw long-lasting relationships as quite problematic—up to the quite controversial Kierkegaardian conviction that love requires a kind of divine mediation. The question is whether this kind of love can still be conceived as romantic.

The last point is strictly connected with another one—the role of free choice in romantic love. If the latter is to be passionate and overwhelming, then how it can be combined with free choice which implies the idea of being a self-master? The existential answer—far from being a simple negation of the essential characteristic of love consisting of the components which appear as uncontrollable—to this query is that it is always up to us whether we enter (and stay in) the loving relationship or not. There is also another controversy here—if a loving relationship is a matter of choice, can it be truly romantic? It seems that right here the existential critique of the ideal touches its most naïve aspects. The answer is as simple as it could be. It is true that the idea of free choice implies that everybody is a potential lover—and so far it seems to be a bit unromantic—but the whole point is that the choice is always based on freely created personal criteria with regard to the personal uniqueness of the beloved. Furthermore, the romantic love does not necessarily arise in the great moment of an overwhelming fascination; it is rather the effect of the constant recognition, affirmation, and reaffirmation. “A loving relationship is a series of choices requiring reaffirmation—that is, perpetually choosing oneself as one who acts lovingly toward another. Just as a relationship is a series of actions, so too is it a series of leaps into an unknown future.”¹⁵ To formulate it in the Kierkegaardian manner, genuine love is a matter of repetition and not of recollection of a single, isolated moment of fascination. It ceases when its main component is the remembrance of the “mythical moment” in which it arose.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 174.

It seems to me that there are (at least) a few reasons why Cleary's work is not only worth of reading, but also with many respects impressive and valuable. First, her profound insight into the most sophisticated nuances of the work of the selected thinkers and very broad knowledge about their writings, as well as a natural talent for comparative analysis makes her book a brilliant example of the history of an idea. The broad scope of the investigation and the above mentioned profound insight are especially visible in the case of Nietzsche, whose writings were full of different points of view, where some of them seem to stand in the sharp opposition to others. Also, the chapters devoted to Sartre and de Beauvoir required a broadened research taking into account not only their philosophical but also literary works, diaries, and letters. Cleary compared and synthesized different points of view and perspectives in order to reveal their highly nuanced stance on the value, importance, and possibility of genuine love.

Second point—somehow connected with the previous one—is what I would call the insistence of Cleary's critical reading. What I understand by this is the consequent strategy to stay close to both ideals and instead of rejecting one (or both) of them, rather to show what kind of transformation both ideals can undergo by means of this mutual confrontation. In other words, Cleary constantly insists, as I have already mentioned, that what is at stake in her enterprise is not the denial or negation of the ideals in question, but rather a deeper understanding of what it means to love (especially in the so-called romantic manner) and of what it means to be a free, responsible, and authentic individual. This double reading reveals perfectly the paradoxes and controversies inherent to the two ideals.

Third, Cleary's strategy and a consciously chosen subject provokes a deeper reflection on the normative dimension of both ideals. Is it possible to draw a strict boundary between the autonomy of an individual and his/her dependencies? How far can we go in the name of love? How and to what extent love and individual freedom can be reconciled? What are the limits of our responsibility for/before the beloved? To what extent love can rely on norms and customs always already available in the vast inventory of culture? Does love has its own evidence, forms of cognition, normativity? etc. Some of these questions were posed explicitly by the author, others are inspired by a careful reading. Cleary's work also provokes a critical reflection on the culturally dominant and philosophically elaborated images of both sexes (especially female) and on the normative implications of these images.

I have to admit that I found only one weak point of this book and that is the arbitrary choice of 'existential' thinkers. Although Cleary provided some criteria for her selection, it seems to me that they are not convincing or transparent, and the reader can find some inconsistencies between these criteria and the final result of the

selection. Let me point to just a few of them. The reader learns from the first pages of the book about the problems and controversies with the label ‘existentialism,’ and that is perfectly correct. As far as we know, only Sartre used the word in reference to his thought, but since one can find analyses presenting the human being as temporal, procesual, understood more in terms of possibility than actuality, essentially determined as *Mitsein* etc., we can refer also to these thinkers who either live before the label was created or simply do not consider themselves to be existentialists. The next step of Cleary is to postulate an essential connection between existentialism and atheism, and then appears Kierkegaard as one of the five existentialists. The argument for choosing him is that it is almost impossible to talk about existentialism without reference to the Danish thinker. Also, a bit surprising or at least controversial, is treating Nietzsche as an atheistic thinker. If one breaks one of her rules of selection, why not break the other rules as well. I do not find convincing the exclusion of Jaspers’ work only because he did not consider himself an existentialist. The other problem with the above mentioned criteria of selection one can find in the reason for excluding Merleau-Ponty, who—as Cleary argues—was rather a phenomenologist than an existentialist. To this argument I would respond that phenomenology and existentialism do not exclude each other, and the best example of that is Jean-Paul Sartre—an existential phenomenologist.

Having said that, I would immediately add that this reproach does not change my overall impression—Cleary’s book is a perfect example of very thoughtful, critical, creative, and inspiring reflection (both philosophical and historical) on the subject matter to which none of us can be completely indifferent. It does not matter how much we are irritated by the ideal of romantic love and how much we are suspicious about the ideal of an autonomous, authentic individual permanently experiencing fear and trembling. These two ideals are still present in our culture and their indiscreet charm still radiates.

