

MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY MEDITATIONS ON LOVE IN EUROPE

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## ABSTRACT

Alexis S. Giachetti: *Mid-Twentieth Century Meditations on Love in Europe*  
(Under the direction of Federico Luisetti and John McGowan)

In *Mid-Twentieth Century Meditations on Love in Europe*, I identify the 1930s to the 1960s as a critical time period in the intellectual history of romantic love. I take a holistic and comparative approach to the subject by bringing into focus works of cinema, literature, and philosophy from one segment of the century, indicating trends and patterns that emerge, deriving their origins, and evaluating their impact on Western thought on love.

The authors, filmmakers, and philosophers that I discuss redefine love in light of the poignance, sobriety, and alienation experienced during this turbulent time period. Human relationships of all kinds, and romantic ones in particular, take on a renewed importance as one of the most defining and essential elements of what it means to be human. These intellectuals no longer find relevance in idealistic nineteenth-century notions that romantic love is a mystical merging of two souls or a means of transcendence. Equally immaterial are early twentieth-century theories from the likes of Proust and Freud that dismiss love as a mere psychological illusion. Instead, this group affirms and esteems love, but grounds it in the reality of lived experience. The beloved is no longer an ideal, but a complex, unique and irreplaceable individual, and love is less a passion than a creative act.

The dissertation is composed of an introduction and four content chapters. The introductory chapter outlines commonalities among the works of cinema, literature, and

philosophy, and contextualizes these beliefs within intellectual, social, and political history. The philosophers I discuss in the introduction include Nikolai Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Simone Weil, Denis de Rougemont, Simone de Beauvoir, and Erich Fromm. The first content chapter discusses Natalia Ginzburg's postwar novella *È stato così* in conjunction with works by José Ortega y Gasset and Martin Buber about objectification and human relationships. The second chapter explores synergies between Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* and Nikolai Berdyaev's works regarding the repression of love's freedom in a materialistic age. The third chapter looks at the impact of Italy's postwar industrialization on romantic relationships in *I fidanzati*, by Ermanno Olmi. The fourth chapter explores the theme of love in the increasingly consumer-driven society of mid-1960s France, as it is depicted in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*.

To my husband, Tobia Giachetti, and my parents, Alfred and Carlyle Seccombe.

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## INTRODUCTION

By the early decades of the twentieth-century, the Romantics' idealized version of love was out of fashion among the European intelligentsia. Already in the nineteenth century, there were “debunkers,” such as Schopenhauer and Stendhal, who sought to unveil the mechanisms behind the supposed mystical experience of love (Lewis 9). As positivism gained sway in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the number of skeptics multiplied. Advances in science and psychoanalysis reinforced the notion that love (like God) was a construction of the mind. In this era of “progress,” the concept of a great, eternal, passionate love divined by the heavens no longer resonated with a worldview that privileged the practical, the useful, and the knowable. Literature from the early twentieth century reflects this precarious state of romantic love. Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* portrays love as “forged out of a myriad of illusions” (May 215), while T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* paints a dreary picture of modern life in which both God and love are dead. In a similarly fatalistic tone, Moravia's *Gli indifferenti* dramatizes the preeminence of materialistic bourgeois values over honest emotions and human relationships.

Beginning in the 1930s, however, there is a traceable shift away from this cynical and skeptical discourse about love to one that is more constructive. It begins with growing dissent against positivism and other theories and practices that subordinate the complexity of the human experience to abstractions. William Barrett credits Henri Bergson as one of the first of a

generation “to insist on the insufficiency of the abstract intelligence to grasp the richness of experience . . . [and] . . . on the inner depth of the psychic life which cannot be measured by the quantitative methods of the physical sciences” (15). This discussion of the complexity of the human experience then extends to the person as a relational being. As philosopher Emmanuel Mounier contends, a person is a mystery; a person cannot be dissected, categorized, and fully known like an object of scientific study (Tavernier 369). Subsequently, care must be taken to perceive others in their complexity and totality. This line of thought will have implications for romantic love in the following decades. Responsibility toward the beloved and human agency in romantic relationships will become paramount. There will be less of an emphasis on passionate love (as with the Romantics) and sexual love (as with Freud and his contemporaries) and more on the practice of love over the long-term.

Historical events will also prompt intellectuals to reevaluate or reframe their beliefs about romantic love. World War II will disrupt long-standing social patterns of marriage and fidelity, family influence in marriage, and gender roles. In addition, as Natalia Ginzburg discusses in her essays, it will affect human relationships at the fundamental level of how people perceive and relate to one another. In the postwar era, increasing secularization, along with the driving forces and consequences of the economic miracle (i.e. industrialization, mechanization, migration, and consumerism), will further alter traditional mores in marriage and family life.<sup>1</sup> Due in part to these social restructurings, we see a number of philosophical treatments of romantic love and human relationships, as well as a collection of films and novels that explore the topic in a changed light.

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<sup>1</sup> See Clark’s *Desire: A History of European Sexuality* and Herzog’s *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* for historical scholarship on love and sexuality in twentieth-century Europe.

In this dissertation, I identify the mid-twentieth century (the 1930s to the early 1960s) as a pivotal and productive time period in the intellectual history of romantic love. While the late Middle Ages and the nineteenth century have been given designations of “courtly love” and Romantic love, respectively, the intellectual history of love in the twentieth century has only been studied in terms of individual contributions. The objective here is to identify a pattern of beliefs (which I will refer to as a ‘belief system’) that surfaces in one segment of the century. I will also discuss how this belief system differs from nineteenth and early twentieth-century thought about love and indicate some of the social, political, and economic circumstances that led to its development. In the introduction, I will outline the contributions of the following philosophers: Nikolai Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Simone Weil, Denis de Rougemont, Simone de Beauvoir, and Erich Fromm. I will indicate where their ideas intersect and where they deviate from one another in order to provide a thorough and nuanced description of this belief system. In the content chapters, I will examine the ways in which fiction writers and filmmakers from the time period addressed changing values and behaviors in love and embedded their own commentary into their creative works. I will show how novels and films such as Natalia Ginzburg’s *È stato così* (1947), Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (1954), Ermanno Olmi’s *I fidanzati* (1963), and Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur* (1964) sought to provide a compass, or at least a line of questioning, for how to think about love in a transformed landscape.<sup>2</sup>

There is a moral and what I will call a “senso-spiritual” dimension to this mid-twentieth century belief system about romantic love. The moral dimension, identifiable particularly in the

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<sup>2</sup> The philosophical works and the fictional narratives are discussed in chronological order (primarily in terms of when they were written or released). While I do not explicitly trace the development of thought over the course of the mid-twentieth century and instead discuss the mid-twentieth century as an integral whole, I do arrange the ideas sequentially so that their chronology can be taken into account. I did investigate if the philosophers, filmmakers and novelists corresponded about the topic of romantic love with one another, but I did not find evidence to this effect. In brief, my research revealed that the ten artists and philosophers discussed here arrived at their beliefs about love independently of one another.

works of Martin Buber, Natalia Ginzburg, Ermmano Olmi, and Erich Fromm, emphasizes a mature love, a love that deliberately and mindfully moves beyond passion and attachment to a sustained (but dynamic) love. It is about the lover understanding his or her responsibility in creating and recreating the relationship with the beloved. This responsibility is directed towards two efforts in particular. First, the lover needs to be aware of how he or she perceives the beloved. As it is easy to fixate on a single aspect of the other person (positive or negative) at the expense of the rest of his or her personhood, it is necessary to endeavor continually to see the beloved as a subject—that is to say, complete, complex, and always changing. Secondly, the lover and beloved are responsible for developing separately as individuals by pursuing interests and passions and living out their convictions. The lover cannot expect that the beloved will fulfill him or her entirely and must learn to become self-reliant in this regard. Whereas the Romantics believed in the merging of two souls, the moral dimension of this mid-twentieth century belief system proposes that love will be sustained by overcoming interdependency and unrealistic expectations of a mystical union. This is a part of a larger self-concept and worldview that it is essential to find one's existential purpose and vocation and bring the benefits of this endeavor to the relationship.<sup>3</sup>

The senso-spiritual dimension appears in Ermanno Olmi's *I fidanzati*, Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, and works by Russian philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev. It is a reaction to modernity and the lifeless (and thus often loveless) existence that results from living slavishly to the tick of the external clock. The senso-spiritual trend is also a reaction to bourgeois values that inhibit and calcify emotions and instincts. This quasi-vitalist notion constitutes a

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of vocation in particular is an important feature of this belief system, and the term's meaning comes to expand beyond its association with "a calling" in one's life's work to encompass one's whole and integral direction and purpose in life, including love and human relationships.

defense of the emotional and spiritual life against the indifferent super-structures of capitalism and technical society. When love feels moribund, the lover needs to revitalize himself or herself as an individual, both for the benefit of the beloved and the relationship. This revitalization begins at the sensory level through reconnecting with physical space, nature, the landscape, the city, and people. The idea here is that in order to love or be loved, one needs to be “primed” for the experience as a spiritually aware and receptive being.

Though the moral and senso-spiritual dimensions are quite distinct, they are united by the core theme of responsibility. Lover and beloved must take it upon themselves to enrich their respective spirits, characters, and personalities for the benefit of one another. This mid-twentieth century belief system has as its core concern the integrity and development of the individual and how he or she contributes to lasting, authentic love. Furthermore, both dimensions are a product of their times. The moral dimension develops out of the hardships and challenges of the mid-twentieth century, such as the rise of fascism, World War II and the postwar era. It affirms the importance and centrality of human relationships and defends them against belief systems that would trivialize or falsely represent them. Conversely, the senso-spiritual dimension is a reaction to the unchecked prosperity of capitalist Europe. It seeks to defend the value of love against materialist bourgeois values and the rising hegemony of corporate and industrial culture. As a complex of beliefs borne of a particular period of history, this two-pronged belief system offers a new way of thinking about and practicing love in changing times.

I chose to profile the six aforementioned philosophers because they provide a range of ideas within the belief system and because they intersect in interesting and illustrative ways, but by no means do they make up an exclusive list of contributors. Look to C.S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves* (1960), Karol Wojtyla’s *Love and Responsibility* (written in 1960 prior to his appointment

as Pope John Paul II), José Ortega y Gasset's *On Love, Aspects of a Single Theme* (1957), and works by Max Scheler and Paul Ricoeur, and one will recognize comparable attitudes, motifs, and arguments about love.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, I do not address all mid-twentieth century beliefs about love. The contributions of Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, René Girard, and Herbert Marcuse are examples of outliers, even counter-strains, to the belief system that I describe in this dissertation.<sup>5</sup> They emphasize the psychological, sexual, social, and/or political dimensions of love. Through them, we recognize a thread of continuity connecting early twentieth-century thought with contributions from the late 1960s and 1970s.

Before delving into the individual contributions to this mid-twentieth century belief system, I pause here to give some background on the philosophical orientation of some of these intellectuals and outline some frameworks and definitions.

Four of the six philosophical contributors to this belief system were influenced by twentieth-century personalism and existentialism. Though distinct philosophies, both arose as a reaction to dehumanizing historical trends, such as capitalism (in which human beings are assimilated into the market system), communism, socialism and Fascism (in which one's individuality is subordinated to the state), an increasingly technical and automated society (in which humans become increasingly irrelevant), and the vogue of social-scientific solutions to human problems (in which human creativity and agency are devalued).<sup>6</sup> Personalism, though now the lesser known of the two philosophies, once enjoyed comparable popularity to

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<sup>4</sup> See Kathleen O'Dwyer's *The Possibility of Love* for more on Ricoeur's beliefs about love and Michael Barber's *Guardian of Dialogue* for more about Scheler.

<sup>5</sup> I refer to works on eroticism by George Bataille, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Girard's *Deceit and Desire*, and Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the emergence of existentialism, see William Barrett's *Irrational Man*, and for more on the emergence of personalism, see Emmanuel Mounier's *Personalism*.

existentialism among French intellectuals (Hellman 3).<sup>7</sup> Personalism is a philosophy that defends the complexity and uniqueness of the individual person in the face of the aforementioned depersonalizing systems and paradigms. It seeks to reinstate the person (as opposed to an abstract ideal) at the center of philosophical inquiry and as the priority for social and political organization. Personalism developed into an organized movement in Paris in the 1930s under the leadership of Emmanuel Mounier (editor of the personalist journal *Esprit*). It is often associated with the lay Catholic movement in France; however, there have been contributors of all faiths, agnostics, and atheists from greater Europe and beyond. The personalists that will be discussed here, Denis de Rougemont and Nikolai Berdyaev, were Swiss Protestant and Russian Orthodox, respectively. In regards to the mid-twentieth century belief system about love, personalist thought manifests in the idea that the beloved should be perceived as a unique and irreplaceable being. It likewise manifests in the contention that love is a powerful and spiritual force that ought to be freed from materialist, bourgeois values.

Existentialism, though far more well-known, is more problematic to define and historicize as it has varied and sometimes conflicting connotations and iterations. In terms of this study, my focus is on the existentialist belief (which it shares with the personalists) that a human being is best understood in terms of what he or she *does* and the choices he or she makes as

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<sup>7</sup> Hellman writes,

The fact that the literary and philosophical works of the existentialists Sartre, Camus, Marcel, and Merleau-Ponty remain the most popular French intellectual products of that period in Anglo-Saxon countries leads many to read too much of that popularity back into the period. It is doubtful if the influence of Sartre and his friends' review *Les temps modernes*, for example, equaled that of Emmanuel Mounier's Personalist review, *Esprit*, the only new review of the 1930s to survive the war. In the opinion of Jacques Ellul, 'the *Esprit* effort was fundamental for the French intellectuals of the 1930s. An essential shift took place in all that generation, which is now in its sixties, has been influenced by that movement (more essential in my view than Sartrian existentialism!), as much the Protestants as the Catholics.' Even Sartre himself told Denis de Rougemont one day in New York City towards the end of World War II, 'You Personalists have won . . . everybody in France calls himself a Personalist.' (3)

opposed to a predetermined set of inborn characteristics. Existentialist thought underpins mid-twentieth century beliefs about love with its foundational premise that an individual is free to create his or her own identity and destiny through the choices he or she makes. The lover has agency in being responsible and deliberate in his or her relationships. The contributors associated with existentialism are Simone de Beauvoir and Martin Buber.<sup>8</sup> Buber is often classified as a religious existentialist.<sup>9</sup> As theists (but by no means orthodox and rarely clerical), the religious existentialists were more likely to believe in an inherent meaning and order of the universe than their atheist counterparts. However, like all existentialists, they understood being and meaning (as it is experienced by an individual person) to be primarily subjective and a product of free will. This generation of religious existentialists was a historical phenomenon, as they were concerned with the state of the human spirit and its search for meaning in an increasingly secular and materialist society.

The two remaining intellectuals, Erich Fromm and Simone Weil, were not affiliated with personalism and existentialism. However, where the subjects of human relationships and romantic love are concerned, there are “family resemblances” or “overlapping and interacting sources, themes, interests and motifs” in their discourses on love (Pattison 3).

In these discourses, love is referred to as either *personal* (when the beloved is loved as a unique being for who he or she is) or *impersonal* (when the beloved is loved for what he or she

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<sup>8</sup> In chapter 1 of this dissertation, existentialists José Ortega y Gasset and Sartre will be discussed in relation to Martin Buber. Though not strictly an existentialist, Ortega y Gasset is associated with existentialism because of his affinities with Heidegger and his core thesis of “*yo soy yo y mi circunstancia*” (I am me and my circumstances), the idea that human beings are free, but within the limitations of their particular circumstances. Sartre, despite being the most well-known of the existentialists, had fatalistic views of love that do not coincide with the pattern of beliefs discussed here. In chapter 2, his views are presented in opposition to those of Ortega y Gasset and Buber.

<sup>9</sup> See Pattison’s *Anxious Angels*, Herberg’s *Four Existentialist Theologians* and Michalson’s *Christianity and the Existentialists* for more on the religious existentialists. Other religious existentialists include Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nikolai Berdyaev, Paul Tillich, and Miguel de Unamuno.



represents or for emblematic aspects of his or her being). All of the contributors to this mid-twentieth century belief system contend that romantic love is personal or has a personal dimension. This is a significant feature when one considers that Western thought on love has more often characterized love as impersonal. For example, in Platonic love and medieval courtly love, the beloved channels a light, a beauty, or a goodness that transcends his or her individuality. It is this perfection, this sublime quality, that is the object of love, not the beloved in his or her own right. These are examples of ennobling forms of impersonal love, but there are degrading ones in Western thought as well. With the Marquis de Sade and the story of Don Juan, for example, the identity and personhood of the beloved are inconsequential and the lover's narcissistic quest for pleasure and power is his sole concern. Particularly popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is Schopenhauer and Freud's contention that people *believe* that they have fallen in love with a unique being but in fact they are drawn to the beloved by forces of nature. In all of these examples of impersonal love, whether the beloved is exalted or denigrated, he or she is not loved in his or her entirety, as an integral whole, as he or she is in personal love. The mid-twentieth century philosophers discussed here are not the first to theorize love as a relationship between two unique, inimitable beings. Spinoza, Kierkegaard, and Kant, for example, all discuss love in personal terms.<sup>10</sup> However, the period of time between the 1930s to the early 1960s does distinguish itself in manifesting a clear trend of multiple intellectuals seeking to personalize love. This is not to say that these philosophers and religious thinkers jettison impersonal love. In many cases, they define romantic love as a blend of personal and impersonal love: the lover loves the beloved for who he or she is *and* for a universal quality or

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<sup>10</sup> For more on Kant's views of love, see Singer, vol. 2, pgs. 376-83, for more on Kierkegaard's, see Singer, vol. 3, pgs. 38-49, and for more on Spinoza's, see May, ch. 10.

element (sometimes divine) present in all beings. (Going forward, I will alternate at random between male and female pronouns for ease and convenience.)

The discourse of intellectual history of love also makes frequent use of the concepts of *eros* and *agape* (or *caritas*, its Latinate variant) in defining “true love.” While there are variations on how these terms *eros* and *agape* are understood and used, the following definitions will provide an operational frame of reference. *Eros* often refers to Plato’s philosophy of love, while other times it is used more loosely as a polyvalent Greek concept or in reference to the Greek god of love. In terms of Platonic thought, *eros* is the desire for a beloved in whom the lover recognizes a sublime beauty or transcendent good of divine origin. It is often experienced as an urge for union with, or possession of, the beloved. This may be felt physically, but it is ultimately an expression of the spiritual appetite. Sexual energy is integral to *eros*, but it cannot be reduced to sexual love. *Eros* is also understood as a love outside of one’s control that consumes and enflames one’s passions, leading it to be described as a kind of “madness.” *Agape* (or *caritas*) is a supreme love of divine origin that mortals are capable of channeling and bestowing on other beings. It is often translated as a combination of words—charity, compassion, pity, and loving-kindness—as no single English word suffices. *Agape* does not discriminate, and it is unconditional; it is the love of all of God’s creatures, including one’s enemies, those in an abject state, and wrong-doers. It enables humankind to love the unlovable and—more relevant to romantic love—that which is unlovable within another person. As C.S. Lewis observes in *The Four Loves*, “there is something in each of us that cannot be naturally loved” (133). *Agape* is able to overcome these natural aversions because its divine source is omnipotent.

In developing and articulating their philosophies of love, the intellectuals in question engage with belief systems from the past such as Platonic love and Christian love, but also medieval courtly love, nineteenth-century Romantic love, and twentieth-century scientific and psychoanalytic approaches to love. They do not all interpret these philosophies in the same way, and this leads to some interesting variations in their beliefs. I begin with Nikolai Berdyaev who, in the context of this study, is a transitional figure in that he brings with him certain nineteenth-century attitudes to his early and mid-twentieth century writings on love.

### **Nikolai Berdyaev**

Nikolai Berdyaev, whose work contributes primarily to the senso-spiritual dimension of this belief system, can be seen as an apologist of love, a defender of love against society's efforts to manage or control it. Berdyaev was born into an aristocratic family in Russia in 1874. He was a politically active intellectual whose anti-Bolshevik statements led to his expulsion from his native country. From 1924 until his death in 1948, he lived in exile in Paris, where he befriended personalists Emmanuel Mounier and Jacques Maritain. In his autobiography, *Dream and Reality*, Berdyaev identifies as a personalist, an existentialist, and a religious philosopher. Raised in a secular household, he converted to Russian Orthodoxy in adulthood, though he maintained his own set of beliefs and was critical of many Church doctrines (Herberg 100). At the core of his philosophy was the belief that truth and meaning reside in the free human spirit and in the subjective experience of the individual. His writings consistently challenge the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paradigm that truth and reality were found in the objective, scientifically-defined world.

For Berdyaev and his fellow personalists, the person is a whole, integral being, (“the spirit-soul-body entity”) and personality is that which is unrepeatable, irreplaceable and ultimately unknowable (*Slavery* 32). Differentiating between an “individual” and a “person,” he clarifies that an individual, as a natural being, can be an object of study for a doctor or psychologist, but a person, as a spiritual and sacred being, eludes this scrutiny, as he is pure subjectivity. “Man is a riddle,” writes Berdyaev (20). In his uniqueness, the person “rises above the determinism of the natural world” (32). So powerful is personality, “When a person enters the world, a unique and unrepeatable personality, the world process is broken into and compelled to change its course” (21).<sup>11</sup> The person is always in a dynamic state of becoming, and the realization of one’s personality occurs through the constructive use of freedom and through creative acts. The organizer of the personalist movement, Emmanuel Mounier, clarifies that the idea behind personalism is not to strive to become eccentric or exceptional: “Personalism is not an ethic of ‘great men,’ nor is it a new doctrine of aristocracy, an eclecticism of all the most fascinating spiritual and psychological successes” (*Personalism* 46). Instead, personality can be found in “the hero in the heat of battle, a lover giving himself in love, a creative artist absorbed in his work” (46). In other words, it is “the extraordinary in everyday life” (46). Loving a person of one’s choice is an example of a simple but powerful way in which man exercises his freedom and takes a step towards his self-realization.

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<sup>11</sup> This leads Berdyaev to comment on the irreplaceability of the beloved which will be a theme of Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur*:

Everything individual is irreplaceable. There is a baseness in the replacing of an individual creature which you have loved, permanently recognizing it in the form of personality, by another being. . . . One personality may have traits of resemblance to other personalities, which allow a comparison to be made. But these marks of similarity do not touch that essence of personality, which makes it personality, not personality in general, but this personality. (*Slavery* 23-24)

Berdyayev perceived Russia and (northern) Europe as rife with threats to the freedom, spirit, and uniqueness of the person.<sup>12</sup> *Slavery and Freedom* details the systems, ideas, trends, and super-structures that enslave the personality. These include the “group-think” that comes with political-economic systems (both Russian Bolshevism and Western capitalism) and deterministic theories and ideologies (such as Hegel’s cyclical conceptualization of history). He also perceived the Romantics as hostile to personality because they subscribed to the idea that the individual should surrender to the cosmos. Berdyayev writes, “Fusion with cosmic life does not emancipate personality, it brings about its dissolution and annihilation” (*Slavery* 101). In all of these examples, man’s limitations are presupposed. He is not the primary, active agent in his destiny and his uniqueness is inconsequential.

Where romantic love is concerned, Berdyayev perceived a dehumanizing threat in the form of the socialized world. The socialized world endangers love with its mission to organize families into economic units and mandate marriages where love does not exist. In Berdyayev’s autobiography, he intimates that he belongs to “a generation of Russians who opposed love to the principles of family and domesticity, and who regarded love as alone valid and real” (*Dream* 76). Here, the nineteenth-century opposition to the tyranny of arranged marriage is alive and well with Berdyayev. He writes:

The socialization of sex and love is one of the most disgusting phenomena in human history: it cripples life and causes untold suffering. Family is essentially a social business, subject to the same laws as political and economic phenomena . . . [and] . . . has but little relation to love, either erotic or sexual. . . . Family has been, and still is in a large measure, a means of enslavement: it is a hierarchal institution based on domination and submission. (79)

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<sup>12</sup> He considered Italy to be a more hospitable environment for the free and creative spirit. In *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, Berdyayev gives an account of a year spent in Italy and describes it as a spiritually rich environment, conducive to realizing one’s personality.

For Berdyaev, “marriage without love is immoral” (*Slavery* 237), and divorce should not only be a right, but in the case of lost love, a moral duty (*Dream* 79). Furthermore, extramarital affairs should not be subjected to public or ecclesiastical moralizing. If two people are fortunate to experience true love, then their marital status is of no consequence (79). The true Christian sacrament, argues Berdyaev, should not be marriage but love itself, as a “*mysterion*” (79). Berdyaev also believed that sexual love enslaves human personality. As an expression of love and desire for unity with a particular individual, sex is justified (*Slavery* 236), but as means of procreation (as in a loveless arranged marriage), it is one more depersonalizing force. He writes that sex is “impersonal and contains nothing specifically human, it is a bond between man and the whole animal world” (224).<sup>13</sup>

According to Berdyaev, true love is spiritual, and it needs to be unshackled from the socialized world and the necessities of biology. Love belongs to a “different world and it is a break-through into this world; it belongs to infinite subjectivity, to the world of freedom” (*Slavery* 234). It is both impersonal and personal, as it is simultaneously the love of the divine beauty and goodness within the beloved and the “unique, unrepeatably and irreplaceable person” (*Dream* 79). Furthermore, real love can only exist if it contains both *eros* and *caritas*. The Platonic *eros*, or “ascending-love,” is an attraction upwards, rapture, it leads to creative ecstasy” (225). However, the Platonic *eros* cannot stand alone as the defining element of love. This is because “Not a single concrete being corresponds with the beauty of the world of ideas in the Platonic sense,” writes Berdyaev (55). He calls thus on the “descending-love” of the Christian *caritas* to love the living, breathing, and imperfect beloved. Berdyaev contends that Christian dogma has erroneously characterized *caritas* as impersonal. The Church has generalized the

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<sup>13</sup> The impersonal nature of the procreative instinct will emerge as a theme in the discussion about Schopenhauer and Varda’s *Le Bonheur* in chapter 4.

object of love to be the “impersonal neighbor who is suffering and in need of help” (*Slavery* 57). Christian doctrine turns *caritas* “into ‘good works,’ into practical virtue,” and thus “contains an element within it which is degrading to the dignity of the other man” (*Slavery* 57). For *caritas* to be the active ingredient that balances out the impersonal *eros* in true love, *caritas* needs to be understood as compassionate love for a particular being. Only with this personalized form of *caritas* can true love come to being: “Real love finds the personality and recognizes it, attaches itself to everything unchangeably individual in it and affirms it for eternity, that is the meaning of love” (225).

Berdyaev recognizes his ideal form of love more often in literature than in philosophy, religious doctrine, or real life. It is only literature, he contends, that has “defended the right and dignity of love” (79). Beginning with the poetry of the medieval troubadours and persisting through Western literary tradition, works like *Tristan and Isolde* and *Romeo and Juliet* have defied *socialized* love and attested to the liberty of love. In doing so, they have “rendered a service of profound religious significance to mankind” (*Dream* 79). Literature also reveals the relationship between love and death and thereby its intensity and power. There is a tragic but wondrous element to both love and death in that they offer direct exposure to the infinite. Love, Berdyaev claims, is a desire for fullness, a union with the divine, and therein lies its “deadly sting” (*Slavery* 227). This is frightening to the earth dweller who wants to cocoon himself in creature comforts to shield himself from the mysterious unknown. However, this feeling of insecurity should be embraced; this is the intensity of the spiritual life. He writes in 1947: “Today everything has become easy, but less tense and significant” (235). Now young couples, even without the encouragement of their families, take a prudent and sensible approach to love and marriage with the aim of securing financial stability and ensuring social mobility.

Capitalism, as a way of thinking, as a worldview, has seeped into the collective psyche and influenced the most personal of decisions. Berdyaev writes: “Nowadays marriage has acquired not a compulsorily commercial, but a freely commercial character. This is part of the rationalization of life which is taking place in every sphere” (236). The lover’s desire to love freely, the subject of so many nineteenth-century novelists, has been curbed by the “bourgeois spirit”—that is, a preoccupation with comfort and security and other small-minded, mundane matters (“Bourgeois Mind” 11). Berdyaev contends that true love is beset by tragedies and paradoxes, and it “presupposes hindrances and conflict.” Love has very little to do with comfort and security. “Without spiritual exertion,” he continues, “it readily becomes insipid and inane” (*Slavery* 235).

Berdyaev devotes a few paragraphs of his writings on love to the subject of women. He has conflicted views about the opposite sex, finding women to be inferior in some ways and equal in others. As mentioned previously, Berdyaev believed that human efforts towards self-realization are encumbered by the animalistic instinct to procreate. This is especially true for women, Berdyaev contends, as women are bodily creatures, tied to sexuality and motherhood. He writes: “In man’s nature sex is partial, in women’s nature sex is complete” (*Slavery* 232). Men are able to compartmentalize their sexuality, so they are in a better position to realize their personalities, while women are more vulnerable to the depersonalizing forces of Nature. Furthermore, Berdyaev observes that women are often “jealous,” “tyrannical” (*Dream* 81), and “despotic” in love (*Slavery* 225), but he acknowledges that this is “due, in measure, to having been deprived of some of the most elementary rights ever since the patriarchal system prevailed over the matriarchal” (*Dream* 81). In his own life, he had, by many accounts, a long and happy marriage to a woman of great intellect, and he had a profoundly spiritual friendship with his



wife's sister, who lived with them. He writes, "I have had, on the whole, more intimate and friendly relations with women than with men: it even seemed to me (or was this mere illusion?) that women understood me better than men" (81). Regardless of this personal experience, his critical observations of women as a whole offer little hope for a realization of his understanding of true love on any notable scale, lending credence to his claim that true love is a "rare flower" (*Dream* 79).

Berdyaev contributes to the senso-spiritual dimension of this mid-twentieth century belief system by arguing that love is a free, spiritual force that is incompatible with the socialized world. Like many nineteenth-century Russian and European aristocrats, he rebels against arranged marriages and the idea that economic and political factors should in any way dictate or influence the course of love. Though social norms change over his lifetime, he continues to perceive love as endangered by the hegemony of bourgeois values, which lead people to prioritize security and social advancement over love. He perceives twentieth-century Europe as a spiritually impoverished environment, offering meager sustenance for true love to thrive and flourish. He states that "the climate of the world is not favorable to real love, too often it is deadly to it" (*Slavery* 225). For Berdyaev, the answer is in exercising one's freedom, which requires great spiritual strength and struggle. Loving freely is a vehicle for becoming a realized person because it is a pure, unhindered expression of one's true self. To compromise in love or to stay in a loveless marriage is to regress spiritually and to forfeit one's progress towards self-realization, a fate to be avoided at all costs.

## **Martin Buber**

Martin Buber was a social philosopher, religious existentialist, and Jewish theologian whose work focused on man as a relational being. His work is at the core of the moral dimension of this mid-twentieth century belief system about love. Born in 1878 in Vienna, he and Berdyaev are of an earlier generation than the remaining contributors to this belief system. Both had the benefit of observing society transition from the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century. Buber studied and taught in Germany before emigrating to Palestine in 1938, where he lived until his death in 1965. In Palestine, he worked to promote a communitarian way of life and was part of an effort to create a binational state of Jews and Arabs. He remained actively involved in European philosophical discourse, engaging with Scheler, Heidegger, Sartre, Bergson, and Weil, among others. His influences include Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche (Herberg, *Introduction* 39). His philosophy is also inspired by Hasidic Judaism, particularly the belief that love of all beings on earth is also the love of God, as opposed to dominant strains of Judeo-Christian belief that separate the two forms of love and rank ascetic, religious love above human love. Buber contends that man's highest moment is when he is connected to and in dialogue with other beings. All of a person's intentionality should be directed towards being in relation with others, for this is all that truly matters in human existence. For Buber, romantic love is dynamic, and it develops over a lifetime, an idea that will also be essential to the philosophies of Denis de Rougemont and Erich Fromm.

Buber's most famous and foundational work, *I and Thou* (1923), discusses two relational modes, the *I-It* and the *I-Thou*. In the *I-It* mode, a person perceives only a part of the other's being. He may place him in a category or consider him in terms of his function or use. The *I-It* is the daily, default mode of relation in which we operate and conduct business. It can be neutral or

malevolent. In the *I-Thou* mode, a man sees the whole, integral person in his unity. The relation is mutual and unmediated, and it exists in the present moment; it is an encounter. He writes, “No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*. . . . No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*. . . . Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about” (11-12). All human beings vacillate between these two modes. However, it requires awareness and willingness, along with God’s grace, to shift one’s perception of the other from *It* to *Thou*.

The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relationship to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting. (11)

As Buber states here, we are changed by the *I-Thou* encounter. Each encounter with the other is a node in our development and realization. While the *I-Thou* is the aspirational mode, Buber acknowledges that it is not practical or possible to always live in the present. He observes, however, that in the twentieth century, there is a disproportionate tendency to function almost exclusively within the *I-It* mode, the danger of which is no less profound than the loss of one’s humanity. He states: “And in all the seriousness of truth, hear this, without *It*, man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man” (34). Buber is careful not to equate the *I-Thou* relational mode with love. The *I-Thou* is certainly essential to love, and in loving another being, one ought to seek and be receptive to the possibility for *I-Thou* encounters. However, love is ultimately a process that unfolds over the duration of one’s relationship as people change and come into being (Singer 3: 336).

Whereas *I and Thou* is about human relationships generally, Buber’s 1947 book, *Between Man and Man*, addresses romantic love and marriage specifically. He distinguishes between two types of romantic love, the “Eros of monologue” and the “Eros of dialogue.” The Eros of

monologue is the “lame-winged” *eros*. It is a love fueled by narcissism, characterized by “mirrors and mirrorings”:

There a lover stomps around and is in love only with his passion. There one is wearing his differentiated feelings like medal-ribbons. . . . There one is displaying his ‘power.’ There one is preening himself with borrowed vitality. . . . There one is experimenting. And so on and so on—all the manifold monologists with their mirrors, in the apartment of the most intimate dialogue! (29-30)

The Eros of monologue constitutes a form of impersonal love, as the beloved’s identity and personhood is secondary to the feeling that gratifies the lover’s vanity or fulfills some deficit.

Without mutuality and the presence of the *Thou*, this feeling does not constitute authentic love.

Love is much more powerful than a feeling, and it is more powerful than man: “Feelings dwell in man, but man dwells in love” (*I and Thou* 14). The Eros of dialogue, on the other hand, does belong to authentic love, and it is about true communion with a particular beloved. He writes, “Those who are loyal to the strong-winged Eros of dialogue know the beloved being. They experience his particular life in simple presence—not as a thing seen and touched, but from the innervations to his movements, from the ‘inner’ to his ‘outer’” (29). The Eros of dialogue is about understanding and “hearing” the beloved in his silent presence.

In *Between Man and Man*, Buber defends love and marriage against Søren Kierkegaard’s assertion that they obstruct one’s relationship to God. Though Kierkegaard offers a formulation of love and marriage akin to what we find in this mid-twentieth century belief system, he ultimately places the love of God in a higher echelon than the love of human beings.<sup>14</sup> True to his creed, he famously called off his engagement with Regina Olsen, declaring that their marriage would be a distraction from his faith. Buber argues that, on the contrary, love of another human is the pathway to God: “Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow creature, by

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<sup>14</sup> For more on Kierkegaard’s philosophy of love, see Singer, vol. 3, pgs. 38-49.

means of them and with them find God. . . . God wants us to come to him by means of the Reginas he has created and not by renunciation of them” (52). There are dangers, Buber acknowledges, of marriage dragging one down into finitude. However, “our hope for salvation is forged on this very danger, for our human way to the infinite leads only through fulfilled finitude” (61).

Fundamental to Buber’s philosophy is the idea that God is wholly present on earth in every thought, feeling, and relation. This is opposed to the premise underlying Platonic love, courtly love, and Kierkegaard’s philosophy that divinity resides in the outer reaches of the heavens and that one’s spiritual objective is to approach or unite with the divine. Irving Singer observes that Buber’s belief

reflects Hasidic ideas about the uniformity of love. As against Christian or Jews who stressed the differences between a love of God or love of mankind in order to subordinate merely human love to a spiritual or ascetic type of religious love, Buber enunciates the Hasidic belief that no such distinction can be defended. He insists that all love is love for God inasmuch as God is present when we truly love our fellow man. And however far our carnal loves may fall, they too must be understood as an attempt to love God as he reveals himself in creation. (3: 337)

This premise heightens the value of romantic love substantially. Love is not an obstruction to God, an intermediary step to God, or a simulation of God’s love; it is the love of God Himself. There are two other noteworthy milestones in European intellectual history of love that pave the way for Buber. The first is the contribution of the seventeenth-century, Jewish philosopher, Baruch Spinoza. He puts forth the notion that God and nature are the same entity. With the idea that God *is* nature, the natural love between human beings becomes the love of God.<sup>15</sup> This premise allowed for the second milestone, nineteenth-century Romanticism, to glorify the

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<sup>15</sup> Prior to Spinoza, theologians and philosophers had taken steps in that direction: with *caritas*, one could love the natural world as a creation of God and with Neo-Platonism, one could love the natural world as an emanation of God. However, it was Spinoza who would unify them absolutely (Singer 2: 291).

inherent goodness of romantic love. Whereas courtly love exalted the beloved, the Romantics exalted love itself. With the Romantics, Singer writes, “Love retained its metaphysical import but emancipated itself from the search for prior perfection that had dominated ancient and medieval philosophy. Love did not require the pursuit of an ideal that was separate from, or logically independent of, experience” (2: 292). Buber’s philosophy departs from Romanticism in a number of ways, but the idea of bringing God down to earth and unifying Him with nature is a major paradigm shift in Western thought that facilitated Buber’s formulation of love.

According to Buber, the spiritual path one takes in marriage is to affirm and continually reaffirm another’s being. The beloved is wholly other; he

does not have merely a different mind, or way of thinking or feeling, or a different conviction or attitude, but also has a different perception of the world, a different recognition and order of meaning, a different touch from the regions of existence, a different faith, a different soil. (*Between* 62)

Buber goes further to state that “this otherness of his is what I mean, because I mean him; I confirm it; I wish his otherness to exist, because I wish his particular being to exist. This is the basic principle of marriage” (*Between* 62). Denis de Rougemont will speak of *accepting* the beloved and his limitations. For Buber, the implication that the lover should in any way tolerate the beloved’s difference or adjust to the beloved is neither an indication of religious charity nor moral fortitude. It fails to grasp the understanding that the beloved’s otherness is a touch of grace, that it allows one to “glimpse eternity” (33). He continues, “Nothing is present for him except this one being, but he implicates the whole world” (*I and Thou* 32). For Buber, love is personal, but it is not finite. God and the spiritual world reside in the encounter of two beings, two complete mysteries unto themselves. In the context of the lifelong bond of marriage, its power and significance is the “steady experiencing of the life-substance of the other as other” (*Between* 62). Notably, Buber does not speak of *agape*. His conceptualization of love is less

about bestowing God's love on the beloved (in which case God would be a distinct and unreachable entity) than it is about experiencing the presence of God in the relationship with the beloved, who is present in everyone and everything.

Buber's work also contributes to the recurring theme of vocation in this mid-twentieth century belief system, albeit indirectly. In *Good and Evil*, Buber aligns purpose and direction with "Good" and a lack of direction with "Evil." Without direction, you are in a "vortex," clutching at passing objects and making what Buber calls "pseudo-decisions" (*Writings* 91). To do good and to be good, one must unify all the parts of one's being and with great strength and will, decide upon a direction or a vocation that incorporates all aspects of one's being. It will be philosopher Simone de Beauvoir and author Natalia Ginzburg who will forge the link between vocation and interpersonal relationships. Beauvoir discusses vocation in terms of a woman's need to achieve independence and equality as a prerequisite for authentic love, while Ginzburg's novella *È stato così* and her essay "The Little Virtues" demonstrate that by finding a vocation, you avoid the danger of interdependency. With a vocation, the lover has a sense of meaning, and she becomes a strong and stable anchor, giving the beloved freedom to pursue his own interests. Buber's contribution to the moral dimension of this belief system is that he localizes human relationships at the center of human existence. While Berdyaev and Beauvoir focus on how love and relationships are factors in the pursuit of an individual's meaning and purpose, Buber makes the human relationship the primary locus and pathway for self-realization. By way of a map or guideline, he puts forth the *I-Thou* encounter as the aspirational mode of existence and then defines love as the lifelong journey from encounter to encounter and the space between.

## Simone Weil

In some respects, Weil is an outlier of this belief system, as she disagreed fundamentally with personalist thought and idealized Platonic and medieval love. However, her concept of friendship-love does pertain, which I will elaborate on presently. Simone Weil was born in Paris in 1909, a full generation after Berdyaev and Buber, and died at the age of thirty-four in 1943. She began attending *École Normale Supérieure* at the Sorbonne in the same year as Simone de Beauvoir, soon after it began admitting women.<sup>16</sup> She became a teacher, writer, and activist, fighting for labor rights and supporting the French resistance movement during World War II. She was raised in a Jewish, agnostic household, but in her thirties, she had a series of religious experiences that led to her spiritual (but unofficial) conversion to Catholicism. Out of compassion for the poor, she committed herself to self-abnegation and service, and her early death was due to lack of nutrition and over-exertion. Her devotion to the suffering, her practice of chastity, and her interest in mysticism have led some to depict her as an anachronistic, saint-like figure.

As previously mentioned, Weil was at odds with the personalist orientation of some of the contributors here. In her essay, “The Person and the Sacred” (written in 1942), Weil states “there is something amiss with the vocabulary of the modern trend of thought known as Personalism” (*An Anthology* 50).<sup>17</sup> Her critique pertains to the sacredness of man; she contends

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<sup>16</sup> Weil and Beauvoir were two of three women admitted to the Sorbonne that year. Beauvoir and Weil make for an interesting comparison as their life paths and views of love do intersect, while their approaches to philosophy are very distinct. In the introduction to an anthology of Simone Weil’s work, Siân Miles reports the following illustrative interaction between Weil and Beauvoir: “Simone de Beauvoir, who met [Simone Weil] as a student, was impressed by her capacity to feel the suffering of others. In reply to Simone de Beauvoir’s suggestion that the main problem in life was not to make people happy but to discover the reason for their existence, Simone Weil said it was easy to see she had never been hungry” (7).

<sup>17</sup> Weil goes on to discredit the personalists by stating that they believe that personality is sacred “because of the social consideration bestowed on it.” Social consideration is of great importance to the personalists, Weil observes,



that man is sacred neither for his personality nor his uniqueness, but for what is impersonal in him, a core humility that is oriented towards the good and believes that justice will be done to him. She writes:

At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnesses, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being. The good is the only source of the sacred. There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to it. (*An Anthology* 51-52)

Though her definition of the sacred is fairly specific, it is part and parcel of the concept of *caritas*. All beings are loved by God (and ought to be loved by humans) merely for existing, for being His creations and not for what makes them distinct from one another.

Not only does Weil critique the personalist idea that the uniqueness of the person is sacred, she defends the long tradition of impersonal love in Western culture (i.e. Platonic and medieval courtly love). In Weil's essay, "The Forms of the Implicit Love of God" (written in 1942), she describes love as follows: "Carnal love in all its forms, from the highest, that is to say true marriage or platonic love, down to the lowest, even to debauchery, has the beauty of the world as its object" (*Waiting* 108). When someone sees beauty in another human being, they have transferred their love of beauty to the individual. Their love for the particular beloved is imagined, for it is really "universal beauty for which we yearn" (108). She continues, "If carnal Love on all levels goes more or less directly towards beauty, . . . it is because beauty in a human being enables the imagination to see in him something like an equivalent of the order of the world" (108). In beauty, we witness the miracle of "divine wisdom in creation" (103). Described

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because many of them are writers, "for whom it is part of the profession to have or hope to acquire a name and reputation" (*An Anthology* 59).

thus, Weil's understanding of romantic love is similar to that of Plato, as it is expressed in *Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*.

In rejecting a core tenet of personalism and in upholding impersonal Platonic love, she would, it seems, be inclined to oppose the concept of personal love that characterizes this mid-twentieth century belief system. However, her beliefs about friendship-love and its implications for other types of human love complicate that supposition. In "The Forms of the Implicit Love of God," Weil writes,

The love of our neighbor, the love of the beauty of the world and the love of religion are in a sense quite impersonal loves. . . . There is however a personal and human love which is pure and which enshrines an intimation and a reflection of divine love. This is friendship, provided we keep strictly to the true meaning of the word. (*Waiting* 130-31)

Friendship begins with a personal affinity for another being. It is natural, Weil concedes, to be drawn towards, or feel a connection with a particular human being. However, "these bonds of affection" are tainted by "the iron hardness of necessity" (132). When one needs another being, there is an imbalance of power, a "wish to please" or to "dominate" (135). This can deteriorate to hatred, "for we hate what we are dependent upon and what depends on us" (*Waiting* 137).<sup>18</sup> However, friendship, as an action, as something one *does*, corrects this imbalance. Friendship, as Weil defines it, is the freedom one bestows on the beloved; it is the respect for his separateness. It is the resistance against the urge to unite with him, to share the same opinion or way of thinking. In *Gravity and Grace*, she states:

To soil is to modify, it is to touch. The beautiful is that which we cannot wish to change. To assume power over is to soil. To possess is to soil. To love purely is to consent to distance, it is to adore the distance between ourselves and that which we love. (*An Anthology* 273)

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<sup>18</sup> Dependency on the beloved will also be a theme in Ginzburg's and Beauvoir's works.

The ability to bestow freedom on a loved one is far from a natural inclination. As it is impossible to defy the gravitational pull towards the beloved alone, the act of friendship requires divine grace. (In other words, when the lover does “consent to distance,” God’s love is enacted in her.) For Weil, friendship is not on the same plane as amorous love or filial love. It is a higher form of love, a love of divine substance that has the power to transform lesser, human “bonds of affection.” In this scenario (which occurs rarely, in Weil's estimation) the lover steps back to give the beloved her freedom, and it is this “unmodified,” independent and particular being that the lover appreciates and admires. Here, romantic love, a mixture of carnal love and the love of beauty, has the potential to be elevated to friendship.

Weil sees little evidence of friendship-love existing in her own culture and epoch. She looks to the past, to late medieval Languedoc in southern France as an exemplar. In her admiration of courtly love, she is less focused on the impersonal dimension of the beloved Lady as the vessel of chaste beauty and goodness than on their practice of love. She writes, “It is simply a patient understanding toward the loved person and an appeal for that person’s consent” (qtd. in Bell 65). Courtly love is a formalized and cultivated practice of friendship-love in which carnal love between human beings is transformed by grace.

Weil wrote admiringly of medieval Languedoc on multiple occasions. She called it the “true Renaissance” that preceded the “false Renaissance” of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy (qtd. in Bell 67).<sup>19</sup> Weil was specifically interested in the Cathars, a Gnostic revival sect that emerged in the twelfth century and whose beliefs found expression in troubadour poetry. She was particularly keen on the spiritual atmosphere they created through their devotion:

No thought attains its fullest existence unless it is incarnated in a human environment, and by environment I mean something open to the world around it,

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<sup>19</sup> Weil believed that the Italian Renaissance was false because with humanism at its center, it turned away from spirituality and God.

something which is steeped in the surrounding society and is in contact with the whole of it, and not simply a closed circle of disciples, around a master. (*An Anthology* 21)<sup>20</sup>

She further praised the Cathars for maintaining “a living link” to the “traditions of India, Persia, Egypt, Greece,” . . . “traditions which offer us inexhaustible spiritual treasures” (qtd. in Bell 68). Weil’s veneration of twelfth-century Languedoc recalls Berdyaev’s admiration for the spiritually rich atmosphere of the Middle Ages, the type of environment he believed to be hospitable to true love. Weil joins Berdyaev in contributing to the senso-spiritual dimension of this belief system by advocating for a spiritualized culture that is hospitable for love.

Weil’s primary contribution to this mid-twentieth century belief system—love as the respect of the beloved as a separate being— resembles Buber’s belief that the lover should affirm the beloved’s otherness.<sup>21</sup> This argument is a rejection of the idea that lovers spiritually merge into one being, an idea popular with many nineteenth-century Romantics. In the second volume of *The Nature of Love*, Irving Singer cites Coleridge, Schlegel, Shelley, Novalis, and Keats as poets and intellectuals that all spoke of love as identification and fusion with the beloved. In his poetry and letters, Shelley uses the words “interwoven,” “mingle” and “interpenetrate” in relation to love (290), while Keats writes in *Endymion*, “Melting into [love’s] radiance, we blend,/Mingle, and so become a part of it” (291). The merging of two souls and bodies is an extension of the Romantic belief that God and nature are one entity. To merge with a natural being is to fuse mystically with the divine and surrender to the cosmos. In the case of the Romantics, Singer writes: “the Romantic lover had only to seek love itself, which is to say that the experience of love meant more to him than the attributes of any specific object” (292). For

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<sup>20</sup> She is referring here to the difference between religion and philosophy.

<sup>21</sup> Though they agree on this subject, Buber critiques Weil’s beliefs about the annihilation of the self and her rejection of Judaism in his essay “On Henri Bergson and Simone Weil” (*Writings* 306-14).

Buber and Weil (and this will also be true of Simone de Beauvoir) merging with the beloved is to lose something vital and precious. With merging and identification come a loss of identity and a loss of freedom. For Buber, God is found in affirming the difference of another being and in the communion (not union) of lover and beloved. This opposition to merging constitutes a key feature in this mid-twentieth century belief system about love. In true love, lovers are not meant to lose themselves in one another, instead, authentic love is predicated on maintaining separateness.

### **Denis de Rougemont**

Unlike Weil and Berdyaev, Denis de Rougemont saw medieval courtly love not as an inspiration but as a malignant source of modern day pathologies. In his theory of love, he attacks passion and advocates for commitment. Like Berdyaev and Fromm, he warns against the threat of a consumerist mindset infiltrating the twentieth-century culture of romance. Rougemont was a Swiss cultural theorist and philosopher, born in 1906 in the Neuchâtel region of Switzerland. His upbringing as the son of a Protestant pastor is reflected in his writings about love (St. Ouen 16). In 1930, he moved to Paris, where he became a prominent member of the personalist movement. In addition to co-founding the personalist journal, *Esprit*, he also directed the journal *Je Sers*, which published works by Berdyaev, Karl Barth, and José Ortega y Gasset. Upon returning to Switzerland, he founded the Gothard League, which opposed a neutral stance towards the looming threat of German fascism. He was expelled from his native country for outspoken criticisms of Hitler, and he spent much of the Second World War in the United States. In 1945, he returned to Switzerland, where he contributed to the formation of European federalist

governing bodies and cultural institutes. In addition to his interests in personalism and federalism, he turned frequently to the theme of romantic love in his writings.

In 1938, Denis de Rougemont wrote the widely read and controversial book, *Love in the Western World*, partly in response to the “breakdown of marriage” (defined as a rise in infidelity and the divorce rate, as well as a general decline in reverence for marriage as an institution and as a sacrament) (17).<sup>22</sup> He attributes this phenomenon to a Western obsession with passion. Many Westerners, he argues, are not in love with a specific person, but with the feeling of being in love. Furthermore, this passion is not a happy love, but a love which is forbidden, obstructed, doomed to failure, and accompanied by suffering. He characterizes the adoration of passion in Western society as quasi-religious in nature. He writes,

Our eagerness for both novels and films with their identical type of plot . . . our desire for ‘escape’, which a mechanical boredom exacerbates—everything within us about us glorifies passion. Hence the prospect of a passionate experience has come to seem the promise that we are about to live more fully and more intensely. We look upon passion as a transfiguring force, something beyond delight and pain, an ardent beatitude. (16)

The breakdown in marriage “reflects a confused strife in our lives as a result of the co-existence of two moral systems” (277). The first, he calls a “middle-class” morality which, in valuing social order, respects the social value of marriage (277). The other morality—the one of passion and romance, or the “cult of Eros,” as he sometimes calls it—runs rampant in Western media, literature, film, theater and art (73). This latter morality is in large part to blame for extramarital affairs, a casual attitude towards divorce, and a pervasive feeling of discontent about the monotony of marriage.

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<sup>22</sup> This book was controversial both in terms of its arguments and its scholarship. The 1954 revision (the source referred to here) includes De Rougemont’s responses to criticisms of the original 1938 publication. Over the course of his life, he wrote a number of articles, delivered speeches and gave interviews on the subject of romantic love, some in response to the attention he received for *Love in the Western World*. Of the philosophers discussed here, he was the most prolific on the topic of love.

Much of Rougemont's book is devoted to a complex theory that details the historical origin of these two moralities. He argues that the first form ("middle-class morals") is a diluted, secularized version of orthodox Christian morals. The second form (the cult of Eros) is a bastardized and tempered version of Catharist morals, which denigrate sex *and* marriage (because they are worldly concerns) and venerate death (in order to unite with God). Rougemont contends that despite the fact that the Cathars were extinguished during the Crusades, their values have persisted through the Western literary and artistic tradition and continue to have influence to the present day. The Catharist belief system plays out in the myth of *Tristan and Isolde* in which the young knight, Tristan, betrays his uncle (the king) by carrying on a lifelong affair with Isolde (the queen) and the story ends with the lovers' tragic deaths. Rougemont believes that this is not a story about the dilemma between duty and love, as it is commonly thought, but a symbolic Catharist text about a desire for death and mystical union with God. Over time, readers unfamiliar with the Catharist symbolism have misinterpreted this tale to be an ode to passionate love, a love more powerful than the social obligation of marriage. Rougemont believes that this myth has continuously held sway over the European imagination and has been a template for a thousand more stories about passion and infidelity. In this extended and convoluted manner, *Tristan and Isolde* has contributed to the present day breakdown of marriage.

Rougemont observes that the breakdown of marriage is particularly acute in the twentieth century. With the shift from arranged marriages to love-marriages, many of the "social compulsions" of marriage have become obsolete (280), and the individual has unprecedented latitude and freedoms in regards to love.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, "the success of any given marriage

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<sup>23</sup> Here Rougemont expresses some ambivalence about this historical development:

depends on an individual notion of the nature of happiness” (280). This degree of subjectivity is a danger in its own right, as marriage should be secured by the binding vow, not subjected to personal whims and desires. Most recently, happiness has increasingly come to be defined and standardized by consumer culture. Advertising conveys the message that happiness is something that is “*acquired*” through the consumption of goods (280): “The consequence of this propaganda is that we are obsessed by the notion of facile happiness and at the same time are rendered incapable of being happy” (280). Our appetite for the pleasure of novelty has become insatiable and this consumerist greed has transferred to expectations in love. The modern person’s “capacity for boredom” is “almost morbid,” and he or she combats this unhappiness with the allure and excitement of a passionate extra-marital affair (280). Once the conquest is consummated, however, the new beloved loses his or her luster. Because the Western cult of passion dictates that one is attracted to the *absence* and *unattainability* of the beloved, “there is a deliberate effort to renew both obstacle and struggle” and the pursuit begins again (284). Furthermore, Rougemont observes that marketing has fashioned contemporary sensibilities regarding what is attractive or beautiful about the beloved. Rougemont writes:

nowadays our sheep-like aesthetic tastes exert a greater influence than ever before, and they are being fostered by every possible technical and sometimes political means. A feminine type thus recedes more and more from personal imponderables and is selected in Hollywood or by the State. This influence of standardized beauty . . . preordains who shall be an appropriate object of passion (and to this extent the object is drained of personality); . . . In short, the present so-called ‘freedom’ of passion is a question of advertising power. A man who imagines he is yearning for his ‘type’ or a woman for ‘hers’, is having his or her private wishes determined by fashionable and commercial influences; i.e. by novelty. (283)

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“When marriage was established on social conventions and hence, from the individual standpoint, on chance, it had at least as much likelihood of success as marriage based on ‘love’ alone. But the whole of western evolution goes from tribal wisdom to individual risk; it is irreversible, and it must be approved to the extent it tends to make a collective and native destiny depend on a personal decision.” (294)



This novelty provides an ephemeral happiness, one that can only be recouped by the continual search and pursuit of a new romantic interest. The implication here is that the lover can “shop” for the beloved and just as easily dispose of him when he no longer brings her happiness (a theme which will be explored in Varda’s film, *Le Bonheur*). This is all part of a newfound cultural expectation of happiness and the belief that one acquires and fine-tunes this happiness through consumer choices.

Indeed, a strain of this mid-twentieth century belief system as a whole derives from a concern about the depersonalizing effects of capitalist and consumer culture. As previously mentioned, Berdyaev also made the observation that the culture of capitalism affects attitudes and behaviors in the personal domain of love and marriage. Berdyaev noted that the rise of the bourgeoisie and the hegemony of its value system have led to an excessively pragmatic approach to marriage. Erich Fromm will also comment on the relationship between love and capitalism, arguing that capitalism creates a society of consumers and producers, first, and human beings, second. As a result, love and love-relationships are marginalized. (This idea is dramatized in Ermanno Olmi’s films from the early 1960s and discussed in chapter 3). Berdyaev, Fromm, and Rougemont all fear that in the twentieth century, love has been demoted within the Western hierarchy of values.

Rougemont devotes the closing pages of *Love in the Western World* to a prescription for salvaging marriage from its debilitated state. First, he contends, we must all agree upon and operate from the premise that marriage is a pledge and that it is “an institution set up to be lasting—or it is meaningless” (292). Secondly, it must be understood that marriage is also a “wager” (303). Marriage will always be an irrational decision, simply because the lives of two beings together will always be unpredictable. There are no guarantees of happiness. One’s

marriage vow is a leap of faith, followed by the daily, patient practice of upholding it. Thirdly, the beloved has to be accepted as he or she is, with the understanding that everyone has limitations. We must move beyond the romantic notion of an “ideal” woman or man, a fabrication we have inherited from the medieval troubadours and the nineteenth-century poets. Instead, marriage is the “acceptance of one’s fellow creature, a willingness to take the other as he or she is in his or her intimate particularity” (309). Fourth, we must upend our contemporary attitude that fidelity is prudish and bourgeois. Writes Rougemont: “Fidelity is extremely *unconventional*. . . . For fidelity is not in the least a form of conservatism, but rather a construction” (307). It is not mere restraint from temptation, it is “active,” and its objective is “the good of the beloved.” A person is “made” by fidelity, and the beloved is “the summons to be created” (310).

Ultimately, Rougemont offers up a vision of marriage that is about reasonable expectations and spiritual growth. With a recommitment to the idea that marriage is a promise that one keeps for a lifetime, marriage will require hard work, self-discipline, and patience. For the Christian, this is an opportunity. Marriage is a productive space for becoming a better human being.<sup>24</sup> For Rougemont, the salvation of marriage as an institution and a sacrament depends upon the triumph of *agape* over *eros*. The primary ingredient of every marriage should not be passion, but should stem from the Christian tenet, “love thy neighbor.” *Eros*, through the rapture of passion, wants to transport us to the heavens, while *agape* wants us to love one another on earth. *Eros* also wants us to believe that love is “irresistible” (314), more powerful than the human will (and thus a legitimate excuse for breaking the marriage vow), while *agape* is the human will to fulfill a promise: “love actually does pledge one for the rest of one’s life, and it

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<sup>24</sup> Even Berdyaev, who writes that socialized love (i.e. family life and marriage) “cripples life and causes untold suffering,” agrees that it can also be “a sphere for the exercise of *agape* or charity” (*Dream* 79).

exacts nothing less than this pledge in order to disclose its real nature” (313). Rougemont does not advocate for eradicating *eros* from the Western psyche. Not only is that impossible, he observes, it is also ill-advised: “to doom passion in theory can only be to try to suppress one pole of our creative tension” (320). Instead, *eros* needs to be tamed by *agape*, put in his proper place in the divine order, and “in ceasing to be a god, he ceases to be a demon” (312).

Here we note a significant distinction between Rougemont and the intellectuals discussed thus far. Rougemont is unique in arguing that *agape* is the primary ingredient of romantic love.<sup>25</sup> Rougemont’s assertion of the primacy of *agape* could be accounted for by his Protestant background. In the 1930s, Anders Nygren, Bishop of Lund, wrote *Eros and Agape*, which clarified the Protestant position on love. He argues that *eros* is the origin of natural loves, all of which are motivated by need and want. As the desire or longing for the beloved, *eros* is ultimately a self-interested love while *agape* is selfless. Nygren writes:

[*Agape*] has nothing to do with desire and longing. It ‘seeketh not its own,’ does not ascend like *Eros* to secure advantages for itself, but consists in sacrifice and self-giving. And it bears this character ultimately because its prototype is God’s own love. The human is not raised here to the Divine, but the Divine, in compassionate love, descends to the human. (qtd. in Hazo 118)

Nygren contends that Catholic theologians and Church doctrine have erroneously attempted to reconcile *eros* and *agape* (Hazo 124). Beginning in the fourth century, Augustine had argued that *all* types of love (even the love of humanity) are self-interested in some way. Seen in this light, *agape* is an evolved form of *eros*. As a part of his reform efforts in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther insisted that *eros* and *agape* are mutually exclusive types of love and that *agape* is the

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<sup>25</sup> For Berdyaev, love is made up of equal parts *eros* and *agape*—*eros* being an upwardly directed uncontrollable passion and *agape* being the cantilever that brings *eros* into equilibrium. In defining romantic love, Weil uses neither term in “The Forms of the Implicit Love of God,” but what she describes is essentially the Platonic *eros*. Friendship, which like *agape* is of divine origin, is an additional ingredient that optimizes but does not define romantic love. Buber discusses *eros* in terms of the “Eros of dialogue” (not the Platonic *eros*) and makes no mention of *agape*.

only love that should concern Christians. Rougemont's aspiration that "*eros* be rescued by *agape*" (311) is spoken from this Protestant platform, established by Luther and reasserted by Nygren in the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout *Love in the Western World*, Rougemont weaves in commentary about women. Like Berdyaev, he is ambivalent about gender equality. On the one hand, he presents a view of women consistent with his personalist philosophy. He seeks to eradicate mythological archetypes of women that idealize and depersonalize them. Rougemont writes: "A man gives evidence of his love for a woman by treating her as a completely human person, not as if she were the spirit of the legend—half-goddess, half bacchante, a compound of sex and dreams" (313). He continues:

A steadfast man no longer strives to see a woman as merely an attractive or desirable body, as merely an unintended movement or a fascinating expression; he feels, as soon as tempted, the difficult and serious mystery of an independent, alien existence; he realizes that he has been desiring only an illusory or fleeting aspect of what is actually a complete life, and that perhaps this aspect has been but a projection of his own reverie. (313)

Rougemont establishes that as a mortal being, a woman should not be an object of worship, but as a person, she is worthy of reverence and respect. He also asserts that the Christian doctrine puts man and woman on equal footing in marriage. He quotes St. Paul, "The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband; and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife" (312). However, he then states that the kind of equality to which he refers is not to be understood in "the contemporary sense of giving rise to rights" (313). In fact, it is his belief that the breakdown of marriage derives in part from "women's emancipation—her entrance in to the profession and her claim to equality of treatment" (294). Equally destructive is the recent trend towards Mariology in the Roman Catholic Church and Carl Jung's work on Sophia and Mother-

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<sup>26</sup> C.S. Lewis, also Protestant, ranks *agape* above *eros* in *The Four Loves*.

Virgin, both of which contribute to the notion that “the feminine principle is about to get even with patriarchal pretensions” (295). It is difficult to ascertain how Rougemont perceives such a clear divide between the equality of women as persons and the equality of women in terms of the social and political status and how they are represented in Church doctrine, for he does not explain his views nor does he attempt to reconcile this paradox. For Rougemont, women are equals in the eyes of God as spiritual beings and as His creations, while the organizational structure of the social and divine world is, and should remain, patriarchal.

With *Love in the Western World*, Rougemont wishes to demythologize what is illusory about love and affirm what is real. He seeks to eradicate the belief that passion is love’s defining ingredient and assert instead that love is a continuous endeavor to uphold a lifetime commitment. Furthermore, in his formulation of love, Rougemont foregrounds *agape*, the selfless and benevolent desire for the beloved’s well-being. He paints a picture of love that requires tenacity and realism. He speaks of “accepting” the beloved’s otherness and imperfections. Keeping the promise of marriage in Christian faith, he writes, “assumes the acceptance of diversity, and that our way of taking hold of the concrete is first to accept its limitations. A Christian takes the world as it is, and not as he may dream it” (318).<sup>27</sup> In addition to Protestant doctrine, Rougemont’s views are also representative of personalist concerns and philosophies. In contextualizing his argument about love, Rougemont acknowledges that marriage is only one sphere in which we witness depersonalization and “western decadence.” He writes,

There are of course other indications, and in the most various spheres—the cult of multiplicity, the poetry of escape, the way nationalist passions encroach upon culture—whatever tends to wreck the person. But they are complex and collective

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<sup>27</sup> This is in contrast to Martin Buber, who *celebrates* the beloved’s otherness. It is worth noting however, that despite these differences in tone and approach, Buber and Rougemont do share a similar theological premise. Both believe that man finds God here below, in daily life and in our fellow human beings. Rougemont cites Spinoza in saying, “The more we understand individual things, the more we understand God” (318). Both seek to ground love in lived experience and leave behind the idea that love transports lover and beloved to a higher realm.

happenings which often elude personal apprehension. The indication given by the breakdown of marriage can be brought home to us, and it warns us quite unmistakably. (319)

The implication here is that if humankind heeds this warning, it can begin to reverse this trend. Marriage is a sphere in which we can begin to *repersonalize* our society. By maintaining respect and reverence for the beloved wife or husband, people begin to set a standard of behavior for human relations generally. (This point will be taken up in the discussion on Natalia Ginzburg's work in chapter 1.)

### **Simone de Beauvoir**

With *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir brings to this mid-twentieth century belief system the perspective of the woman's experience in the love-relationship. She contends that because of their circumstances, women experience love differently from men, and this has to be taken into account in a productive discussion about love and marriage. Her analysis confronts some of the idealism of this mid-twentieth century belief system with the reality of gender inequality. Beauvoir was born in 1909 to a bourgeois family in Paris. She was raised Catholic but became an atheist at age fourteen. As previously mentioned, she attended the *École Normale* concurrently with Simone Weil, along with Jean-Paul Sartre, her lifelong romantic partner. After graduating with a degree in Philosophy, she taught from 1929 to 1943. From 1943 until her death in 1986, she gained considerable fame as an author, existentialist philosopher, and activist. Apart from Erich Fromm, she is the only secular philosopher discussed here. Subsequently, her philosophy of love excludes the presence of God and spirituality in love-relationships and de-emphasizes the role of interpersonal morality. She argues that the dysfunctionality of romantic relationships stems more from the systemic inequality of men and women than moral

transgressions and failures. These differences aside, Beauvoir is in agreement with the other five philosophers and religious thinkers in asserting that genuine love is personal. It is made up of two, independent, self-realized people that respect each other's freedom and personhood.

Beauvoir publishes *The Second Sex* in 1949, eleven years after Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*. She contends that as men have had more political and economic rights, their superior social standing has infiltrated the collective psychology of love-relationships. Because of gender inequality, lover and beloved do not perceive one another as complete and complex individuals. In other words, love cannot be anything *but* impersonal under these circumstances. In one of many forms of impersonal love that Beauvoir describes, women and men idolize or reimagine the beloved as a means of filling a void or transcending their limitations. They perceive an element that impresses them, and the beloved becomes that quality to the exclusion of all else.

Idoltrous love plays out somewhat differently for women and men. In the chapter entitled "The Woman in Love," Beauvoir writes that women, having far fewer means of applying their talents and energies, look to men for fulfillment and significance. The woman in love deifies the beloved, looking past his unique identity to markers of manhood, such as virility, strength, wealth, and social status for proof of his superiority. In the process of falling in love, she depersonalizes herself by becoming a servant to her god (653). Beauvoir writes:

She abandons herself to love first of all to *save herself*; but the paradox of idoltrous love is that in trying to save herself she *denies herself* utterly in the end. Her feeling gains a mystical dimension; . . . she want to merge with him, to forget herself in his arms. . . . [There is] a desire for a complete destruction of the self, abolishing the boundaries that separate her from the beloved. . . . (660)

This desire to merge, an aspiration for the nineteenth-century Romantics, is a crisis to be averted in Beauvoir's view. It is a death of the self. Idoltrous love is doomed to failure because it is

based on nothing but love itself; there is no real subject or real object.<sup>28</sup> The woman dissolves into the relationship, and the man is not a person, only a symbol.

Men likewise idolize and reinvent women, often as incarnations of their projected fantasies. In a chapter entitled “The Myth of Women,” Beauvoir lists the various archetypes of the mythical woman that have held sway in the collective imagination over the centuries:

The myth is so various, so contradictory, that at first its unity is not discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena—woman is at once Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress; she is man’s prey, his downfall, she is everything he is not and that he longs for, his negation and his *raison d’être*. (175)

Whereas a woman looks to a man to transcend her limiting circumstances, a man looks to a woman to transcend his limited being. Feeling existentially lacking, he looks to a woman to complete him (172-73). In addition to the fact that the beloved mythical woman is a figment of the collective imagination, his love is doubly flawed and illusory because it presupposes woman as a static being rather than the constantly changing and evolving being that she is (Secomb 42).

Beauvoir observes that the mythical woman most often exists outside of marriage. In marriage, a woman loses her allure; she is a finite person with limitations, incapable of living up to the expectations placed upon her. Beauvoir is in agreement with Rougemont that Western culture perceives love and passion to be incompatible with marriage. She likewise identifies *Tristan and Isolde* as a myth that reflects and perpetuates a cultural belief that true love can only exist outside marriage (220). This is because men see the mythical woman and not the real woman as a means of transcendence. Beauvoir cites Kierkegaard’s *In Vino Veritas* by way of example. He writes that only a woman outside of marriage, as an idealized entity only partially

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<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir notes that *Tristan and Isolde* is partly about this phenomenon: two lovers “die of ennui, of the slow agony of a love that feeds on itself” (668).



known, can be productive for a man's genius and creative imagination. One's wife, however, makes "a man finite for the most part" (qtd. in Beauvoir 218). Beauvoir believes that marriage and love can and should co-exist, and the reconciliation will depend (in part) on replacing the mythical woman with the real woman. This can be done without any sacrifice to the feeling and power of the love relationship. She writes:

To recognize in woman a human being is not to impoverish man's experience: this would lose none of its diversity, its richness or its intensity if it were to occur between two subjectivities. To discard the myths is not to destroy all dramatic relation between the sexes, it is not to deny the significance authentically revealed to men through feminine reality; it is not to do away with poetry, love, adventure, happiness, dreaming. It is simply to ask that behavior, sentiment, passion be founded on truth. (291)

This excerpt exemplifies Beauvoir's mission to eradicate fantasy and illusion in love while still affirming that it is real and significant. Authentic love is contingent on a correct and balanced perception of the beloved, one that is not distorted by wishful thinking.

In the chapter "The Married Woman," Beauvoir describes another dysfunctional male-female dynamic in which distorted perception plays a part. In marriage, man and wife are confronted with the reality of one another's imperfections. Once married, they come to terms with the fact that marriage will not be their means of transcendence and begin to look for it elsewhere. Men may find it outside the home in work or in the community, but for women, "the roads to transcendence are blocked" (286). The wife becomes increasingly dependent on what dignity she obtains from her role as wife, mother, and manager of the household and becomes desperate for recognition from her husband and children. This situation deteriorates into a dynamic of mutual resentment and enslavement. In this "parasitic" relationship, men become tyrants and women become "'praying mantises', 'leeches', 'poisonous' creatures" (500). (This dynamic plays out in Natalia Ginzburg's novella *È stato così* discussed in the first chapter.)

Beauvoir argues against the belief (held by Berdyaev, for example) that men and women are preternaturally disposed to these roles:

The truth is that just as—biologically—males and females are never victims of one another but both victims of the species, so man and wife together undergo the oppression of an institution they did not create. It is asserted that men oppress women, the husband is indignant; he feels that he is the one who is oppressed—and he is; but the fact is that it is the masculine code, it is the society developed by the males and in their interest, that has established women's situation in a form that is at present a source of torment for both sexes. (500)

This illustrates Beauvoir's socio-cultural approach to the problem. She argues that when a man oppresses his wife, it is less a failure of his morality than a failure of society: "Individuals are not be blamed for the failure of marriage," she writes, it is "the institution itself, perverted as it has been from the start" (497).

The other philosophers discussed here would argue that a man who perceives his wife as an inferior being ought to alter his perception and recognize her as a complex, distinct being. Beauvoir does not disagree, but she finds this kind of moral fortitude to be all too rare. Certainly it is possible for lover and beloved to work towards perceiving one other as free and equal beings, "But friendship and generosity, which alone permit in actuality this recognition of free beings, are not facile virtues; they are assuredly man's highest achievement." (172). This virtuosity is a lofty aspiration, even more so when one considers that a marriage or long-term romantic relationship requires a continual renewal of virtuous intent and action. If one is to efficiently create change on a significant scale, the solution is not in appealing to one's moral conscience, but in instituting economic and political reforms that establish an egalitarian society. The implication is that men will be more disposed to perceive women as equals once women have been elevated by education and opportunities for fulfillment outside the domestic sphere.

While Beauvoir believes that dysfunctional dynamics between the sexes are common, she does not believe they are universal. There is the possibility for a romantic relationship based on friendship, equality, and respect. This type of relationship “is not a utopian fantasy, such couples do exist” (497), Beauvoir asserts. What she describes resembles Simone Weil’s concept of friendship: love is granting the beloved the freedom to grow and develop independently.

Beauvoir writes:

Genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties. The lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other: neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world. For the one and the other, love would be revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world. (677)

In regards to marriage, Beauvoir imagines two people relating to the world on their own terms:

Marriage should be a combining of two whole independent existences. . . . The couple should not be regarded as a unit, a closed cell; rather each individual should be integrated as such in society at large, where each (whether male or female) could flourish without aid. (497)

These ideals of “two independent existences” and the “mutual recognition of two liberties” are realized when both partners actively become complex, engaged, and motivated individuals in their own right. They come to desire freedom for themselves and thus empathically recognize and appreciate how the beloved would benefit from freedom too.

Beauvoir’s understanding of authentic love and married love also resembles friendship in the broader sense of two intellectual equals coming together over shared interests. She observes, however, that in reality, married couples are rarely friends. Historically, a typical marriage is beset with ready-made barriers to friendship: a “difference in sex often implies differences in age, education, situation, which allows no real mutual understanding: intimates, the two are yet strangers” (478). As a result, wives and husbands do not really know each other, and they do not

probe into one another's "psychic life" (491). To bridge this gap, Beauvoir advocates for training women in reasoning and argumentation. Without it,

intellect for women is an amusement rather than an instrument; even though intelligent, sensitive and sincere, they are unable to state their views and draw conclusions, for lack of intellectual technique. That is why their husbands, even though of comparatively mediocre ability, will easily dominate them. (482)

Beyond pursuing this type of education, she advises women to find a career outside of the home.

With domestic work, a woman finds "social justification and provides herself with an occupation," but it provides "little affirmation of individuality" (470). This is because the nature of the work is cyclical and perpetual, and she never creates anything of lasting value:

Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day. The housewife wears herself out marking out time: she makes nothing, simply perpetuates the present. She never senses conquest of a positive Good, but rather indefinite struggle against a negative Evil. (470)

With a career outside of the domestic sphere, however, a woman is able to create and construct a selfhood, which she then can offer up to a friendship and a marriage. This is what is meant by Beauvoir's statement, "love would be revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world" (677). A sense of individual identity nourishes the relationship, gives it dynamism and nuance and creates bonds of understanding and empathy, something that day-to-day intimacy and familiarity are unable to achieve by themselves.<sup>29</sup>

Beauvoir is in agreement with the other five philosophers and religious thinkers that in authentic love, one loves a unique and particular human being. She also concurs that the

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<sup>29</sup> The belief that one needs to realize one's potential and engage in the world derives from Sartre and Beauvoir's secular existentialist philosophy. Since God does not exist, it becomes each individual's responsibility to make meaning of his existence, or achieve "transcendence." Though Sartre and Beauvoir share this starting point, they have different views about the relationship between transcendence and love. Beauvoir believes that when two people realize their potential, authentic love becomes a possibility. Sartre, on the other hand, claims that romantic love is an obstruction to transcendence because it distracts one from engaging meaningfully in the world (Singer, vol. 3, ch. 8). Sartre's fatalistic views of love exclude him from the belief system in question, while Beauvoir's affirmative and constructive approach towards love makes her one of its primary contributors.

aspiration is not to merge with this person, but to maintain a respectful distance and allow him the freedom to be himself. Beauvoir's vantage point as an atheist, however, endows her contribution with some nuanced distinctions. First, Beauvoir's secular orientation implicates different motives for bestowing freedom on the beloved. For the religious thinkers, the lover keeps his distance from the beloved and grants her freedom because he believes that there is something unknowable, mysterious and sacred about her. Even though he knows the beloved intimately, he also perceives that there is something in her that will always elude him. This is because each person is born a mystery, and the continually changing interactions between her being, her circumstances and her choices only add to this unknown. In the theistic bestowal of freedom, there is a certain humility the lover feels in the presence of the beloved. Beauvoir does not use diction such as "mystery," "riddle," and "unknowable" in regards to the beloved. Her understanding of bestowing freedom originates in the existentialist view that the human being is born a blank slate and that she creates her essence and identity through her choices and actions. The lover bestows freedom on the beloved to allow her to become the person she chooses to be. He does so because it appeals to his ideal of justice and because he desires the same freedom for himself. Beauvoir's concept of bestowal of freedom involves more reasoning but less humility and reverence than the theistic approach.<sup>30</sup>

Another feature of Beauvoir's secular approach is that it shifts a large part of the moral burden from the individual to the public and its governing bodies. For the religious philosophers, the lover's responsibility to the beloved is part of the larger ethos of interpersonal accountability that makes up Judeo-Christian belief. In honoring the beloved, the individual also seeks to become a better human being. It is an individual choice and a personal struggle to do right by the

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<sup>30</sup> Fromm describes this approach as "fairness ethics." Born of the capitalist concept of the equal exchange of goods, it is about expecting reciprocity for loving or respecting one's neighbor (120).

beloved, and only the lover, the beloved, and God know if the lover has succeeded or failed. Interpersonal morality is not absent in Beauvoir's understanding of love, but it is not the primary mechanism for realizing authentic love. For Beauvoir, the onus is on society to create the conditions for authentic love to thrive—that is, declare and enforce equal status and equal opportunity for men and women. In essence, this is a continuation of Enlightenment principles.<sup>31</sup> It legislates equality, but it does not hold people accountable for what they might actually think and feel. It requires an external change in behavior and assumes that an internal conversion of perception and belief will follow. In contrast, the theistic approach asks each person to recognize the worth and complexity of all persons and assumes that external changes in attitude and behavior towards humanity as a whole will evolve organically from this new awareness and appreciation.

Finally, with the absence of God and religion in Beauvoir's formulation of love, we recognize that she is more of a product of the age of psychoanalysis than her religious peers. She seeks to “clean house” of the myths and legends that have shaped our collective psychology and do away with projections and illusions. The religious thinkers also seek to demythologize love, but their mission is to re-evaluate holistically what is true and false, based on changing views of God and religion in the twentieth century. While they concede that there is value to the psychoanalytic approach, they are more distrustful of it as a guiding paradigm. These differences between the religious and secular approaches become significant when considering that secular philosophies will predominate in the public discourse of love after the 1960s and will have the more far-reaching legacy. Society will look more to external political factors that affect love in their discussion of ethics and rely more on psychology and neuroscience to explain love as a

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<sup>31</sup> This resembles the reasoned and ethical approach to love put forth by Hume and Kant. (Singer 2: 376-82)

phenomenon while discussions of interpersonal morality and spiritual growth will recede from the foreground. In this sense, Beauvoir can be viewed as a transitional figure in respect to the intellectual history of love. She shares fundamental beliefs with her mid-twentieth century contemporaries but her work foregrounds the discourse of the late 1960s and beyond.

Like many other philosophers discussed here, Beauvoir wishes to take a clear-minded and practical approach in order to facilitate and sustain authentic love. To this end, a balanced perception of the beloved is fundamental. An idolized beloved will one day reveal herself as merely human, and when the object of the love disappears, love too will die with it. Beauvoir and her peers also point out that the lover must evaluate herself and her contribution to the relationship. If the lover cannot stand on her own two feet, if her identity is enmeshed with and dependent upon that of the beloved, love will not endure. Love requires two active subjects continually working to realize their individual potentials. It is about living according to one's values and pursuing one's goals for the benefit of both the beloved and the health of the relationship.

In contrast to the other philosophers discussed here, Beauvoir will be the only one to address gender inequality in-depth, and she will come closest to characterizing authentic love as friendship. (While Simone Weil discusses friendship as an optimizing dimension of romantic love, she does not argue that it defines romantic love, and she believes that it is very rare.) The fact that Beauvoir is unique in this regard calls attention to the fact that though this mid-twentieth century belief system is characterized by reciprocity, mutuality, respect for the beloved's personhood, acknowledgement of the beloved's complexity, and the bestowal of freedom, a requirement of gender equality and friendship (as in the mutual attraction and bond of like-minded intellectual equals) is not a common feature of it.

## **Erich Fromm**

As a psychoanalyst and a social philosopher, Erich Fromm was interested in man's inner life and the socio-cultural factors that affect him. As a writer and intellectual, he was a humanist who attempted "to seek the meaning of life in a modern age of alienation" (Kramer 2). His influential and popular book, *The Art of Loving* (1956), posits love as a discipline, an art that one practices and strives to master. Though there are many original elements to his philosophy of love, his work can be seen as a synthesis of the philosophies discussed up to this point. Like Beauvoir, he takes a secular, socio-cultural approach to the philosophy of love, but he retains the interpersonal ethics that are essential to the philosophies of Buber, Rougemont, and Weil. He is in agreement with many of the other philosophers that love requires a nourishing environment to flourish and like Berdyaev and Rougemont, identifies the culture of capitalism as one that is inhospitable to love.

Fromm was born in Germany in 1900. He grew up in a devoutly Jewish household, but he absconded from the faith as a young man because he "didn't want to participate in any division of the human race, whether religious or political" (Fromm qtd. in Kramer 2).<sup>32</sup> He left Germany in the 1930s to flee the Nazi regime, and emigrated to the United States, where he taught, practiced, and wrote some of his most well-known works. He returned to Europe late in life and died in Switzerland in 1980. Though his approach to philosophy is secular, his prior knowledge and studies of Judaic scripture and theology surface in his philosophies. He was also influenced by Eastern thought, including Buddhism and Taoism.

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<sup>32</sup> He describes his religious beliefs as follows: "I want to make it clear that I myself do not think in terms of the theistic concept, and that to me the concept of God is only a historically conditioned one, in which man has expressed his experience of his higher powers, his longing for truth and for unity at a given historical period" (67).



In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm argues that the human need for love derives from a universal, deep-seated anxiety about being existentially alone. At a certain stage in evolution, humans became aware that they no longer belonged to the animal kingdom and the natural world. This is the meaning of the Adam and Eve myth. Since the bite of the apple from the tree of knowledge, humans have felt cast out and separate from one another and nature (8). Essentially social creatures, humans have sought to overcome this separateness through a number of coping mechanisms, such as sex, drugs, and conforming to social norms, in order to feel a connection with others or temporarily liberate themselves from this world and the pain of solitude (11-12). People also rightly seek connection through love relationships, but most often blindly lapse into false, even pathological forms of love, not realizing that the art of loving requires intensive thought and deliberation.

Fromm sees the epidemic of love's failure as partly a product of twentieth-century Western capitalist society. Capitalism, he argues, reduces the human being to a unit of labor and a unit of buying power. In step with the intentions of its design, people become passive, adopt conformist tastes and sensibilities, and lose their integrity and individuality. Fromm continues,

What is the outcome? Modern man is alienated from himself, from his fellow men, and from nature. . . . Human relations are essentially those of alienated automatons, each basing his security on staying close to the herd, and not being different in thought feeling and action. While everybody tries to be as close as possible to the rest, everybody remains utterly alone, pervaded by the deep sense of insecurity, anxiety and guilt which always results when human separateness cannot be overcome. (80)

To alleviate the pain, many take advantage of the various "palliatives" that society offers (80).

Fromm observes that the Aldous Huxley's prophetic vision in *Brave New World* has come to fruition, a world in which people live according to a pleasure principle and assuage their anxiety with consumption, entertainment, and medication.

In regards to love, the capitalist system supports the idea of marriage as a “smoothly functioning team” (81). Husband and wife are meant to be comforting, courteous, and understanding towards one another. Marriage is considered a “refuge” from aloneness and an “alliance of two against the world” (81). This may create the sensation of love and intimacy, but husband and wife ultimately “remain strangers all their lives” (81). Fromm attributes this 1950s ideal of “team spirit and mutual tolerance” in marriage to the pseudo-scientific literature of the 1920s, where it was purported that mutual sexual satisfaction was the key to a long and happy marriage. He claims that the instructional books and prescriptions of the time reflected the erroneous belief “that using the right techniques is the solution not only to technical problems of industrial production, but all human problems as well” (82). For Fromm, such notions are “forms of the disintegration of love in modern Western society” (87).

Fromm’s beliefs are partly a response to Freudian thought. He finds Freud’s attempt to explain human behavior through the analysis of repressed instincts to be limited and short-sighted. He believes that human behavior is more aptly explained by the human existential condition (i.e. his feeling of separateness) and social and economic factors (i.e. the capitalist paradigm) (85). He also perceives Freud’s ideas about love and sex as a part of the vogue of early twentieth-century thought that reinforced the mechanisms of capitalism:

In order to prove that capitalism corresponded to the natural seeds of man, one had to show that man was by nature competitive and full of mutual hostility. While economists ‘proved’ this in terms of the insatiable desire for economic gain, and the Darwinists in terms of the biological law of survival of the fittest, Freud came to the same result by the assumption that man is driven by limitless desire for the sexual conquest of all women, and that only the pressure of society prevented man from acting on his desires. (85)

What Freud failed to understand, argues Fromm, is that the truth about human behavior “lies in the totality of human existence” (85).

Fromm observes that modern capitalist society poses a challenge to practicing the art of love. As the Western paradigm is based on self-interest, it is antithetical to the selfless love of another being. For love to flourish, our social and economic structure will have to adapt to our social nature. At present, he states:

All activities are subordinated to economic goals, means have become ends; man is an automaton—well fed, well clad, but without any ultimate concern for that which is his peculiarly human quality and function. If man is to be able to love, he must be put in his supreme place. The economic machine must serve him, rather than he serve it. He must be enabled to share experience, to share work, rather than, at best, share in profits. Society must be organized in such a way that man's social, loving nature, is not separate from his social existence, but becomes one with it. (122)<sup>33</sup>

Like many of the intellectuals here, Fromm's utopia is one in which the complexity and potential of the person is understood and honored. In this ideal, humanist society, love is highly valued and central to the human experience.

Though Fromm argues that capitalism is ill-suited for love, he maintains that it "is a constantly changing structure which still permits of a good deal of non-conformity and of personal latitude," and one can still practice love within it (122). What then, according to Fromm, are features of "mature" love (19), and how is it practiced? Similar to Buber's *I-Thou* encounter, love occurs when the core of one's being encounters the core of the beloved's being. Fromm cites Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace*, stating, "The same words [e.g., a man says to his wife, 'I love you']" can be "commonplace or extraordinary" depending on the "depth of the region in a man's being from which they proceed" and if "they reach the same region in him who hears them" (Weil qtd. in Fromm 44). When this profound level of communication occurs, lover and beloved recognize their sameness and separateness is overcome. However, love is also the appreciation of the distinct qualities and uniqueness of the beloved. Fromm writes,

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<sup>33</sup> He develops and formalizes this idea in his 1955 book, *The Sane Society*.

mature *love is union under the condition of preserving one's integrity, one's individuality. Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separate man from his fellow men, which unites him with others; love makes him overcome the sense of isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.* (19)

Here we see a merging of two beings, but not at the expense of the lover's and beloved's identities, and unlike Romantic notions of merging, it is not an ecstatic, mystical fusion; instead, it results in a feeling of wholeness and completion.

The idea that love is active rather than passive is a cornerstone of Fromm's philosophy of love. Fromm is inspired by Spinoza in defining love as an "active power" that man exercises as opposed to a passive "passion" (20), by which man is driven by unconscious motivations beyond his control. The primary action one takes in love is reminiscent of Beauvoir's "revelation of self" (*The Second Sex*, 677); the lover gives the beloved

that which is alive in him; he gives him of his joy, of his interest, of his understanding, of his knowledge, of his humor, of his sadness. . . . In thus giving of his life, he enriches the other person, he enhances the other's sense of aliveness by enhancing his own sense of aliveness. (23)

Beyond this primary action, the other elements of Fromm's practice of love are by now familiar themes in the moral dimension of this belief system. First, there is the need for mindfulness in how one perceives the beloved. One must adopt a clear view of oneself and the beloved: "I must try to see the difference between *my* picture of a person and his behavior, as it is narcissistically distorted, and the person's reality as it exists regardless of my interests, needs and fears" (111). This action requires both the mind and the heart: "The faculty to think objectively is *reason*; the emotional attitude behind reason is that of *humility*" (111). Fromm also speaks of perception in terms of regarding the beloved from a respectful distance. Reminding his readers that the word *respect* originates from the Latin, *respicere* (to look at), Fromm defines the word as

the “ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality” and to give him the freedom to “grow and unfold for his own sake” (26). In this way, Fromm’s philosophy resembles that of Weil and Beauvoir. Other love-actions include *knowledge* and *responsibility*: knowledge refers to sensing and knowing the beloved’s innermost thoughts and feelings, and responsibility is the ability and willingness (and not the duty) to respond to the needs of the beloved. Fromm’s philosophy is similar in spirit to that of Buber in that the lover is meant to listen actively and “tune in” to the beloved’s state of heart and mind and act on that knowledge. For Fromm, and indeed for all of the contributors to the moral dimension of this belief system, love is something one *does*, not something one experiences.

Ultimately, for Fromm, it is not enough to train one’s concentration on the beloved and relationship; the art of love must be exercised in every sphere and with everyone, and it requires discipline, deliberation, and concentration. To practice love effectively, one must live in the present and be awake to the world. The lover must take time to know himself and cultivate spiritual qualities so that the beloved may benefit from the “simple presence of a mature, loving person” (108) and so that he may give “what is alive in him” (23). As in Beauvoir’s formulation of love, the lover must work to be self-sufficient so as not to rely on the beloved for fulfillment and purpose. In fact, dependency is the negation of love: “If I am attached to another person because I cannot stand on my own feet,” writes Fromm, “he or she may be a lifesaver, but the relationship is not one of love” (103). Throughout, the lover should maintain the wider view, and “keep alive a vision of the mature life” (109). To practice love in the way, Fromm observes, is to go against the grain of modern capitalist society. It is to overcome the need for instant gratification and narcissism. It is to be true to oneself and to be a “non-conformist” in the face of

social pressures. It is to live and love courageously in spite of a system that encourages complacency, uniformity, and self-absorption (122).

Fromm was able to express many of the ideas and attitudes of this mid-twentieth century belief system from a secular platform informed by an integrated body of knowledge sourced in psychoanalysis, philosophy, social theory, and religious thought. Though by virtue of his profession and methodology, he is a part of the twentieth-century lineage of thinkers that engages with psychoanalysis in their theorizations of sex and love (e.g., Freud, Marcuse, Sartre, and Kristeva), his beliefs have more affinities with those of the religious philosophers of the mid-twentieth century. Their emphasis on love as a deliberate and mindful practice will go out of fashion in the late 1960s, but as we will see, Fromm's notion of love as a “union under the condition of preserving one’s integrity and individuality” and as a power which allows man to “overcome the sense of isolation and separateness,” will reemerge in late twentieth-century thought.

### **Belief Systems on Love Post-1965**

With the advent of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, the mid-twentieth century belief system about love was displaced by discussions about power structures and the politics of sexual love. Integral to the seismic shift are three factors that may have contributed to the dissolution (or hibernation) of this mid-twentieth century belief system.

First, over the course of the 1960s, a final and definitive wave of secularization takes place in academia and the public discourse. Until the 1960s, the likes of Buber, Lewis, Weil, and Mounier were identified not necessarily as “religious thinkers” but in more general terms, as scholars and public intellectuals. As they were often outside of the clerical fold and sometimes

critical of orthodox and ecclesiastical doctrines, they held an intermediary role of interpreting and challenging religion in light of changing times while maintaining a core faith in God and Judeo-Christian principles. Despite this critical stance, the religious tenor to their writings became outmoded and the study of their work was assigned to the disciplines of theology or religious studies. While this mid-twentieth century belief system about love is not wholly predicated on theism, certain aspects (such as the emphasis on interpersonal ethics, the person as an unknowable and sacred mystery, and the divine nature of *eros* and *agape*) are best understood in context of their religious grounding. Suffice it is to say, a belief system about love with so many theistic contributors was unable to maintain influence into the late 1960s and 1970s.

A second possible explanation for the demise of the mid-twentieth century belief system is that the postwar generation grew up under starkly different circumstances and thus viewed love and sexuality through a different lens. As opposed to their parents who had lived during World War II, the generation of 1960s came of age during the economic boom. Arguably, the pervasive optimism, prosperity, mobility, and opportunity of the 1950s and 1960s rendered the need to deliberate and reflect on the emotional, moral, and internal experience of human relationships less urgent. While the World War II generation had been more receptive to Mounier's call for spiritual renewal and Buber's call for strengthening human relationships, their children privileged Sartre and Beauvoir's call to defend freedom, justice, and human rights. Ethics were still central to the public and intellectual discourse, but the focus progressed from the immediate, internal, and personal sphere of the individual, his family, and his community to a wider, impersonal sphere of institutions and demographical groupings of victims and oppressors (based on race, gender, sexuality, etc.). This is not to say that the religious thinkers had been politically inactive. On the contrary, they were deeply engaged in social and political reform.

Nominated the “third way” between capitalism and communism, they proposed a personalized and spiritualized democracy in which the internal life and dignity of the person and the possibility for communitarian cooperation would be the starting points for policy. These systems (e.g., Berdyaev and Mounier’s “personalist socialism” and Martin Buber’s “true community”) varied widely but shared the common mission of protecting the individual from becoming a functionary of the state or of the market economy. The personalists in particular aspired to mobilize a critical mass of individuals in recognizing their role not only as citizens but as members of a spiritualized community and sought to achieve the “transformation of the basic drives of a person” (Spinka 70).<sup>34</sup> This involved not only political reforms but the revitalization of Christianity from its stale and static condition. Mounier speaks of a “Christianity of the open air,” “a virile Christianity,” and a “plebian Christianity,” as opposed to bourgeois Christianity that resembles “a shuttered house” and that has “a heart circumspect and cautious” (xii). This rhetoric proved very difficult to achieve in practice. The new postwar generation conceivably found it more efficient and more in alignment with their secular outlook to critique and reform government and institutions rather than to energize masses of people to critique and reform themselves. Accordingly, a belief system about love that was secular and that sought to liberate women and sexuality from oppressive super-structures would gain traction in lieu of one that emphasized introspection, spiritual development, and interpersonal ethics.

A third reason that this belief system about love did not flourish beyond the mid-1960s was the unresolved status of woman. As a collection of varied contributions, this belief system reflects a range of views on women, and as such, reveals women’s tenuous and transitional place in the mid-twentieth century. Given that this belief system is about the respect of the beloved’s

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<sup>34</sup> For more on the personalists’ political engagement, see John Hellman’s *Emmanuel Mounier and the New Catholic Left, 1930-1950*.



otherness and particularity, there is an underlying supposition that the lover and the beloved stand on the same plane. Though this belief system forms prior to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, its emergence certainly reflects an increasingly common perception of women as complete and complex individuals and as men's equals.<sup>35</sup> The effort in the twentieth century to demythify women was one factor that contributed to this change. In her book, *Love and the French*, Nina Epton writes that in 1920s and 1930s France, the idea of marriage as companionship of two equals had become more popular, along with the understanding that "love is the possibility for two people to be themselves" (342). She continues:

To be oneself implied a complete reversal of the maxims distilled in the old fashioned codes of gallantry. . . ; it meant stripping love, and particularly women—its eternal symbol—of coquetry and mystery; it implied too, a severe reappraisal of the 'eternal feminine,' a revaluation of women as a 'subject' instead of an 'object' (342).

The mythologized woman, as vixen, goddess, or sacred virgin, was giving way to the "real woman."<sup>36</sup>

However, as Emmanuel Mounier observes in *Personalism* (1950), though this evolution towards gender equality is underway, the status of women was still very much in flux. Despite the trend towards demythification, women were still enshrouded with

'pseudo-mystery,' and we are still far from having disentangled the permanent from the purely historical. Neither masculine self-sufficiency nor the exasperation of vengeful feminism will ever elucidate this dilemma. It is nevertheless true that our social world is one that man has made for men, and that the resources of feminine being are among those which humanity still largely neglects. How these

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth indicating that two of the four films and novels discussed in this dissertation have a female protagonist depicted as a thinking and feeling agent in a love relationship (*È stato così* and *Viaggio in Italia*), two of the four works are authored by women (*È stato così* and *Le Bonheur*) and two of the six philosophers are women (Simone Weil and Simone de Beauvoir). I say this to reinforce the claim that this mid-twentieth century belief system does indeed reflect changing views of women and to indicate explicitly that both men and women made significant contributions to this new belief system about love.

<sup>36</sup> Epton credits Rougemont and Beauvoir for their part in demythologizing the "'eternal feminine'" (342). Nikolai Berdyaev also spoke out against the "cult of eternal womanhood" and the adulation of "'fair ladies' in Dantesque or Goethean guise" (*Dream* 81).

resources are to be fully developed and drawn upon without imprisoning women in her functions; how to unite her with the world and the world with her; what new values and what new conditions this project calls for—these are questions and tasks inescapable for everyone who gives its full meaning to the affirmation that woman, also, is a person. (109)

Among the contributors to this belief system, it is generally agreed upon that the notion of a woman as a person is vital to the successful realization of their ideas about a love based on reciprocity and respect for the beloved's complexity and integrity. However, Nikolai Berdyaev and Denis de Rougemont maintain an openly ambivalent attitude toward the equality of women in their writings on love.<sup>37</sup> Their writings express an evident discomfort, even hostility, towards the changing role of women taking place in both public and private spheres. This lingering traditionalist attitude by some indicates that materializing a belief system about the mutual recognition of the freedom and integrity of the beloved on any significant scale would have been a challenge, not only because it required great moral courage and tenacity, but because a substantial paradigm shift regarding women was still outstanding. As Beauvoir had argued, half of the love relationship did not yet have the means to self-realize. From the vantage point of a woman relegated to the home, some of the features of the belief system, such as pursuing a vocation for the benefit of the beloved, maintaining a balanced perspective, or bestowing freedom on the beloved posed a particular set of challenges. It is conceivable that this mid-twentieth century belief system dissolved simply because it emerged before the requisite attitudes and social conditions were in place to support it.

It follows a certain logic that the next phase in the intellectual history of love would involve an analysis of the power dynamics and mechanisms that undermine love's potential and authenticity (gender inequality among them). Like in the nineteenth and early twentieth century,

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<sup>37</sup> This is also true of C.S. Lewis (see *The Four Loves*, pgs. 73-78), and Mounier's reference to "masculine self-sufficiency" and "vengeful feminism" may also express this ambivalence.

romantic love is put to a test of veracity in the 1970s, and its mythological qualities are revealed anew. As opposed to the “scientific findings” of the turn-of-the-century, love’s “true” source was found not in biology, but in the suggestive powers of the state and the media. In this deconstructive phase, romantic love and sexuality are destabilized and scrutinized for all that may delude or distract humans from understanding the truth about institutional hegemony and systemic inequality. Sexuality tends to be the focal point of the discussion, but romantic love is implicated.

A number of works explore the relationship between sexuality, society, and the state. There were, of course, a wide range of feminist contributions following Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* that aimed to deconstruct and re-envision the woman’s role in the romantic relationship. To name a few, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1971) argues that women have been desexualized by their role in the suburban nuclear family and Luce Irigaray’s *The Sex Which is Not One* (1977) discusses the sexual commodification of women. Herbert Marcuse’s highly influential *One Dimensional Man* (1964) discusses the commodification of sexuality in an increasingly capitalistic and technological society. He argues that like television or religion, the sexual revolution distracted people from their political objectives and made the discomforts and injustices of day-to-day life more bearable (Clark 205; Herzog 135).<sup>38</sup> (Though his work is markedly different from his mid-twentieth century contemporaries, his study of the relationship between love and capitalism is a thread of continuity that links him to Berdyaev, Rougemont, and Fromm.<sup>39</sup>) Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976) also interrogated ways in which sexuality

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<sup>38</sup> A decade earlier, in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Marcuse had argued that Eros (in the Freudian sense of sexual love as the life force) was a potentially powerful subversive agent against a repressive government. Subsequently, he advocated for freeing up the “pleasure principle” so long as it did not curtail the freedom of others (Geoghegan 45).

<sup>39</sup> Marcuse’s work engaged with Freud and Sartre, whose work constitutes a different belief system from the one explored in this dissertation. However, Marcuse worked with Fromm at the Institute for Social Research and though they disagreed on many issues, they shared overlapping interests and methodologies.

was intertwined with institutions and systems. He drew upon documents and texts from various public discourses (e.g., psychiatry, law, medicine, and the Church) to demonstrate how power relations pervade sexuality at all levels of society. He argues that these discourses define who we are (e.g., homosexuals, married monogamists, or nymphomaniacs) which in turn “stimulate desires,” effectively shaping and creating our sexual identities (Clark 5).

As Anna Clark points out, Foucault and his contemporaries were reacting against nineteenth and early-twentieth century attempts to define love as a physiological or psychological phenomenon by arguing that sexual identities, which involve both behaviors (sex) and emotions (love), are socially constructed (3). The implication is that love does not originate in the lover nor is it inspired by a unique beloved. Instead, love’s source (or what is thought to be love) is the interplay between an individual’s psychology and a matrix of external factors. Despite these different approaches, both the philosophies of the early twentieth century and the 1960s to 1970s focused on the illusory and impersonal nature of love. As I have argued, the philosophies that emerge between these two time periods (many of them influenced by existentialism and personalism) are significant in affirming love and asserting that the individual has the power and agency to act as his conscience dictates and to shape and direct the feelings that arise within him.

Roland Barthes’ work is in some respects a bookend to the late-1960s and 1970s segment of the intellectual history of love. Like Foucault, Barthes also examined discourses on sexuality, but expanded his subject matter to include romantic love and fictional narratives. *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977) demonstrates that our understanding of love is derived from other people’s stories, be they in the form of oral histories, poems, films, novels, and magazine articles. We subconsciously draw upon this collection of scripts and characters to perform our roles as lover

and beloved (Secomb 121). While we believe that our emotions and actions are wholly genuine, original, and unique, they are merely imitative. Furthermore, the belief that we love a unique beloved is an illusion. In reality, we are in love with love itself and its fantastical representation in books and films.

Barthes walks a well-trodden path in the intellectual history of love (after Stendhal, Schopenhauer, Freud, Proust, and others) in characterizing romantic love as impersonal and imaginary. However, like Beauvoir, Barthes wishes to critique the “cultural fabrications” that falsify love and also affirm and defend genuine love. Barthes writes *A Lover’s Discourse* towards the end of the 1970s, when sexuality is venerated but romantic love is out of fashion. Sartre and Firestone’s argument that love’s sentimentality is bourgeois—an enervating and oppressive trap that distracts from political action—had gained considerable allegiance among the young revolutionaries and within academic discourse (Secomb 124). Barthes writes *A Lover’s Discourse* partly in reaction to this disparagement of love. As he explains at the outset, the discourse on love is “ignored, disparaged . . . derided . . . exiled, . . . and thus has no recourse but to become a site, however exiguous, of an affirmation” (3). This affirmative lining to his deconstruction of love anticipates the 1980s and beyond, in which romantic love will again be considered by many to be a real and essential component of the human experience.

Beginning in the 1980s, some of the philosophical contributions to the intellectual history of love revert to the mid-twentieth century efforts of affirming and grounding love in lived experienced, but they abandon the notion of love as a spiritual phenomenon. Love as a means of establishing a shared identity is a recurring theme in the literature.

In the *The Examined Life* (1989), philosopher Robert Nozick defines love as “the forming of a *we*” (232). In creating “a joint identity” (233), two separate people conjoin to create a third

identity. In essence, their beings are tied to one another, and over time, these “intimate bonds change the contours of the self, altering its topology” (239). He even compares (but is careful not to equate) love’s journey with a spiritual journey in its capacity to break the boundaries of our selfhood to merge with another entity. It is essential to Nozick’s philosophy that love is personal. The lover loves the beloved in his entirety, “not a whitewashed version” or “just a portion” of him (233). The lover cannot love the beloved for a portion of his identity, because, if this were the case, she would be inclined to “trade up” for a new and improved beloved, which would destroy the joint identity that the lovers have built and annihilate a part of herself (234-35).

Similarly, in his essay “The Virtue of Romantic Love” (1988), philosopher Robert Solomon speaks of love as the “urge for *shared identity*, a kind of *ontological dependency*” (251). Solomon is clear in stating that love “is not a ‘force’ or a ‘mystery’” (251); it is a human emotion; therefore it is erroneous to endow it with metaphysical powers. Subsequently, his understanding of a shared identity is not a union as described by Aristophanes in *The Symposium* (that lovers are two halves of a whole), nor is it a nineteenth-century Romantic mystical merging of souls. Instead, it is a means of determining selfhood (252).

Solomon argues that the need to determine selfhood is particularly acute in the contemporary Western world. He writes that love is “functional and historical” (248), by which he means that love’s function changes in accordance with historical circumstances. Romantic love as we know it, he contends, is not universal and timeless; it is an outgrowth of nineteenth-century Romanticism. He writes that Romantic love “presupposes an unusually strong conception of privacy and individual autonomy,” a concept that had been developing since the advent of Renaissance Humanism (248). The idea that one’s selfhood would derive from one’s community (as is the case in the Middle Ages) is all but obsolete in the present day. One now

relies on his inner circle of loved ones as a means of self-definition and identity formation. Love is particularly powerful in its capacity to establish a new sphere (apart from friends and family) in which individuals can negotiate meaning and identity. Solomon writes, “In a fragmented world so built on intimate privacies, love even more than family and friendship determines selfhood” (252). This is because, “When we talk about ‘the real self’ or ‘being true to ourselves,’ what we often mean is being true to the image of ourselves that we share with those we love” (252). In other words, in the presence of the beloved, we “relax” into our genuine and best selves. From the foundation of self-love and acceptance that we associate with the beloved, we affirm our selfhood. Solomon argues that in the context of today’s world, love functions as a mode of “self-expansion.” He continues, “In a fragmented and mobile society, romantic love allows us to forge intensive ties to the other, even to strangers,” which is no small feat in “today’s climate of personal greed and ‘self-fulfillment.’” Love is “a powerful emotional ally . . . in breaking down the isolating individualism that has become the dubious heir of some of our favorite traditional values” (253-54).

Like the mid-twentieth century philosophers, Solomon notes that love “takes time” (253). This is because merging identities is a process. Solomon observes that in the late twentieth-century, many people marry later in life when their individual identities are already formed. Subsequently, love develops through a struggle of two separate identities attempting to negotiate their differences. Because love is about identity, it is unequivocally personal. Solomon challenges the commonly accepted interpretation of *The Symposium* that Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to express his own beliefs. In lieu of Socrates’s idealized account of love as the search for wisdom and perfect beauty, Solomon believes that Plato favors Alcibiades’ portrayal of love as “personal, passionate, irrational” (248). By advocating for this humanizing

interpretation of Plato's intent, Solomon is able to frame love as a virtue that is relatable and accessible.

In *Love: A History* (2011), contemporary philosopher Simon May joins Nozick and Solomon in defining love as the desire for "ontological rootedness" (240). In the beloved we seek grounding, a feeling of being home. This ineffable quality is something we only recognize when we experience it, but it is often connected to our origins and our upbringing. Here May departs from Nozick and Solomon in asserting that love is impersonal. The lover does not fall in love with the beloved for her individual qualities, nor, as opposed to the mid-twentieth century philosophers, is love even about "valuing 'the whole person, '" or the loved one "'in her full particularity'" or "'for her own sake'" (242). Rather, we are attracted to "that mysterious kernel of her being in which we discover the promise of ontological rootedness" (242).

May joins a chorus of philosophers (which includes the mid-twentieth century intellectuals) in attempting to humanize the unobtainable ideals promulgated in Western thought on love. May would agree with Solomon when he states: "Much of the history of our changing conceptions of love has to do with the effort to bring together and synthesize the idealization suggested by Plato and Christian love with the very real demands and desires of a couple in love" (250). May's solution is to jettison the metaphysical ideal altogether and replace it with a grounded, purely human need for rootedness.<sup>40</sup> He rejects the Christian, Protestant paradigm articulated by Luther and Nygren that "true love" is selfless and unconditional. According to May, this attempt to model human love on God's love (i.e. *agape*) has been a self-defeating endeavor because humans are by nature incapable of living up to this divine standard. Instead,

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<sup>40</sup> May writes that the specific nature of these ideals has changed over the course of the intellectual history of love, but that they all amount to a "whole, or supreme good." These ideals include, "God (Judaism; Christianity); absolute beauty (Plato); divine creation (Ficino); Nature (Spinoza); the indivisible, eternal world (Schlegel); the unity of all living things (Schopenhauer); fate (Nietzsche); and narrative (Proust)" (246).



love resembles *eros* in that it is needy and conditional. It is a yearning that for rootedness that seeks to be satisfied, and it is an unequivocally human phenomenon. He writes:

Love should be modeled on how humans are commanded to love God, not on how God is said to love humans. Unlike God, everything humans do is thoroughly conditioned, interested, time-bound, and dependent on our building a robust self amid the vagaries of fate and vulnerability. And we have a supreme need, that God by definition doesn't, indeed that he was 'invented' to fulfill: to be united with (what we take to be) the ground of our being; to experience our life as indestructibly secure, vivid and anchored; to find a home (240).<sup>41</sup>

After May establishes that the nature of love is impersonal and secular, conditional and needy, his description of love begins to resemble aspects of the mid-twentieth century belief system. Once the lover recognizes the promise of ontological grounding in the beloved, the lover then comes to appreciate the beloved's particularity, loving him for all of his attributes and his uniqueness. She seeks to ensure that the relationship endures by developing a practice of love, one that is attentive and giving. Her love becomes unconditional, tolerating the difficulties of the relationship and the shortcomings of the beloved in order to keep intact the emotional home of they have built. May argues that the concepts of *eros*, *agape*, and *philia* should be understood not as types of love but as "three stages in the development of love's attentiveness." He explains:

We should say then that Eros is the desire for a loved one who inspires ontological rootedness and whose presence in our life we try to secure. . . ; that this encounter triggers *agape*, passionate surrender to . . . the lawfulness of her being, which makes no further conditions; and that as this surrender develops it also comes to have the character of *philia*. . . ; an intimate, and necessarily reciprocal, identification with the unfolding and unpredictable life of the other, experienced as a second self. We experience her as a second self not only, or even primarily, because we have similar virtues, but more broadly because we have

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<sup>41</sup> Like Solomon, May contextualizes this human aspiration within the historical trend of increasing individualism. The sphere of what constitutes "home" has become ever more compact and exclusive since we no longer find belonging and meaning in our larger communities. As a result, love becomes

the ultimate source and sign of our belonging—a sign that people display today as eagerly as in previous eras they displayed their fidelity to church or state. And the more individualistic we become the more we expect love to be a secular journey for the soul, a final source of meaning and freedom, a supreme standard of value, a key to the problem of identity, a solace in the face of rootlessness, a desire for the worldly and simultaneously a desire to transcend it, a redemption from suffering, and a promise of eternity. Or all of these at once. (239)

similar understandings of our projects, goods, sensibilities, histories and origins.  
(248)

In this excerpt, we see the legacy of the mid-twentieth century belief system reflected in May's contributions. His description of evolved love as a "necessarily reciprocal, identification with the unfolding and unpredictable life of the other," is particularly reminiscent of ideas expressed by Buber, Beauvoir, and Fromm.

With Nozick, Solomon, and May, the nineteenth-century concept of merging is revived, but it is grounded in the finite realm of human needs (psychological and emotional, as opposed to spiritual), and it is steeped in the complexities of what it means to develop an identity. Even with this modification, the mid-twentieth century philosophers (especially Buber, Weil, and Beauvoir) would have been wary of this notion of love as a shared or joint identity. Integrity and the realization of the self were essential elements of their philosophies. Nozick, Solomon, and May are perhaps less preoccupied with separateness due to their historical circumstances. By the end of the twentieth century, there is willingness, even a desire, to sacrifice some of this individual integrity in order to find meaning, comfort, and an identity with one's partner. Additionally, the contemporary philosophies reflect significant social changes in gender dynamics. In their discussion of a shared identity and sense of "home" with the beloved, Nozick, Solomon, and May take for granted the equality of genders. There is an assumed equilibrium that negates the possibility of the male partner's identity categorically dominating or subsuming the woman's identity.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> However, not all of their contemporaries are in agreement. Luce Irigaray's 1996 work, *I Love to You*, maintains Beauvoir's argument that merging should be avoided. Though we may believe otherwise, women in Western culture continue to be "represented as the opposite, the complement or the lacking and diminished reflection of . . . man" (Secomb 94). Irigaray argues that lover and beloved should actively work to maintain separate identities and not seek fulfillment in one another's love (Secomb 94).

While aspects of the philosophies of Nozick, Solomon, and May resemble the mid-twentieth century belief system, the latter distinguishes itself in emphasizing individual responsibility and agency in love. The contemporary philosophers describe love as a semi-conscious journey, one in which the aspiring lover is aware of the objective but the process of getting there is more opaque. The journey described by Buber, Rougemont, Beauvoir, and Fromm, on the other hand, is exceedingly deliberate and mindful. The lover does indeed have control in facilitating and maintaining the possibility of love. The lover tries to actualize her potential, improve her character, and spiritually progress. She tries to become a person that is capable of both giving and receiving love. Through the practice of loving the beloved, she strives to experience the mystery of another being.

In the subsequent chapters, I present four narratives that bring to life facets of this mid-twentieth century belief system on love. I consider writer Natalia Ginzburg and filmmakers Roberto Rossellini, Ermanno Olmi, and Agnès Varda as philosophers of love in their own right, and as contributors to this belief system. With the dissertation as a whole, I identify a constellation of beliefs voiced by ten philosophers, writers, and filmmakers, but each belief is an integral whole, and furthermore, each belief belongs to other constellations. For this reason, each contribution should be understood as a part of the belief system but also considered individually and as a product of overlapping but sometimes divergent ideological, social, and historical contexts.

Chapter 1 is an examination of Natalia Ginzburg's novella, *È stato così* (1947), and the role that distorted perception plays in the demise of the protagonist's marriage. I contextualize Ginzburg's work within a broader conversation among existentialists (namely, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Buber, and José Ortega y Gasset) about interpersonal perception within romantic love.

While Sartre offers an explanation as to why distorted perception occurs so often in amorous relationships, Buber and Ortega y Gasset offer alternate models in which the lover chooses to recalibrate his or her perception of the beloved. Reading *È stato così* in light of Buber and Ortega y Gasset allows the reader to more readily recognize that it is not a fatalistic novel but a constructive one. This subtext of the novella is consistent with Ginzburg's essays, "Human Relationships" and "The Little Virtues," in which she argues that human relationships are a problem to be solved, not renounced or avoided. Like Buber, she advocates for actively working to perceive the beloved in his or her entirety and for finding purpose and direction in life for the benefit of the beloved and the relationship.

While the first chapter is concerned with the practice of love, the second chapter is about the feeling of love and the environments wherein it may flourish or perish. Here I examine Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (1954) and a number of works by Russian philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev. Rossellini and Berdyaev put forth the argument that love cannot survive in a spiritually sterile heart; it cannot be sustained between two people exclusively preoccupied with navigating and mastering the material world. This is particularly true when one's materialist inclinations originate in and are reinforced by a hyper-rationalized culture (i.e. northern Europe) because it tends to socialize love and neglect its spiritual dimension. Berdyaev and Rossellini imply that lovers need to continuously develop spiritually as individuals in order to maintain a hospitable environment for love's survival. This is achieved by cultivating a relationship with the physical world, nature, people, and the cityscape. Transcending insularity and feeling connected with one's surroundings is how one inhabits the spiritual world on earth, a necessity for being continually receptive to love.

The third chapter is also about overcoming the challenges that a utilitarian society poses towards sustaining romantic relationships. Ermanno Olmi's *I fidanzati* (1963) is one of a number of films from the time period that focuses on a directionless and disaffected postwar generation incapable of forming strong romantic bonds. Unlike in the fatalistic endings typical of an Antonioni or Godard film, Olmi's protagonist is able to find his way back to love. *I fidanzati* implies that in order to maintain a fulfilling and lasting committed love-relationship, one must resist the debilitating powers of an impersonal economic system by maintaining a presence of mind and a sense of childlike freedom through a relationship with one's surroundings. Interviews with Olmi about the film also reveal his belief that one must take responsibility as a mature adult in one's romantic life. Through this dual messaging, Olmi's work speaks to both the senso-spiritual and moral dimensions of this belief system.

The final chapter marks the ending of the era of love in question (1930s to the mid-1960s) and the beginning of the next (the late 1960s and 1970s). Agnès Varda's film, *Le Bonheur* (1964), differs from the other works in that it neither presents an ideal form of love nor recommends "a best practice" for love. Instead, it seeks to make sense of impersonal love through a philosophical exploration of the beloved as a replaceable entity. Varda conveys an ambivalent attitude of critique and acceptance in her film and interviews. On the one hand, she recognizes the replaceable beloved as a necessity of nature tied to survival of the species. On the other hand, she perceives it to be connected to a self-serving prioritization of personal happiness and a product of a consumer and media-driven culture in the postwar era in which people, like objects, are dispensable and easily replaced. Her continuous dialectic between impartiality and partiality towards the morality of her protagonists is essential to her objective of unsettling viewers' predetermined moral paradigms and invoking discussion and debate. This film is

prescient for the late 1960s when impersonal love will supplant personal love as the dominant paradigm.

While varied in their approaches and arguments, these authors, filmmakers, and philosophers of the mid-twentieth century give shape to a new era in the intellectual history of love. They redefine love in light of the poignance, sobriety, and alienation experienced during this time period. Human relationships of all kinds, and romantic ones in particular, take on a renewed importance as one of the most defining and essential elements of what it means to be human. These intellectuals no longer find relevance in idealistic nineteenth-century notions that romantic love is a mystical merging of two souls or a means of transcendence. Equally immaterial are early twentieth-century theories that dismiss love as a mere psychological illusion. Instead, this group affirms and esteems love, but grounds it in the reality of lived experience. The beloved is no longer an ideal, but a complex, unique, and irreplaceable individual, and love is less a passion than a creative act.

## CHAPTER 1: Love and perception in Natalia Ginzburg's *È stato così*<sup>43</sup>

Considering that some of the most profound meditations on romantic love have been works of fiction, it leaves little cause for wonder that contemporary scholars who write about Western thought on love source works of literature as often as philosophy. Look to the intellectual histories of love composed by Irving Singer, Simon May, or Martha Nussbaum, and one will see Plato alongside Ovid, medieval theologians alongside the troubadour poets, and Kierkegaard alongside Tolstoy. This chapter, which brings Italian author Natalia Ginzburg into conversation with three of her existentialist contemporaries, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Buber and José Ortega y Gasset, can be seen as a brief chapter in this long sequence of ideas about love, in which writers of both fiction and non-fiction attempt to characterize a phenomenon so defining of the human experience and so persistently unwieldy to rational analysis. These particular intellectuals are considered together because each reflects upon the complex relationship between love and perception. Ginzburg's *È stato così* (*The Dry Heart*) and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* elucidate the ways in which distorted perception leads to love's failure. This critical take on love and perception is countered by a more constructive one in Ginzburg's essays ("Human Relationships" and "The Little Virtues"), Ortega y Gasset's *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme*, and various works by Buber in which the authors suggest recalibrating one's

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<sup>43</sup> A version of this chapter is published in *Forum Italicum* under the bibliographical reference: "Love and Perception in Natalia Ginzburg's *È stato così*." *Forum Italicum*. 50 (May 2016): 50-68. doi: 10.1177/0014585815623756

perceptions in order to differentiate between authentic and inauthentic love and maintain authentic love. For the purposes of this chapter, “authentic love” is defined as loving the beloved for who he or she is, not as an imagined or idealized figure. This chapter seeks to reconsider some of Ginzburg’s early work in the context of interdisciplinary scholarship on love and to contribute to a discussion initiated by scholars such as Pacifici and Castronuovo who have identified and explored a kinship between Ginzburg’s work and existentialist thought.<sup>44</sup>

According to philosopher Irving Singer, Western thought on love is broadly characterized by two competing ideologies: the “idealist” theories, which conceive of love as having a “magical and metaphysical import” (3:8), and the “realist” theories, which believe love to be a social construct that romanticizes and reimagines a mere biological instinct. Natalia Ginzburg’s ideas on love differ substantially from those of the “idealists” such as the medieval troubadours or the nineteenth-century Romantics. Her conception of love is informed by the experience of the Second World War—by loss, by tragedy, and by knowledge of evil. Her works consistently demythologize the archetypal love story, featuring unglamorous young female protagonists who fail to find love or who find love that subsequently fails. However, this is not to say that Ginzburg believes that love is an illusion or a fabrication. Love, according to Ginzburg, is a feeling of comfort and peace in the presence of the other. In her essay, “Human Relationships,” she describes the phenomenon of authentic love as follows:

One day we meet the right person. We are unmoved because we haven’t recognized him. . . . He has an infinite capacity to do to us everything that is good and everything that is evil. And yet we feel infinitely calm. (*The Little Virtues* 89)

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<sup>44</sup> For extensive scholarship on the relationship between Ginzburg’s work and existentialist philosophy, see Castronuovo’s *Jewishness as a Moral Identity*. Parallels between Ginzburg and existentialism have also been noted by Pacifici (137), Almond (29), Bassani (139), and Picchione (86).



Ginzburg's understanding of romantic love is tied to a sense of security and rootedness with the beloved. In her fictional works, this form of love surfaces occasionally and rarely survives. Instead, Ginzburg concerns herself with the problematic nature of love, exploring the idea that love is within the domain of human choice and error.

In Ginzburg's early fiction (such as *La strada che va in città*, *Valentino*, and *È stato così*), a variety of people and factors are implicated in love's failure. Typically, some combination of a weakness of character, an inability to communicate, a stifling home environment, and rigid social norms will work together to thwart or sabotage a romantic union. In *È stato così*, the protagonists hasten their engagement in an effort to escape an acute feeling of loneliness and entrapment in their circumstances. The unnamed female narrator and Alberto decide to marry one another, fully aware that their marriage is a compromise. Though there is evidence of genuine affection between them, the reality persists that she is somewhat repulsed by his age and fragile physicality, and he is in love with another (married) woman. However, because the narrator fears that this is her only opportunity for marriage, she convinces herself that to marry Alberto is to possess Alberto, even if his affections are directed elsewhere: "I thought how, if he asked me to marry him, I would say yes, and then we would always be together and even when he was out I would know where he was" (82). Her need for security quells her visceral distaste for Alberto. She sacrifices the dignity of being the sole beloved and the possibility of authentic love with someone else in order to preempt abandonment. She states:

When Alberto asked me to marry him I said yes. I asked how he expected to live with me if he was in love with somebody else, and he said that if I loved him very much and was brave we might make out very well together. Plenty of marriages are like that, he said, because it's very unusual for both partners to love each other the same way. (89)

While the fiancés in Ginzburg's fictional works may be aware that they are not marrying for love, they are hopeful that marriage will grant them some freedom and alleviate the pain of solitude. As Alan Bullock observes, they become disabused of this illusion once they are married, when many of Ginzburg's protagonists "discover in their sexual partner a fundamental incompatibility of spirit which frequently leads to the breakdown of marriage, and subsequently, an isolation which is all the more distressing for having been temporarily relieved" (65). Thus many of the marriages in Ginzburg's fiction are ill-conceived from the start, and the young couple, their families, and larger social forces have all played a part in their contrivance.

By indicating the role of the lovers in electing a flawed union, Ginzburg casts light on the fact that they do have *some* agency, and where there is agency, Ginzburg indicates an opportunity for a shift in the pattern of failed love. However negative Ginzburg's treatment of romantic love may be, it is, as Peggy Boyers describes, a "negativity without nihilism" (77):

Throughout her writing is a consistent attempt to face nothingness and to wrest from it some sort of meaning. Negativity, nay-saying, the stark refusal of optimism, however earnestly exercised, are nevertheless relentlessly in the service of working out the implications of a moral vision based on *something*: an intuition of the good. (77)

This may explain why Ginzburg recounts the demise of love with such fastidious detail in *È stato così*, breaking the process down into a transparent sequence of misperceptions and missteps. The reader's attention is drawn to the abundance of life's junctures where small but important decisions are made. Ginzburg's view is that the failure of love is a problem to solve, not a condition which we are doomed to suffer. In "Human Relationships," she states:

The problem of our relationships with other human beings lies at the centre of our life: as soon as we become aware of this—that is, as soon as we clearly see it is as a problem and no longer as the muddle of unhappiness, we start to look for its origins, and to reconstruct its course throughout our whole life. (75)

This is why, for Ginzburg, the failure of love is not solely a product of oppressive social norms. However young and misguided her protagonists may be, and however constrictive their circumstances, it is within their power to choose authentic love.

When looking for the origins of love's demise in *È stato così*, one identifies the primary misstep to be the unwillingness or incapacity of the lover to see the beloved in his or her totality. Both the narrator and Alberto agree to marry not because they perceive a person that they love but because they recognize an opportunity to escape their unhappy circumstances. They believe that marriage will end their unbearable condition of loneliness. They objectify one another as a kind of emotional life raft, failing to behold and love one another as complete and separate beings. As the relationship progresses, another type of reification occurs. The narrator and Alberto fixate on one or a few negative facets of one another, causing their already imbalanced power dynamic to become more entrenched and egregious. As the love triangle with Alberto's mistress refuses to dissolve, Alberto begins to perceive his wife as a pest interfering in his extramarital affair, and the narrator perceives her husband as her torturer. The narrator and Alberto acknowledge their perceptions of the situation in a discussion about one of Alberto's sketches.

Once I told him that he should put my face on a mouse and his on a cat. He laughed and asked me why. So I asked him if he didn't think we too fitted these roles. He laughed again and said there was nothing mouselike about me. Still he did draw a mouse with my face and a cat with his. The mouse was knitting with a frightened and ashamed look on its face, and the cat was angrily making a sketch in his notebook. (96-97)

While the narrator's suggestion hints at Alberto's cruelty and power over her, his artistic interpretation of that suggestion reveals his perception of her weakness and his own frustration. Over the course of their relationship, the complexity of the beloved is reduced to what the

beloved comes to represent: the injury (or irritation) that is being done to the lover, to the exclusion of other aspects of his or her being.

In her book, *Natalia Ginzburg: Jewishness as Moral Identity*, Nadia Castronuovo indicates that this second type of interpersonal misperception (in which there is a dynamic of power and inequality) is a node of connectivity between Ginzburg and existentialist philosophy (49). Castronuovo argues that in Ginzburg's novels, existential alienation and meaninglessness manifest more as a relational problem than an individual one. Ginzburg's characters experience extended existential crises because they cannot find purpose and security in their most intimate relationships. This is because they depend on one another for recognition, and all too often, one or both parties refuse to recognize "the Other" as a complex and integral being. Those who are victims of this narrow, reductive gaze feel acutely oppressed and ashamed. They inhabit an "absurd" world, a broken world in the immediate sphere of their own home.<sup>45</sup>

Castronuovo identifies a parallel between Ginzburg's configuration of human relationships and Sartre's concept of the "*regard d'autri*" or the objectifying "look of the Other." Castronuovo writes that in the existentialists' "absurd" world, people

are free to create their existence through their choices and acts. However, humans are also dependent on others for recognition and the reflection of the self in the eyes of the other. Sartre's famous '*le regard d'autri*' determines who they are. (48)

In the context of the love relationship, Sartre's "look" functions as a mechanism of possession and power (*Being and Nothingness* 364). The lover achieves superiority over the beloved when he or she delimitates what or who the beloved is and the beloved accepts this definition. A form of this Sartrean dynamic plays out in the marriage of Alberto and the narrator. At the nadir of

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<sup>45</sup> Castronuovo refers here to Camus's definition of absurdity explicated in "The Myth of Sisyphus": "In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. . . . This divorce between man and life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (qtd. in Castronuovo 47).

their relationship, the narrator ceases to struggle against her competitor (Alberto's mistress) and she accepts that she is her husband's second choice. She comes to identify with the "frightened" and "ashamed" mouse in Alberto's drawing. As a consequence of internalizing his definition of her, she begins to feel that she is culpable for his infidelity because she has failed to be sufficiently compelling as a wife and as a desirable woman.

Castronuovo discusses how Sartre and Ginzburg's views about human relationships are informed by the experience of living during the Fascist era and the Second World War (14-30; 46-47). The fact that both Ginzburg and Sartre perceive similarities in the dysfunction of domestic relationships and the colossal breakdown of human relations in Europe is indicative of the volatility of the time period and a heightened sensitivity about the dangers of interpersonal objectification and misrecognition.<sup>46</sup> By contextualizing Ginzburg's work in terms of her life experience during the 1930s and 1940s, Castronuovo helps elucidate why one of Ginzburg's principle moral concerns is the strengthening of human relationships.<sup>47</sup> In addition, her scholarship indicates the ways in which Ginzburg writes this concern into the family dynamics of her fictional characters. What happens within the domestic sphere may appear irrelevant to broader historical phenomenon, but in fact, one's perceptions of a lover or a family member is a formative mechanism for how one perceives one's neighbor.

Ginzburg was in the company of a number of existentialists who wrote about the need to broaden and complicate one's view of other human beings. As William Barrett explains, the collective concern in mid-twentieth century Europe about the perception of "the Other" was a

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<sup>46</sup> See Rebecca West's introduction to *Natalia Ginzburg: A Voice of the Twentieth Century* for more on the political dimensions of Ginzburg's work.

<sup>47</sup> For a discussion on the moral dimension of Ginzburg's postwar essays, see Riviello's "From Silence to Universality in *Le piccolo virtù*." Riviello examines the effect of the Second World War on the moral fabric of society and how Ginzburg felt a "moral obligation to improve human relations through her writing" (181).

reaction against the post-Enlightenment tendency to perceive a person as a divisible being that could be understood, organized, and even optimized. Existentialists sought to restore mystery, complexity, and meaning to humankind's existence (Barrett 275). In fact, they felt an exigency to do so. They believed that whether one perceives a person as a complex and contradictory being, or whether one perceives him or her as a mere fragment of that being, would determine the course of one's relationships and ultimately history itself (Barrett 21-22, 275).

A small tributary of this discourse about perception of "the Other" was devoted to the relationship between lovers. While it was not central to the conversation amongst existentialists, it had a significant impact on the philosophy of love which was emerging from a historical period dominated by views of Proust and Freud.<sup>48</sup> Existentialists addressed the following quandary: before all else that is related to the beloved (i.e., communication, compatibility, sexuality, etc.), what does one *see* when regarding the beloved? Does one see a whole, integral, complex and separate being, or a fragment of that being? More abstract still, does one see a fictitious ideal, or even an opportunity? While "realists" (to use Singer's term) such as Jean-Paul Sartre believed that it is in human nature to objectify the beloved (Barrett 257; Singer, Vol. 3, 284-85), other existentialists such as Martin Buber recognized this tendency, but thought humans capable of viewing the beloved as a subject in his or her own right. For Buber, this willingness to work at changing one's perception of the beloved is a guiding principle for finding and sustaining authentic love.

In the case of the couple in *È stato così*, their distorted perceptions of one another are partly based on the premise that they believe they will be sustained by the other's love.

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<sup>48</sup> See Singer's *Nature of Love*, vol. 3. chs. 4-5, and May's *Love, A History*, chs. 15-16, in which they discuss the influence of Freud and Proust on early twentieth-century Western thought on love. In sum, Proust and Freud viewed love as a projected illusion masking a biological instinct or psychological desire.

Functioning from the stationary isolation of their own egos, they passively wait for love and expect to be nourished by it. Their stance is reminiscent of Sartre's description of love in *Being and Nothingness*: "Each one wants the other to love him but does not take into account the fact that to love is to want to be loved" (376). Buber identifies this phenomenon as illusory love, an expression of some great internal deficit and an attempt to achieve fulfillment of the self. In *Between Man and Man*, he distinguishes between the "lame-winged Eros" preoccupied with the "pollination" of the species and "the strong-winged Eros" of dialogue:

The kingdom of the lame-winged Eros is a world of mirrors and mirrorings. But where the winged one holds sway there is no mirroring. For there I, the lover, turns to this other human being, the beloved, in his otherness, his independence, his self-reality, and turn to him with the all the power of intention of my own heart. (29)

Thus for Buber, inauthentic love can be identified as reflexive while authentic love is relational, whereas for Sartre, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic love does not exist; all love is the desire and expectation to be loved.

The difference between Sartre and Buber's views on love hinges on the existential notion of "authenticity." Sartre maintains that to live authentically (that is—to live a purposeful, meaningful existence in accordance with one's true self and remain uncorrupted by external pressures), one must free oneself from dependencies and cut the tethers of romantic relationships (Barrett 258). Sartre perceives the beloved to be an obstacle to self-fulfillment and self-actualization (Barrett 257; Mounier 17; Sartre 366).<sup>49</sup> Inherent to his argument is what he perceives to be the inevitability of the reductive gaze (Sartre 371). Buber agrees that lovers often

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<sup>49</sup> As Singer argues, Sartre modifies his views on love over the course of life, as he becomes influenced by both historical events and Simone de Beauvoir. Most of Sartre's later views appear posthumously (and in unfinished form) in *Cahiers pour une morale*. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to work strictly with *Being and Nothingness* because it is his most well-known and influential articulation of his formulation of love. For more on the evolution of Sartre's views on love, see Singer (vol. 3, ch. 8).

misperceive or objectify one another, but he carries the argument forward to advocate for changing this dynamic in amorous relationships, not avoiding or escaping love as an adversary of authentic living. Buber gives a directive to look at the beloved or one's neighbor in a different way—to regard him in his “unity” and as a “single whole” (8-9). For Buber, all living is relational: “all real living is meeting” (11). Unlike Sartre, who believes love to be a hindrance to authenticity, Buber believes that to love authentically is to live authentically.

When reading Ginzburg's essay “Human Relationships,” it is apparent that Ginzburg has more in common with Buber than Sartre in this regard, as she too believes that authentic love is more the objective than the distraction. The parallels between Ginzburg and Sartre are more recognizable in *È stato così*, with its detailed examination of a dysfunctional and imbalanced relationship.

While *È stato così* does not reference the Second World War or its aftermath, this narrative is arguably her most grave and despairing. Besides having a violent and tragic ending, there is less of the author's customary dry humor that lends levity to her other work. The dark content and tone of *È stato così* reflect the author's emotional state after having recently survived the war while trying to care for three small children and living with the fear of persecution as a Jew and an anti-Fascist. In addition, this novel was written only three years after having lost her husband who was tortured to death in 1944 for participating in the resistance (Picarazzi 57). As Alan Bullock writes:

Totally defenceless and miserable as she then was, it is hardly surprising that Ginzburg's first attempts at narrative fiction in peacetime should result in a novel—*The Dry Heart* [*È stato così*—whose protagonist is the epitome of naïve innocence brutalized by misfortune, a young woman whose inability to defend herself against the blows of life leads her first to murder [her husband] and then to suicide. (21)



Bullock indicates that while the historical and political events of mid-twentieth century Europe are not present in the story, the lived trauma of war manifests itself in the marital conflicts, the protagonist's mental anguish, and the novella's violent conclusion.

In her novella, *È stato così*, Ginzburg posits various types of (ill)perception (namely, an overactive imagination, fixation, objectification, and withheld recognition) as adversaries of authentic love. Because I uphold Peggy Boyer's claim that Ginzburg writes with "an intuition for the good" (77), I contend that Ginzburg does not simply accept misperception as an incontrovertible fact of the human condition, but that she, like Buber, considers it to be partially within one's control. The reasons that the narrator of *È stato così* murders her husband are multiple and complex; however, her distorted perceptions play a discernible role in generating this crisis. Subsequently, for Ginzburg, perception is partly a moral issue. By recounting the tale of a lovers' dystopia in *È stato così*, Ginzburg conceptualizes a non-example, an inverse illustration of Buber's affirmative statement that the lover must work to remain grounded and to actively regard the beloved in his or her balanced totality and complexity.

*È stato così* is in the form of a confessional. The unnamed narrator has just murdered her husband, and she feels that to do her story justice, she must relay it in its entirety: "I should have to go back to the day we first met" (72). She recounts a detailed descent into an inherently flawed marriage followed by the circumstances and psychology that led her to violence. When the narrator meets Alberto, she is twenty-six years old, lives in a boarding house, and teaches at a girls' school; he is in his early forties, lives with his mother, and works occasionally as a lawyer. Unbeknownst to her, he is in a long-standing love affair with a married woman. In the early days of their acquaintance, the narrator's perceptions of herself and Alberto undergo a radical transformation. Initially, her vision is clouded by an overactive imagination and dizzying

overconfidence, but progressively, as she sobers to the reality of who Alberto is and where his affections are directed, this expansive creativity narrows into a finely focused fixation and tormented obsession. Much of the rich fantasy life that she describes in the first stage reads as youthful naiveté; however, the confessional structure and her defensive and apologetic tone indicate a modicum of guilt (or at least regret) for allowing her perceptions so much autonomy.

During the first phase of their relationship, when the narrator first encounters Alberto, her mode of seeing might be described as youthful misperception. The narrator concedes that she was susceptible to misperception and self-deceit because she was isolated and relied on her imagination for companionship. She explains:

When a girl is very much alone and leads a tiresome and monotonous existence, with worn gloves and very little spending money, she may let her imagination run wild and find herself defenseless before all the pitfalls and errors which imagination has devised to deceive her. (75)

Her overactive imagination is fueled by her isolation and boredom, but also by her poor self-concept. As she is hyper-sensitive to the opinions of other, her imagination is highly suggestible. She believes herself to be plain, unremarkable, and unworthy of male attention, describing herself as “dull” and “unattractive,” certain that she “would always be alone” (74). So undernourished for recognition, she is disproportionately overjoyed by Alberto’s interest in her company, which she is quick to interpret as love. In a complete reversal of her self-concept, she at once blossoms with confidence and femininity, explaining:

A girl likes to think that a man may be in love with her, and even if she doesn’t love him in return it’s almost as if she did. She is prettier than usual and her eyes shine; she walks at a faster pace and the tone of her voice is softer and sweeter. (74)

In her isolation, she had felt invisible, but after a few interactions with Alberto, she felt not only visible, but prominent—a leading actress on the stage. As for her feelings for Alberto: “I didn’t

really like him, and the only reason I was pleased to have him come and call on me was that he looked at me with such gay and sparkling eyes” (73). This is her third repetition of the phrase, “gay and sparkling eyes,” which refers not to her admiration for their charm or beauty but the preeminence of Alberto’s gaze upon her. By narrating this sudden change from humility to inflated self-confidence, Ginzburg highlights a rather significant phenomenon: the transformative potential of recognition when one has been deprived of it. Whoever grants recognition may also retract it. Alberto will consciously or unconsciously exercise this power throughout the duration of their relationship, and she will become enslaved by this need for his recognition. However, in these opening pages, Ginzburg maintains a light and humorous tone, suggesting that an unharnessed imagination is a naïve and even endearing misstep. In recounting the initial stage of their courtship, Ginzburg embeds a note of caution against isolation and “getting carried away” in the great expanse of one’s internal world, if for no other reason than that it makes one impressionable and vulnerable. However, there is nothing particularly unusual or blameworthy about this young narrator’s behavior at this point. In this way, Ginzburg shows how gradual and natural the descent to (ill)perception can be.

Over time, the narrator’s expansive and infinite mode of seeing transforms into a narrow and hyper-focused view of reality. As Alberto’s intentions become increasingly unclear, her imagination ceases to be nourished, and her mind begins to revisit again and again the little morsels of encouragement that he has given her: “Now I had become too idiotic to have any imagination. I absorbed his every word and tried to see if there was love in it. I took his words and turned them over and over in my mind” (83). She begins to make metonymic references to his overcoat and his briefcase, recurring symbols of his elusiveness and incompleteness:

This, then is how I fell in love with him, . . . walking in the city streets, on the alert for his unexpected appearance, and with a quickened pulse every time I saw

a slight figure in a light raincoat holding one shoulder a little higher than the other. (79)

The narrator falls in love not with Alberto but the silhouette of a figure that eludes her. Unable to conceive of him in his totality, her mind moves from one fragment to the next: “the hands, then the notebook, then the raincoat, and then again the notebook,” . . . “to the exclusion of everything else” (81). In this process of falling in love, a fruitful, productive imagination gives way to fixation, which seeks nourishment from scarcity. In either mode, she appears unable to control her perceptions of herself, Alberto, and their relationship.

This process that the narrator experiences (one in which falling in love is fueled by fixation) is one of the subjects of Ortega y Gasset’s *On Love: Aspects of a Single Theme*. He describes falling in love (which he is careful to distinguish from sustained, authentic love) as a “phenomenon of attention” (51). In answer to Stendhal’s theory of crystallization (in which the lover projects numerous fantastical attributes onto the beloved), Ortega y Gasset replies that falling in love is not at all a “superactivity of consciousness,” but “a state of mental misery which has a restricting, impoverishing, and paralyzing effect on the development of our consciousness” (44). Whereas *prior* to falling in love, one perceives a full tableau of objects that constitute his world, *as* one is in falling in love, one sees only the beloved (57). Ortega y Gasset contends that this dynamic of power can and ought to be avoided from the outset. One must avoid fixating solely upon the beloved because one’s personality is informed and described by the foci of one’s attention. What one sees (or chooses to see) in one’s view frame contributes to the formation and the evolution of the self (51). The narrator of *È stato così* testifies to this diminishment of personality as a result of falling in love. Once in love, she begins to lose interest and isolate herself from everything that is not Alberto. She declines an invitation to vacation in San Remo, alienating her cousin and only friend, Francesca, and she neglects her students:

Once I had had been a fairly good teacher and taken considerable interest in my pupils and their work. But now I felt not the least bit of affection for the eighteen girls in front of me; in fact they bored me to the point of nausea and I could not even bear to look at them. (81)

For Ortega y Gasset (and Ginzburg), this negative account of falling in love is not merely a description of a phenomenon, but an indication of an opportunity for positive agency. Ortega y Gasset asserts that fixation on the beloved is a remediable error. He establishes that the lover actively and *voluntarily* focuses his or her attention on the beloved, as opposed to when one is vitally *obliged* to focus on an object, such as when “a shot is fired in the street” (58).

Subsequently, the lover ought to actively and voluntarily “reopen [his/her] field of consciousness” (56). One does so by reintroducing other focal points into one’s view frame.

Ortega y Gasset states, “If in the paroxysm of falling in love we could suddenly see the beloved in the normal perspective of our attention, her magic power would be destroyed” (56). For

Ortega y Gasset, falling in love does not have to be an omnipotent force that overtakes you, enchants you, or imprisons you—it is simply a way of seeing that the human mind can control by “opening channels” in one’s “sealed consciousness, through which fresh air and normal perspective enter” (58). He implies that a “normal perspective” is essential to identifying authentic love in the first place and maintaining its quality, once found.

In both the fantasy and fixation stages of their courtship, the narrator endows an exaggerated sense of power initially to herself and then to Alberto. He appears at first disproportionately diminutive and then grandiose in her mind’s eye. Through her retrospective narration, a more accurate image emerges of both Alberto and their relationship. In reality, Alberto is a very flawed figure, hopelessly disempowered by his subordinate position in his relationship with Giovanna. Alberto’s mood at any given moment depends on Giovanna, who wields power on two fronts: her unattainability as a married woman and her history of

extramarital affairs. This leaves Alberto in constant flux; he believes himself to be Giovanna's one true beloved, yet he can never enjoy consistent affirmation of that belief. In one particularly painful revelation, Alberto admits to marrying the narrator in order to regain some power and dignity in relation to Giovanna: "I wanted to talk about 'my child' when she talked about hers and to have a private life of my own which should be just as mysterious to her as it was to me" (119). Whatever temptation might arise to blame Giovanna for both Alberto and the narrator's unhappiness is quickly undermined by the revelation that Giovanna is *also* unhappy in relation to her husband and Alberto. Over the course of the novella, it becomes apparent that there are not any clear villains in this story; there is only a chain of dependencies and effaced identities. The characters are trapped in a love triangle as a consequence of their ineffectuality and inauthenticity. Because the characters are so consumed with their feelings of impotence, and their happiness is so contingent on the beloved, they lack "a normal perspective." Their insecurities and imaginations obscure their ability to liberate themselves from the beloved's "magic power" (Ortega y Gasset 56).

This pervasiveness and destructive power of inauthenticity is what leads Ginzburg to identify a more specific antidote than "opening channels" to "one's sealed consciousness" (Ortega y Gasset 58). Her remedy to this "abnormal state of attention" is not only to replenish one's perspective with more focal points, but in fact to develop a life purpose and cultivate a vocation. In characteristic fashion of her fictional work, she makes this point via the non-example. Reminiscent of the antiheroes of a Sartre or Camus novel, Ginzburg characterizes Alberto as the embodiment of inauthenticity, completely bereft of purpose and direction (Pacifi 221). Described as "a cork bobbing on the surface of the sea" (83), he is idle and aimless. Rarely at his law practice, he spends hours in his study which is decorated with markers of his arrested

development: a picture of his mother (to whom he is excessively attached) and two decorative items he had made in his youth: a bust of Napoleon and a fleet of ships. In his desk drawer, he keeps a revolver, “in case he wants to commit suicide” (92). He drifts in the tepid waters of a mild depression, interrupted only by moments of recognition from his lover, Giovanna. He never descends into a severe depression, because as the narrator states, “he hasn’t the courage to get at the bottom of anything” (101). She continues, “he refuses to be unhappy. He just lights a cigarette and walks away” (145), and he confirms, “I’m lazy when you come down to it, and I don’t want to suffer” (141). Alan Bullock identifies the “absence of vocation” as the primary affliction of a number of Ginzburg’s characters, who he states “have neglected . . . opportunities for the greater security offered by conventional patterns of short-sighted selfishness” (97). This assessment is certainly applicable to Alberto, but it is also applicable to the narrator, as she herself admits. She implicates herself in neglecting her vocation when she describes how after her marriage, she “had let everything go” (92), referring to her teaching position at the girls’ school. Bullock’s analysis also squares with Ginzburg’s own treatment of the subject of vocation in her non-fiction work, where her message is explicit and affirmative. In her essay “The Little Virtues,” Ginzburg cites two significant reasons why pursuing and maintaining one’s vocation is important, not just for personal fulfillment or even to serve the greater good, but as an act of love and selflessness within intimate relationships. First, she explains that by having a vocation, one preserves one’s relationships, because without it, human beings attach themselves to one another as “a shipwrecked mariner clings to a tree trunk” (100). If one does not have a vocation, one risks oppressing one’s loved ones by depending on them for total fulfillment. Secondly, Ginzburg upholds that pursuing a vocation energizes and inspires those within one’s sphere of influence. She states that vocation is “the highest expression of man’s love for life,” and that “the

love of life begets a love of life” (110). For Ginzburg, to avoid the narrow chasm of fixation and dependency where intimate relations can find themselves, one needs not avoid love (as Sartre would suggest) or merely stay occupied and fill one’s view frame with objects (as Ortega y Gasset would suggest), one needs a higher purpose and sense of direction. Through her characterizations of the narrator and Alberto, Ginzburg points to the egotism and destructive potential of ennui not just for the afflicted individual, but to those in close proximity. The absence of vocation limits one’s perspective by bringing one’s deficits to the fore and eclipsing the longer view. As Bullock states, Ginzburg’s protagonists’ lack of vocation is selfish and “short-sighted” (97). It leads them to objectify their beloveds as beings who simply fulfill or do not fulfill their deficits.

In relation to Ginzburg, Martin Buber is even more insistent on the primacy of vocation. For Buber, vocation and life purpose are integral to his moral and theological understanding of good and evil. In sum, “good is direction, and what is done in it,” and “evil is lack of direction, and that which is done in it” (92). In *Good and Evil*, he initiates his argument by describing the feeling of “swirling chaos”—most commonly first experienced in adolescence—when one is overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities of being and action. In this whirlwind, one has two options. One can “clutch at any object, past which the vortex happens to carry it, and cast its passion upon it” (90). This choice, Buber claims, will prove to be a distraction, a false idol, and a dead-end. It is a “pseudo-decision which is indecision” (90). (For example, in the case of the protagonists of *È stato così*, their first “pseudo-decision” would be their decision to marry to escape their loneliness.) The second option is to “set about the audacious work of self-unification,” giving up “undirected plenitude in favor of one taut string, the one stretched beam of direction” (90). The key to self-unification is that *all* parts of the soul must be integrated and



nothing suppressed. One's "habits," "inclinations," "indolence," "fondness for possibilities," and "appetites," must "plunge of their own accord, as it were, into the mightiness of decision and dissolve within it" (91). This decision is to essentially transcend one's ego and orient one's being towards "the order which has established and eternally establishes good and evil" (95). This must be done with the wholeness of one's being because "evil cannot be done with the whole soul; good can only be done with the whole soul" (92). This theological understanding of vocation, though in appearance beyond Ginzburg's intent, has some resonance in *È stato così* when one considers its violent and fatal conclusion. How does an ordinary young schoolteacher reach a point of such desperation four years into her marriage and, in effect, *do* "evil?" Buber's formulation suggests that in addition to a number of other factors, an absence of "self-unification" and purpose may have played a part.

In a hopeful turn in the narrative, the narrator's life appears to find some direction with the birth of her child. As a mother, she becomes increasingly aware that depending on Alberto for fulfilment is futile. By now having *two* significant relationships in her life, there is the possibility of a refreshed perspective and a new sense of proportion—that is, the simple realization that the child's needs are paramount to her fraught marriage. However, it becomes evident that she has transferred her expectations for fulfillment from her husband to her child. Her relationship with the baby is obsessive, grasping, and singular; her great internal deficit persists and she needs the child to alleviate her loneliness and distract her from Alberto. So while motherhood is perhaps a more noble and worthwhile use of her emotional energy, she is, according to Buber's paradigm, still in the "vortex," "clutching" at an object and "casting her passion upon it." Devoting herself exclusively to her child from a state of insecurity and directionless could be deemed another "pseudo-decision" (90).

The death of the child is the proverbial “point-of-no-return” for the narrator and for her marriage. Though in their grieving, there is a momentary expression and love and mutual support between the narrator and Alberto, this soon fades and they are left where they are started, caught in a tortuous love triangle with Giovanna. At this point, the narrator’s enslavement to Alberto’s recognition is total and all-defining. She now fears her husband and perceives his infidelity as a reflection of her shortcomings. She writes,

It was my own fault, I realized, if even now I wasn’t altogether happy with him. I was always worried about my face and body, and when we made love I was afraid he might be bored. Every time I had something to say to him I thought it over to make sure it wasn’t boring. (140)

It is in these final pages of the novel where the Sartrean dynamic of “*le regard d’autrui*” is particularly apparent. As Singer explains, the power of the lover’s “look” in Sartrean thought is that both lover *and* beloved ascribe to the notion that the beloved is an object (288-89). At this point, the narrator appears to have internalized her status as a reduced being, a subordinate figure that either pleases or displeases her superior.

Ultimately, a key difference in their characters—the narrator’s desire to understand problems and Alberto’s tendency “to walk away” from them—results in an eruption of deep-seated anger on the part of the narrator. “Incorrigibly young” (147), Alberto mocks her jealousy: “He was laughing and turned around to see if I was laughing too. I shot him between the eyes” (149). She then (it is implied) takes her own life. How one interprets these final acts depends on whether one reads *È stato così* as solely an attempt to understand and explain human behavior or whether one subscribes to Peggy Boyers’ argument that Ginzburg writes with “a moral vision based on *something*: an intuition of the good” (77). Critics Bullock, Castronuovo, and Picarazzi view the protagonist’s final decision as a reaction to circumstance and social restrictions. Bullock views the protagonist’s decision to kill her husband and herself as succumbing to a

series of hardships. In his view, the narrator is “the epitome of naïve innocence brutalized by misfortune” (21). Castronuovo interprets the narrator’s actions as the rejection of “the role imposed by society” upon her (49). As the narrator is “gradually deprived of autonomy by the people around her and by social customs” (49), she comes to believe that her only means to transcend these barriers is to kill her captor and then herself. The murder is a desperate act of agency, an attempt to *do something* about her situation. Picarazzi also sees the murder as a revolt, pointing out that the narrator shoots Alberto in the *eyes*, “the index of her worth; she targets ‘the look,’ . . . the gaze and valor conferred upon her and taken away” (87). Picarazzi’s feminist and psychoanalytic approach argues that the narrator has failed to navigate a patriarchal society. Neither able to cope nor transcend the limits imposed upon her, she dissolves, her identity subsumed by her relationship with Alberto and her child, and she falls into deep depression. Picarazzi states, “Unable to accept herself and move with ease within her own boundaries, the narrator externalizes her depression, as anger, by shooting Alberto in the eyes, only to internalize it once again through her possible suicide” (91). These interpretations are true to Ginzburg’s intent in that they speak to the narrator’s psychological state and they incorporate Ginzburg’s social critique of hierarchical and repressive societies. What they do not account for is Ginzburg’s indications that that the murder is the result of both the narrator’s victimization *and* her faulty decision-making over the course of her relationship with Alberto. By signaling that the narrator is at least partially responsible for the murder, Ginzburg’s objective is not to blame the narrator, but to meditate on the significance of her failures, as part and parcel of the novel’s exploration of the consequences of distorted perception within love relationships. The reader is certainly made to sympathize with the narrator’s desperate act for having suffered the loss of her child and endured the repeated emotional injuries of an unfaithful and selfish

husband. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, Ginzburg does indicate how the narrator erred both in isolating herself after her marriage and in neglecting her vocation as a teacher, choices which contributed to a distorted perception of herself, Alberto, and their marriage. Most importantly, the reader recognizes the narrator's fateful initial misstep in perceiving Alberto and their marriage as a solution to her loneliness, opting for inauthentic love in lieu of (assumed) spinsterhood. The narrator is self-aware in this regard. In her confessional, the narrator wishes to tell the story of her failed marriage from the very beginning, detailing *all* of the circumstances, those in and out of her control, because even if the silence and oppression of her upbringing had blinded her to opportunities for agency before, she recognizes them now.

In Ginzburg's "consistent attempt to face nothingness and to wrest from it some sort of meaning" (Boyers 77), she points to the moral imperative of living purposefully and working to maintain and improve one's human relationships. In "Human Relationships," Ginzburg describes the pinnacle of human existence as the moment when we

look at our neighbor with a gaze that would always be just and free, not the timid or contemptuous gaze of someone who whenever he is with his neighbor always asks himself if he is his master or his servant. All our life we have only known how to be masters and servants: but in that secret moment of ours, in our moment of perfect equilibrium, we have realized that there is no real authority or servitude on the earth. . . . It is the highest moment in the life of a human being, and it is necessary that we stand with others whose eyes are fixed on the highest moment of their destiny. (94)<sup>50</sup>

In this passage, Ginzburg ascertains that there is a choice in how one perceives one's neighbor. All beings ought to aspire to this understanding that "the Other" is neither inferior nor superior, and they should seek the company of those that share this objective. This aspiration serves as one of the moral points of reference that can help keep one's perceptions in equilibrium.

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<sup>50</sup> For an explanation of the connections between Ginzburg's configuration of human relationships and Hegel's "master and slave relationship," see Castronuovo (2-4).

In examining *È stato così* in light of Sartre's philosophy, one recognizes the commonality and universality of the phenomenon of distorted perception within love relationships. When one reads *È stato così* in light of Ortega y Gasset's and Buber's philosophies, one reads Ginzburg's conviction that this kind of (ill)perception can be avoided and remedied. This is why I argue that Ortega y Gasset's and especially Buber's perspective ought to be considered alongside Sartre in a discussion about Ginzburg and existentialism. To consider misperception to be optional rather than inevitable is a cornerstone of Buber's thought, and it is expressed in his *I-It/I-Thou* dichotomy.<sup>51</sup>

In the *The Nature of Love*, Irving Singer offers an explanation as to why Sartre and Buber, though both existentialists, diverge on this point. Sartre's paradigm is based on a godless universe, one void of Buber's belief in a universal order of good and evil. As Sartre believes that God is a figment of the human imagination, he contends that people use erotic love as a substitute to compensate for God's absence. The lover attempts to "merge" with the beloved, to "possess" the beloved, to feel integral to something larger and complete (Singer 293-94). Love, thus, is a religion, and like all religions, it is the worship of a false idol, an idol emblematic of nothing at all. In lieu of this act of futility, Sartre believes that people should operate independently, establish their own principles and spend their life working to implement them and uphold them. This would be "authentic" living. For Buber, as a religious existentialist, the love of God is the organizing force of one's life. To love another human being is to love God.

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<sup>51</sup> By way of reminder, the *I-It* relation is one in which "the Other" is perceived as a component of himself or a mere sum of components. This mode of seeing, while not evil in itself, can lead to hatred. Writes Buber in *I and Thou*, "Hate is by nature blind. Only *a part* of a being can be hated" [emphasis added] (16). The *I-It* mode of seeing is more passive and more facile. This is how Sartre's "*le regard d'autrui*" comes to pass and why it is so pervasive. The "*I-Thou*," the mode to which Buber believes man ought to aspire, is to regard one's neighbor in his "unity" and as a "single whole," to "stand in relation to him, in the sanctity of the primary word: 'Thou'" (8-9).

Where does Natalia Ginzburg stand in relation to Sartre's atheism and Buber's religiosity? While Ginzburg's views on love may resemble those of Buber, she was not religious, and while her characters may act out Sartrean views on love, she was not an atheist. Ginzburg was raised in a secular household (although her mother came from a Catholic family and her father came from a Jewish family).<sup>52</sup> Her own beliefs about God emerged from life experience and reflection. According to Peggy Boyers, she had a "shadowy and tenuous belief in God and providence" (77). In Ginzburg's own words (in which she refers to herself in the third person): "She believes in God, albeit in a chaotic tormented and discontinuous manner" (qtd. in Boyers 79). However, she rejected a divinely planned universe of fixed moral certainties. Boyers writes,

So strong is the abhorrence of ideology and of all static systems of belief that Ginzburg's overriding concern is to resist the comfortable appropriation of a ready-made ethics and to insist that the moral life is difficult, improvisatory, highly individualized matter. (79)

Ginzburg disliked philosophical and religious language with its abstractions and generalities and was "more comfortable in the realm of the particular" (81). From studied introspection, observation, and narration, Ginzburg took on moral problems case-by-case, story-by-story, and though she was adverse to accepting a set of truths handed down to her, she painstakingly went about trying to derive moral truths based on what she knew to be true. Writes Boyers, "the project of her life seemed to her—as it seems to us—to have been to assert moral values that might actually redeem humanity through inquiry, honest criticism and encounter" (78). Ginzburg

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<sup>52</sup> It is Castronuovo's primary argument that Ginzburg does identify with Judaism, but as a "moral identity," not as a religious or cultural identity. Castronuovo claims that Ginzburg, who had lived through an extended period of anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy and had suffered through the war, began to identify with other Jews as victims of oppression. Castronuovo cites an interview with Peggy Boyers in which Ginzburg states, "My Jewish identity became extremely important to me from the moment the Jews began to be persecuted. At that point, I became aware of myself as a Jew" (qtd. in Castronuovo 1). This, Castronuovo argues, is a driving force in Ginzburg's moral argumentation.

offers an alternative to the theist/atheist dichotomy. Life experience has presented her with paradox and mystery, “shrouded in uncertainty and doubt, but rich in spiritual depth” (80).

Likewise, Ginzburg’s views on love are paradoxical: love is tragic, painful, and often elusive or illusory, but it is not hopeless; it is a problem to be solved. This view does not fit neatly into Singer’s “idealist”/ “realist” dichotomization of belief systems about love. While Singer identifies Buber as an “idealist” (because love of the beloved is an expression of love for the divine realm) and he identifies Sartre as a “realist” (for his belief that love is an illusion, a psychological compensatory act for a universe without God), Ginzburg’s views are neither. Love is a dynamic problem. Like all human relationships, it has to “be rediscovered and reinvented every day. We have to remember constantly that every kind of meeting with our neighbor is a human action and so it is always evil or good, true or deceitful, a kindness or a sin” (*The Little Virtues* 95).

## CHAPTER 2: Roberto Rossellini and Nikolai Berdyaev on Love and Marriage

In *On Love*, contemporary philosopher Luc Ferry observes that the “shift from the ‘marriage of convenience’ . . . to marrying for love . . . was a long process that took several centuries. . . . But it was only after the Second World War that this new model became universal” (8). It is at the end of this “long process” in European social history that Roberto Rossellini writes and directs *Viaggio in Italia* (1954), a film about a British husband and wife who reevaluate their marriage while on a trip to Naples. When considering the socio-historical context Ferry describes, Rossellini’s examination of one particular marriage could be viewed as a much broader reassessment of the institution of marriage as it enters a new historical phase. With families now relegated to a minor role in the matchmaking process, the mid-twentieth century is a period of redefinition, with new freedoms and new responsibilities to consider. In both practical and philosophical terms, it is not only a question of *who* one should marry but *how* one should approach marriage. As previously discussed in the introduction, a number of European intellectuals wrote on the subject of love and/or marriage beginning in the interwar period and leading up to the postwar era, including, but not limited to, Erich Fromm, Denis de Rougemont, José Ortega y Gasset, Jean-Paul Sartre, C.S. Lewis, and Nikolai Berdyaev. Assembled together, their meditations on love can be seen as an effort by intellectuals to grapple with this augmented agency in love and marriage. This chapter will discuss the contributions of Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* and Nikolai Berdyaev’s philosophical works to this discourse.



The striking similarities in Rossellini's and Berdyaev's viewpoints constitute a challenge to the notion that the age of the "marriage of convenience" has in fact come to an end by the mid-twentieth century. They observe that though marriages are less likely to be arranged for the financial benefit of the extended family, the function of marriage remains primarily pragmatic and economic. Rossellini describes the status of modern marriage in an interview with *Filmcritica*, characterizing *Viaggio's* protagonists' marriage as a business partnership, held together by an allegiance to the mundane:

I think it is a fairly normal thing in modern society that many marriages are limited companies under another name. People get married because one of them has a job to do, the other has a number of connections, so the wife acts as a public relations officer while the husband is an economics official. . . . And the couple in *Voyage in Italy* are that kind of couple—people who have nothing to say to each other outside of their work, their job, their daily routine. A vacation, more than anything else, is the death of them. (154)

In *Slavery and Freedom* (1944), Berdyaev offers an explanation for this trend:

Marriage, in its social projection, has always been closely connected with economics and not infrequently had a compulsorily commercial character. Marriage has been very far from being a sacrament. Nowadays marriage has acquired not a compulsorily commercial, but a freely commercial character. This is part of that rationalization of life which is taking place in every sphere. (236)

Berdyaev implies here that despite the overwhelming esteem and popularity of the idea of a love-marriage, couples *choose* to expend their energies on the utilitarian aspects of married life and not on its primary ingredient: love. He claims that this is due to the cultural paradigm that privileges the material world and overlooks, even denigrates, the spiritual world. The "material world" is defined in this chapter as the socialized world, the world codified and organized by humankind. Significantly, it does not refer to the sensory world, such as nature, art, the body, or the landscape, which Berdyaev and Rossellini consider to be expressions—or even extensions—of the spiritual world. "Spiritual" is used here in its broadest sense as the binary to "material," as

the invisible world of mystery and the unknown. This is not to ignore the fact that Berdyaev's understanding of the spiritual is largely informed by Russian Orthodoxy or that Rossellini's film is laden with imagery of Greco-Roman paganism and Catholicism. In reference to this discussion of love, however, Berdyaev and Rossellini's common concern is the viability of love in an excessively mechanized and rationalized world. The non-material world, the spiritual world, with its allowance for the unknowable, is posited as the more hospitable environment for love's survival. Ultimately, Berdyaev and Rossellini's objective is not to merely heighten consciousness around this lingering entanglement between marriage and economics. Their works suggest that couples who desire to maintain love within their marriage will need to subvert their value systems and privilege the spiritual over the material world. Viewing Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* in light of Berdyaev's philosophy helps to situate the film within a pan-European discussion on love and marriage at a transitional time in its history and to highlight some of its didactic underpinnings.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, one can more readily view the structure of *Viaggio in Italia* as a heroine's journey, and a map or blueprint for achieving existential and spiritual renewal in service of love's survival.

In *Slavery and Freedom*, Berdyaev states that "there cannot be any other sort of love than free love" (228). He explains that society and religion have sought to condition love through their respective codifications of marriage, but love exists apart from their rules and their constructs: "Love . . . does not belong to the world of objectivization, of objectivized nature, nor does it belong to objectivized society, it comes, as it were, from a different world and it is a

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<sup>53</sup> It is worth noting at the outset that despite similarities in their theories of love, there is not any evidence to suggest that Berdyaev and Rossellini were acquainted with one another's work. However, Berdyaev and Rossellini were both friends of Jacques Maritain, and all three were living in Paris simultaneously during the brief period from late 1946 to 1948. This is to say that the possibility of some type of acquaintance or familiarity with one another's work is not out of the question.

break-through into this world; it belongs to infinite subjectivity, to the world of freedom” (234). He contends that love has suffered because family life has been “penetrated through and through by economic utilitarianism” (*Creative Act* 197), and that this has been fostered by what he calls the “bourgeois spirit” (*Slavery* 181). Berdyaev refers to the bourgeoisie not as a social class but as “a spiritual category” (181), to which, in theory, a member of the proletariat or the aristocracy could belong. The “bourgeois man,” argues Berdyaev, “firmly believes only in the world of visible things” (181), and he is primarily concerned with where he is positioned in the hierarchy of this world. He is uninterested in the spiritual world and “has no desire to transcend himself” (182). Fearful of struggle and “the vast expanse of the infinite” (182), he protects himself with comforting indicators of the finite by leading an orderly and predictable existence. Berdyaev states that the man inflicted with this “bourgeois spirit” is consumed with the affairs at hand:

‘Business’ obliterates the object and meaning of life; ‘business’ prevents the bourgeois from seeing the person, nature, the starlit skies. . . . All his will-power is turned exclusively to the organization of existence and he loses the capacity of rejoicing in life. He is an organizer and a business-man, and organization kills organic life in him. (“Bourgeois Mind” 21-22)

Berdyaev contends that the bourgeois spirit disparages love by allocating it to the objective, social world of marriage and family life. As marriage has traditionally been used to secure economic and social advancement, it has become a tool to serve an ideology that privileges “the power of money over human life” (*Slavery* 231). Berdyaev calls for a revolution of this personal value system, in which love—a supreme value—triumphs over the desire for wealth, power, comfort, and status (“Bourgeois Mind” 13). In his autobiography, *Dream and Reality*, he states, “love is the most intimately personal experience in life and society should not dare interfere in it” (78). Crediting the medieval troubadours for their affirmation that love exists outside the socialized realm, he points out that it has historically been literature, and not ethics, religion, nor

law, that has given voice “to the right and dignity of love” (79). With works like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Tristan and Isolde* in mind, Berdyaev defends the freedom of love against the minor virtue of duty; the laws and conventions of marriage are of little consequence in the face of love. In Berdyaev’s view, divorce should not only be admissible, it is sometimes the ethically correct course of action: “The real question is not of the right to divorce (a right which I believe to be beyond question), but of the duty of divorce when love is no more” (79). Berdyaev contends that there is a moral imperative to reject the common practice of marriage as a loveless “economic unit” (*Creative Act* 199). “Marriage without love,” he states, “is immoral” (*Slavery* 237).

The English couple in *Viaggio in Italia*, Katherine and Alex Joyce (played by Ingrid Bergman and George Sanders) may be said to embody Berdyaev’s “bourgeois spirit.” Alex, in particular, is psychologically bound to work and timetables. He is frustrated and bored by Naples and wishes to sell his uncle’s villa and return to London as soon as possible: “I am getting absolutely sick of this crazy country—it poisons you with laziness. I want to go back home, back to work.” Katherine’s “bourgeois spirit” manifests in her meticulous and guarded self-presentation and her sense of propriety. André Bazin goes so far to say that she possesses “the consciousness of an ordinary bourgeoisie” who “suffers from great spiritual poverty” (98). However, she is not as easily classified as her husband, as she also possesses an innate curiosity and a depth of sentiment that suggest that she is willing to explore beyond “the world of visible things” (Berdyaev, *Slavery* 254).

At home in England, the cultural emphasis on propriety, respectability, and routine had occupied the Joyces and provided reinforcement for their marriage, but now Naples, with its sensuality and spirituality, destabilizes this sense of security. Upon arrival in Italy, Katherine and Alex’s deficits, both individual and shared, surface immediately. On the first day of the *viaggio*,

their marriage shows signs of distress, and by the seventh day, they decide to divorce. Ostensibly, the conflict of the film is whether or not the marriage will survive, and in a brief and miraculous moment in the finale, it appears that their journey to Italy has in fact restored their love and saved their marriage. However, the reunion is sudden and not wholly substantiated, indicating that it may be tenuous. Whether or not the Joyces will be able to sustain their love and their marriage beyond the final frame of the film is left to the imagination. While Alex's commitment remains in question, it can be said that Naples has allowed Katherine to transcend her defenses and her pretenses, to integrate the parts of her being that heretofore have been sublimated in service of the role she must play as a wife in her society and her culture. The environment of Naples may not have guaranteed the Joyces' future, but it has reawakened its potential by renewing Katherine's capacity for love (Wood 11). In *Viaggio in Italia*, Katherine will embark on a spiritual quest as a tourist visiting the sites of Naples. Over the course of this existential journey, knowledge about herself and the human condition will come by way of revelation, a kind of "bubbling up" of subterranean understandings that she will cognitively decipher. She will begin to see love as a more worthwhile objective than propriety and self-control in a short, earthly existence.

Before elaborating on Katherine's journey, it will be helpful to outline Berdyaev and Rossellini's shared understandings of freedom, personality, and the sacred, as they are the elements that constitute the spiritual journey requisite for love's survival. One of the most pre-eminent commonalities between them is their esteem for human freedom. As a personalist, Berdyaev's life work is built around the complexity, mystery, and uniqueness of the person and the forces that liberate and enslave the person. Berdyaev contends that though humans are born with personality, they must also struggle to preserve and develop it. Over the course of his life,

man is confronted or lured by the conforming forces of necessity such as “the mores of society, the compulsion of state or individual vices” (Spinka, “Nicholas Berdyaev” 66). In his pursuit of spiritual renewal, man’s purpose is to maintain and develop his personality through constructive use of his freedom. The organizer of the personalist movement, Emmanuel Mounier, clarifies that the idea is not to strive to become eccentric or exceptional: “Personalism is not an ethic of ‘great men,’ nor is it a new doctrine of aristocracy, an eclecticism of all the most fascinating spiritual and psychological successes” (46). Instead, personality can be found in “the hero in the heat of battle, a lover giving himself in love, a creative artist absorbed in his work” (46). In other words, Mounier states, it is “the extraordinary in everyday life” (46). By emancipating one’s personality, one inhabits his authentic self. However, the emancipation of personality is not an endpoint of a singular, linear struggle. It requires “continuous transcending of self,” and it entails suffering (Berdyaev, *Slavery* 28). In Berdyaev’s writings on love, “free love” requires that lovers persistently work to liberate their own personalities, to fight for their own authenticity as individuals, not from the beloved, but from the stultifying comfort that comes from a prescribed identity.

The uniqueness of the person and the exigency of freedom are also central to Rossellini’s philosophy. As Tag Gallagher states, Rossellini’s aspiration for mankind is the “liberation of the spirit—the courage to be oneself” (345). He is critical of blind allegiances to ideologies and social custom. Rossellini states: “One lives in orthodoxy because it’s comfortable, a way of avoiding responsibility. . . . My great dream is that each person be himself, with all the risks that entails, including the risk of being a fool” (my translation) (qtd. in Menon 77, 80). By living according to one’s own compass, there is the increased likelihood that one will engage in authentic, creative and “heroic” action (Rossellini 175). If one does not, one risks finding oneself

complicit in something morally reprehensible. Rossellini states in an interview with *Cahiers de Cinéma*, “Freedom is the center and mainspring of everything. If you make a discovery while you are free, it is wonderful. But if you manage to achieve perfection in conformity, there is nothing heroic about that. My main concern is to bring back this heroic sense in our lives” (175). In *Viaggio in Italia*, Rossellini defines heroism as the courage to live and love honestly. In the case of Katherine, this means coming to terms with the implications of “perfection in conformity” and breaking free from the roles she plays within her marriage.

For Berdyaev, freedom possesses a “sacred quality” (*Dream* 56). To exercise one’s freedom is to inhabit one’s spiritual being and the spiritual world. The supernatural world for Berdyaev is neither elsewhere nor made of a different substance; it is “a mode of existence” on earth (*Slavery* 254). He defines it as “the world of spirituality, of freedom, love, kinship” whereas the material world is “the world of objectivization, of determinism, of alienation, of hostility, of law” (254). In Berdyaev’s view, constructive acts of creative freedom transfigure man and bring him closer to a spiritual existence on earth. Likewise for Rossellini, the sacred is present in everyday life. Sandro Bernardi states,

The sacred, for Rossellini, is not just what happens in exceptional circumstances, or to superior beings, but what lies before everyone every day and what they live within, the world in its totality, which manifests to each person differently yet is always the same and only a small part of which can be comprehended by the conscious mind. (50)

The ability to recognize this immanent sacred realm is contingent upon the individual’s continuous efforts towards self-realization and authenticity. As Robin Wood contends, Rossellini’s spiritual belief system is about “striving towards fulfillment . . . and fulfillment [is] a process of becoming” (11). This “process of becoming” begins with the conviction and courage to live one’s truth. Exercising freedom is the triumph of the spirit over the material. In fact, it is

the defining quality of the saint, the martyr, and the hero.<sup>54</sup> In *Viaggio in Italia*, Katherine's "heroic" action is simply to determine her feelings for husband. Whether the honesty of these feelings is more accurately reflected in the decision to divorce or to start anew is not the most urgent question. Instead, Rossellini focuses on Katherine's liberation from short-sighted preoccupations and the process of achieving authenticity. The subtlety of this heroism is precisely what interests Rossellini: "I think that the surprising, extraordinary, moving thing about men is just that the great actions and achievements occur in the same way as the ordinary acts involved in living; it is with the same humility that I try to translate one into the other" (qtd. in Guarner 144).

The potential for the Joyces' love is renewed at the end of Katherine's two-stage journey. The first stage is what Berdyaev would call the "emancipation" from "the bourgeois spirit" (*Slavery* 181). This emancipation is achieved by dissolving the barriers between the self and the spiritual realms, which is accomplished by being present, alive, and in relation with one's immediate surroundings—nature, the landscape, people, works of art—and by being cognizant and humbled by the proximity of death. This first stage is an admission of fragility and vulnerability, a surrender of control that Berdyaev's "bourgeois man" is so keen to possess (i.e. his compulsion to organize and master time, emotions, and possessions). The second stage involves identifying suppressed sentiments and convictions and finding the courage to act upon them.

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<sup>54</sup> This principle is most evident in Rossellini's 1952 film, *Europa '51*. In atonement for the sin of neglecting her son (and thereby causing him to take his own life), the protagonist (also played by Ingrid Bergman) abandons her wealth and family to serve the poor. Her actions are perceived not as heroic or saintly, but as indications of insanity, and she is sent to a mental institution. Rossellini's closing shot of Bergman imprisoned in the institution revisions her as a martyr, misunderstood in a modern world of misplaced values.



Rossellini chooses Naples as the space for Katherine's transformation because of its proximity to the sacred realm. As he states in an interview with *Cahiers de Cinéma*, Naples is a "strange atmosphere so imbued with a very real, very immediate, very deep feeling: the sense of eternal life" (54). It is a place where life and death co-exist, and as Gallagher states, "where the earth is alive and even metal and stones have biological life" (411). Within this "strange atmosphere," a change in properties—like ice to water, or water to vapor—takes place within the composition of the couple. This new freedom and vitality allow Katherine to better recognize the layers of her emotions and act upon them in a way that felt impossible in her ordinary existence.

This, however, is a gradual process that manifests in subtle revelations, and for much of the film Katherine and Alex's marriage appears to be in distress. On the fourth night of their journey, Katherine and Alex's differences erupt in an argument after a social gathering at the Duke of Lipoli's residence. In this scene, the viewer learns something of their fraught marital dynamic over the last eight years. It is revealed that Alex's unspoken criticism has "crushed" certain aspects of Katherine's personality, such as her "ridiculous romanticism." As a defense against his disapproval, she has responded by becoming frigid and humorless, giving her husband more cause for complaint. It is Katherine that identifies the underlying cause of this problem: "When I was reduced in rank from your wife to a mere hostess for your friends to handle your public relations, you seemed quite pleased." In assuming the identities of a socialite bourgeois couple, the Joyces have clipped one another's personhood (and their own) through an elaborate exchange of quiet criticism, snide remarks, and defensive airs. Love has suffered in this cold war, as the Joyces' energy has been marshalled towards self-preservation and public performance. In effect, they have been functioning as two-dimensional versions of themselves,

as characters in a drama. Reconciliation will only be possible if they can, as individuals, reclaim and come to terms with the entirety and complexity of their sentiments.

As previously mentioned, the film suggests that the Joyces (again, mostly Katherine) do make some progress towards this end. Over the course of the seven days, Rossellini's camera assiduously studies Katherine's reactions as she journeys through Naples, documenting indications of new revelations and understandings. Rossellini follows Alex as well, but Alex wanders more so than explores, and his reactions to his experiences are cryptic, indicating confusion and sensitivity, not profound rumination and growth. Katherine's journey is comprised of five site visits (the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Cumae, the Phlegraean Fields, the Fontenelle Cemetery, and Pompeii) and the unstructured hours in between when she is exposed to Naples through its people, its rhythms of life, and its natural beauty. As Sandro Bernardi and Laura Mulvey explain, Katherine's journey is patterned in a mythical structure. Bernardi compares Katherine's journey to the epic trope of the journey to the underworld: "If Ulysses's journey to the underworld in the *Odyssey* is the *nèkya* of Greek literature, . . . then *Journey to Italy* may be considered the *nèkya* of Italian cinema" (58). Like Odysseus, Katherine will "struggle with monsters either literal or figurative in search of self-knowledge" in "a space of transformative experience" (Mulvey 96-97). Indeed, Rossellini inserts the ancient epics into the subliminal consciousness of the viewer by naming Alex's uncle "Homer." Like a ghostly invitation to tour the underworld, it is Homer's death that prompts the Joyces' voyage to Naples. In part, Katherine's journey will be about discovering the secrets of the past in that "deep level of Mediterranean culture buried under millennia" that bear upon the human condition generally and her existence personally (Bernardi 58).

However, as Bernardi points out, Katherine's journey is also "into light, the sun, the realm of living and love" (58). Katherine is now immersed in a city of sensual chaos. In a repeated scene of Katherine driving through Naples in her Bentley, the viewer witnesses Katherine react with surprise and sensitivity to a city teeming with babies in carriages, pregnant women, and couples in love. She is also confronted by the vitality and warmth of Natalia and Burton (friends of Uncle Homer and caretakers of their villa) who speak openly of being in love and wanting children, clearly at ease with their sentimental natures. This "realm of living and love" is set in the heat of the sun with the magnificence of Mt. Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples in the background. Naples will awaken Katherine's senses; this new and highly charged environment will sensitize her and prime her for her journey of self-discovery. In order to become her authentic self—uninhibited and unguarded—she will have to be brought out of the confines of her socialized self. She will have to be exposed to, and even discomfited by, the realities of living, loving, having children, and dying. These instincts and desires have been denied components of her personality whose absence has disrupted the complex fabric of her being. The journey "into light, the sun" will break down her cold resistance and allow those parts of her to surface.

The scenes of Katherine's journey in Naples alternate with scenes of the Joyces back at Uncle Homer's villa, most of which are fraught with friction and discord. These scenes with Alex are an integral part of Katherine's existential journey. Their interactions preoccupy her mind and heart, and infuse Naples with subjective meaning. Rossellini puts Katherine's embittered reactions to these arguments under a magnifying glass, making it evident that her solitary expeditions are not purely motivated by a traveler's curiosity but by the need to wrest herself from the dark moods that these arguments provoke. The end of the discord between the

Joyces, be it by way of divorce or renewal of the marriage, is the unconscious driving force behind Katherine's journey. Reminiscent of the "hero's journey" described by Joseph Campbell, she is repelled out of the domestic space to search for and bring back new knowledge, in this case, for the benefit of their marriage.

At her first excursion to the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale*, the alternating shots of wide eyes and her pursed lips reveal that she is both in awe of the life-like statues and discomfited by their nudity and vitality. This reaction is echoed verbally at home later that evening, in one of the rare moments of peace with her husband: "To think that these men lived thousands of years ago and you feel they're just like men of today. . . . What struck me was the complete lack of modesty with which everything is expressed." Her "emancipation" in this instance is occurring on two levels. First, she is presented with the pure marvel of the art in its ability to capture the vitality of the past for eternity. In witnessing images of history that nearly pulse with life, she is struck by the universal commonality of the human experience. She conveys this understanding again when she says: "It is as if Nero or Caracalla, Caesar or Tiberius, would suddenly tell you what they felt and you could understand exactly what they are like." Secondly, Katherine is confronted with the sexuality of the nude statues. The sensual ease of the statues clashes with her puritanical paradigm and confronts her with her own sexual frigidity (Bondanella 104). The tour guide comments on the rounded figure of one of the statues and asks her if she shares his opinion. She disdainfully replies, "I wouldn't know," which serves to extinguish the potential for an awkward conversation, but also reveals that, in truth, she wouldn't know, as she side-steps all that is sensual in nature. In this first visit to the museum, it is both her intellectual communion with the past and the cultural and personal friction with the sexuality of the sculptures that stirs activity in her mind and shakes up her sensibilities. At this point, no grand epiphanies about her

life have occurred, but the dialectical process has begun. The following scene, in which she shares a tranquil moment (albeit brief) with her husband in front of the fire, suggests that for their marriage to survive, they need content for the conversations, something beyond daily logistics and the failure of their marriage. In this scene, her own personal growth transfers to their marriage, allowing her to neutralize their conflict momentarily by engaging her husband in substantive conversation.

The cave of the Cumaean Sybil is Katherine's next touristic expedition. Katherine is in ill-humor the day she visits Cumae. She has argued with Alex the previous evening and he has left for an overnight trip to Capri. Upon arrival at the site, however, her emotions subside in deference to the marvel of the cave. Katherine learns from her guide that Cumae is the legendary dwelling of the Sybil, the renowned prophetess and Aeneas's guide to the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Layers of history and mythology haunt this site, a notion that turns to sensation when the guide claps and shouts, summoning echoes from the past from the depths of the cavern. Katherine's guide informs her that the British troops landed there in World War II. The mention of British troops on Neapolitan soil elicits Katherine's memory of Charles Lewington, a young poet that used to be in love with her. He was stationed in Naples during the war, contracted a sickness and died some years later. Charles's ghost now appears in the form of felt memory. Rossellini holds on a long shot of Katherine and the guide entering the long trapezoidal entrance to the cave, evoking Aeneas's descent into the underworld, and signaling the change in the atmosphere of the film. What begins as touristic awe at the majesty of the Sybil's cave becomes progressively more subjective. Notes of fear, melancholy, nostalgia, and anger register on Katherine's face as her experience mingles with thoughts about Alex and Charles. The guide informs her, "It is here where lovers would come to question the Sybil when they wanted to

know what the course of their love would be.” Rossellini’s subsequent close-up on Katherine reveals her distress. The guide’s statement has completed the transformation: the cave has lost all objective, historical significance; it is now a room in her consciousness that she will inhabit, explore, and that will ultimately help her make sense of her marriage. Her emotional reaction stems from the realization that like Neapolitans from centuries previous, she too now finds herself vulnerable, seeking the Sibyl’s prophetic wisdom about the course of her love.

Disconcerted, she begins to recite Charles Lewington’s poems under her breath. Why does she revert to the memory of her former admirer at this moment? What significance does Charles hold in respect to her knowledge about herself and her marriage? Impulse compels her towards him because his memory is a warm shelter from her husband’s coldness. To remember Charles is to remember being loved and being desired. Whether or not Charles is the more compatible spirit, the “truer beloved,” is unclear. However, by evoking Aeneas’s descent to the underworld at the beginning of the scene, Rossellini signals that for the moment, Charles is to be understood as one of the ghosts along her journey, a source of knowledge. He represents the part of her selfhood that Alex has rejected: her “ridiculous romanticism.” He *is* her sentimental nature now long buried beneath pretense and cool-headed, routinized existence. To co-exist with the spirit of Charles in the cave is to inhabit a forgotten part of herself. It is a moment of catharsis, a liberation of the self, if only for a moment. Unconsciously, she has sought a prophecy of love from the Sybil, but she never receives a clear vision of the course of her marriage. Instead, she experiences an expansion of self and perspective. No longer anchored to the singular, temporal drama with her husband, she is now a part of a community of lovers that spans myth and history. In the transformative space of the cave, Katherine has experienced the return of *eros*—not attached or fixed to Alex or Charles in particular—but in its own right, as a spirit. The epiphany

at this point of the journey is not about the object of Katherine's love nor its destiny, but simply that love exists within her—that she feels within herself the renewed capacity for love. This exemplifies Bernardi's description of Rossellini conjoining man and the sacred through landscape:

It is in landscape that characters, in their experience of vision, come out of themselves and discover the world they are a part of. The relationship of the individual with the whole, the cult of the dead, love, the discovery and observation of the world—these are the aspects that link landscape to myth as an epiphany of the sacred. (50)

The benefits of Katherine's trip to Cumae manifest the following day during her third touristic visit to the Phlegraean fields, where the viewer witnesses the phenomenon of live volcanic activity. In a rare moment, Katherine is joyous, almost child-like in her curiosity and wonder; she appears unburdened, light, and free. Diverging from cinematographic patterns from previous scenes, Rossellini captures Katherine from a distance, emphasizing her movements rather than her facial expressions. She moves in relation with her environment, as opposed to previous scenes in the museum and the Sibyl's cave, where she appears to brace herself against her surroundings. In one continuous, protracted shot, Rossellini holds on Katherine standing over a sulphur pit surrounded by smoke, and then slowly pans right, leaving Katherine and following the smoke's movement over the moon-like landscape. It is a visual depiction of Katherine's own momentary spiritual emancipation from circumstance and temporality. The streams of smoke, emerging from multiple openings in the ground, move in unison, indicating the interconnectedness of all things. These visual poetics reinforce the aforementioned theme of unity between man, nature, and the sacred.

As I discussed, Katherine's journey is partly about recuperating repressed instincts, desires, memories, and personal characteristics, the accumulation of which expands her spirit and

revitalizes her authentic self. This process of self-discovery unifies her with universal human experience (as both a carnal and spiritual being) and liberates her from her parochial, bourgeois preoccupations. Another aspect of her primordial self that surfaces is her fear of death. In Naples, Katherine is exposed to a cultural paradigm that maintains a fluid boundary between mortality and immortality (Bernardi 58; Mulvey 108). Images of the cohabitation of the living and the dead pervade the film. For example, the inanimate statues of historical Greek figures breathe with life at the museum, while at the Fontanelle catacombs (her fourth excursion), she learns of the Neapolitan practice of immortalizing the dead by “adopting” and caring for skeletons with forgotten identities. As Bernardi states, *Viaggio in Italia* is a story in which “the dead are more alive than the living” (59). Katherine is astonished and unnerved by the pervasive presence of death in Naples. Unshielded by everyday life, she finds herself at the shore of the river Styx, confronted with the depths of the eternal realm. She experiences an existential crisis, a profound realization that death is always near, and that her own life is barren (Wood 11; Bondanella 106). This crisis reaches a point of catharsis when at Pompeii (the fifth and final excursion), she and Alex witness archeologists recover the remains of a couple exactly as they were when they were killed in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius. Up until this point, Katherine has become increasingly aware of life’s potential at the same time that she has been sobered by the presence of death. With this archeological discovery, Katherine is presented with these two realities in one single image. This revelation of the proximity of death and the fragility of love and life casts her temporal existence into a different light, reassigns her values, and culminates in a breaking point and her declaration to Alex at Pompeii: “Life is so short.” As Wood states:

Katherine’s cry that ‘Life is so short,’ expresses a new-found awareness of the potential value of life which is at once an awareness of transience and of continuity, the present and the infinite, the need to accept and submit to a world



too strange for Northern rationalization to explain—and by explaining, deaden.  
(11)

Katherine's realization marks another moment of liberation from a cultural and social paradigm that has proven itself insufficient in helping her to navigate the depths of her being. Wood here implies that rationalization seeks to "explain" life by imposing categories on elements of the human condition such as love and death that have blurred edges and internal contradictions. The clarity or knowledge achieved by this paradigm is countered by the sacrifice of what exists in those liminal zones and in those paradoxes.

In *Slavery and Freedom*, Berdyaev provides insight as to why the lover's recognition of the connection between love and death is tragic, wondrous, and important for love's survival. Love, he claims, is a desire for fullness, a union with the divine, and therein lies its "deadly sting." At some level, "love is a fight for immortality" (*Slavery* 227). It is the mutual recognition of the free, eternal spirit that is the beloved, and affirmation of it for eternity. This approximation to the infinite is in a sense terribly sad and frightening. Berdyaev believes that the bourgeois domestication of love has sealed off the unconscious fear and insecurity that arises in association with that part of love. He states:

Love, personalist love, facing towards personal immortality, finds no place for itself in the everyday existence of the objectivized world. . . . The love of Tristan and Isolde, of Romeo and Juliet leads to disaster. Platonic love is tragically without issue. The routine of social life draws love downwards, and renders it ineffective. It creates the social institution of marriage and the family, and in essence denies the rights of love as living intensity and ecstasy, and regards it as having no place in the social structure. (227-28)

According to Berdyaev, love suffers in this social structure in which the lover's outlook is dominated by "the difficulty of good management and of security, the fear of the future, daily burden-bearing" (*Creative Act* 199). These conditions train the lover's attention to the here-and-now, the logistics of daily living and material advancement. He argues that the attempt to seal off

life from death limits the depths of human consciousness and the spirit, stating: “The organization of ordinary day to day life aims at establishing security. . . . But submerged in the realm of everyday life, absorbed in its interests, man deserts the deeps, and the disquietude that belongs to the deeps” (250). To shield oneself from death is to extinguish one’s own spark of vitality as a living, spiritual being. It is in the “disquietude” that one is truly alive. To live a complacent, insular life, to be unconscious of freedom and unconscious of death, is to choose to be a mere biological being and thus to reject one’s own eternal self. He continues, “The rejection of immortality is weariness, a refusal of activity” (253). To live fully and with conviction—to take risks—is to approach death, but in proximity to death, one is more truly alive.

Katherine’s encounters with death at the catacombs and Pompeii make her acutely aware that life and love hang in the balance, and by the film’s end, she is able to find the clarity and the courage to declare her love and her desire to stay married. A number of experiences and realizations have compounded and erupted in this declaration. She has come to terms with her sentimental nature and her repressed desire for romance, she has had an existential reckoning with death that has brought about a new appreciation for life, and she has developed a new awareness and humility around the mystery and irrationality of the universe. She has shaken off the petty concerns and self-protective mechanisms that have shielded her true self and her true feelings. She has come closer to the world’s “other-face” (Gallagher 411), the realm of the spirit, and in that journey, she has succeeded (at least for now) in emancipating herself from her “bourgeois” paradigm. However, Rossellini does not guarantee the viewer that she will be able to continue to live in accordance with these epiphanies. Instead, he makes the ending intentionally ambiguous to preserve the mystery and unpredictability of human freedom and emphasize the notion that life is “eternal flux” (Wood 11). Over the course of the film, he establishes that both

characters have the capacity for courage and cowardice and the power to give and withhold love. As Eric Rohmer states, Rossellini refuses “to illuminate the mechanics of choice in order all the better to safeguard its freedom” (40). In doing so, Rossellini’s philosophical contention comes to the fore: the success or failure of love is a function of spiritual awareness, receptivity, and preparedness. This openness to the inter-connectedness of all things is the (re)entry point for *eros* and its space of operation. As for its sustained presence, that will be contingent upon the lovers continuing to live heroically and with conviction so as to continuously renew their spiritual vitality and remain receptive to love.

Rossellini and Berdyaev observe that “modern” marriage—however romantic and “free” it may be at the outset—has a tendency to evolve into a business arrangement. They suggest that love is susceptible to its environment and that its survival depends upon the spiritual state of the two lovers. Their works are less about two people collaborating to renew their love than individuals working separately to emancipate themselves from an exclusively materialist paradigm. For Rossellini and Berdyaev, love is spiritual in the way that birth and death are spiritual. It is a connection to infinity and mystery, so the lover and the beloved must maintain the conditions for love to exist and survive, particularly in an historical time period that is increasingly skeptical of the invisible world and in which spiritual life is characterized by “passivity and indifference” (Mounier 7). Berdyaev and Rossellini wish to subvert a trend of society revolving itself around work and money, and they see individual spiritual transformation and revitalized interpersonal relationships as progress towards that end. The rationalization of every sphere of human life is what Berdyaev and Rossellini find so reprehensible and why they insist that love as mystery, as an element of the supernatural, must not be denied.

Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* is a precursor to a number of European films in the early 1960s that will directly or tangentially explore the triangular relationship between the individual's spirit, its environment, and love. As Peter Bondanella states, "Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* helped to move Italian cinema back toward a cinema of psychological introspection and visual symbolism where character and environment served to emphasize the newly established protagonist of modernist cinema, the isolated and alienated individual" (111). Like *Viaggio in Italia*, many of these films follow a protagonist on his or her existential journey in search of meaning, and often the protagonist's capacity for love reflects the state of his spirit. The most famous of these films are about the failure (or near-failure) of love and the human spirit: Malle's *Le Feu Follet* (1963), Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) and Antonioni's trilogy, *L'avventura* (1960), *L'eclisse* (1961), and *La notte* (1962). However, there are other critically acclaimed films from this time period, such as Olmi's *I fidanzati* (1962) and Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) that affirm the potential for spiritual renewal and the capacity of love through increased connectivity with one's environment. This cinematic interest in this tri-partite relationship casts light upon the status of love in a segment of European history that begins in the inter-war period and ends just prior to the seismic shift in cultural values in the late 1960s. Considered alongside Berdyaev and Rossellini's ideas about love, these films point to a mid-twentieth century ambivalence and uncertainty around the state of love in relationship to modernity. The fact that love is seen to be susceptible to its environment and contingent upon the individual human spirit reflects a time period characterized by instability, realism, spiritual questioning, and hyper-awareness about human agency and the significance of human relationships.

### CHAPTER 3: Love in the Postwar Industrial Age in Ermanno Olmi's *I fidanzati*

In the early 1960s, a number of French and Italian films emerge with a similar theme and structure to that of Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*: a lone figure journeys through the city streets in search of meaning and serenity. In these films, which include Louis Malle's *Le Feu Follet* (1963), Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'eclisse* (1962), Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960), and Ermanno Olmi's *I fidanzati* (1963), the protagonists' incapacity to love or be loved serves as an indicator of their *malaise*. They appear unable to identify and express their emotions, or in some cases, feel anything at all, a veritable "*crisis dei sentimenti*" (Pezzotta 147). Collectively, these films offer some insight into the historical causes for this generational disaffection: *Le Feu Follet* alludes to the futility of the Algerian War, *La Dolce Vita* and *L'eclisse* showcase the extravagance, emptiness, and greed that accompany the economic miracle, and *I fidanzati* addresses the breakdown of the family due to industrialization and migratory displacement. Furthermore, we recognize that this is the first generation to come of age after World War II, a war that accelerated the end of communal life in Europe and ushered in an age of hyper-individualism. With many social mores and structures from previous generations becoming obsolete or in question, young adults now navigate rapidly shifting value systems on their own and define life's meaning and purpose for themselves. The characters in these films may be representative of the fact that this pioneering generation feels more paralyzed than liberated by this prospect. In a 1966 interview for the *Portrait d'Acteur* series, Maurice Ronet (who stars in

*Le Feu Follet*) speaks about the concerns of this generation. Referring to the characters he plays in *Le Feu Follet*, *Elevator of the Gallows*, *Purple Noon*, and *Time Out of Love*, he states:

All these characters belong to the same generation I do, a generation that's a bit transitory. All these characters are heavy drinkers, have a sense of humor and leave a bitter taste of hopelessness in your mouth. They're characters from a certain type of bourgeois literature, like that of Drieu La Rochelle and others. . . . They are also a product of circumstance. This generation was seventeen years old at the end of World War II: too young to have fought but too old to have been just children. . . . Roger Nemier wrote that it was the 'sacrificed' generation because we really didn't have any myths. We really hadn't had many to lean on among our elders. You might say the future was ours in that sense.

At the same time, Ronet's interviewer suggests, there was "Nothing to believe in." Nodding in agreement, Ronet concludes, "We're going through a moral crisis right now."

In the films by Malle, Antonioni, and Fellini, the failure to connect with others, romantically or otherwise, prevails as the unhappy conclusion. However, Olmi's *I fidanzati* resembles Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* in that it ends with a reawakening of the protagonist. By way of his journey through the Sicilian town of Priola, Giovanni transcends insularity and self-absorption and refreshes his perceptions of the world around him. Once in communion with a place and its people, his sentiments are primed for love, and he is able to rediscover his feelings for his fiancée, Liliana. Like *Viaggio in Italia*, *I fidanzati* resembles the archetypal journey narrative in which the hero returns transformed, and as such, has a didactic layer. By making the process of awakening transparent and achievable, Olmi points to the need for the young adults of the postwar generation to take responsibility for their own happiness both as individuals and in love.

In *Viaggio in Italia* and *I fidanzati*, we recognize that to love is to surmount some form of egotism (pride, in the case of Katherine, and a reticence to commit, in the case of Giovanni). Both characters learn to break free from futile patterns of thought that insulate them and pivot

their internal gaze outward. Consequently, in both of these films, a relationship with place will precede a relationship with a person. Naples and Sicily serve as interlocutors and companions to the protagonists. They give rise to new thoughts, feelings, and memories. The discovery of place becomes a rehearsal for interacting with the beloved, the first effort in breaking out of a comfortable cocoon that has infantilized them. In the case of Giovanni, emergence from this cocoon is a re-awakening of the nervous system and the emotional response system, a renewed capacity to feel love for Liliانا.

This chapter is about *I fidanzati*'s contribution to a constructive belief system about love (similar to that of Ginzburg, Rossellini, and certain personalists and existentialists) that counters the cynicism and fatalism commonly found in films from the 1960s. Bert Cardullo observes that Olmi makes *I fidanzati* "in an age where detachment, irony, and objectivity are valued above all else" (121). He continues that Olmi, unlike his contemporaries Fellini, Antonioni, and Visconti, does not distance himself from his characters. Instead, his films "feel like one-to-one exchanges between real people" (122). Morando Morandini distinguishes Olmi from Antonioni in particular, stating that Olmi made *I fidanzati* during "a season of rampant '*antonionismo*,' of incommunicability, crisis and devaluation of feelings." *I fidanzati* is antithetical to this trend, Morandini asserts, as it concerns "the possibility of communication between human beings" (22).<sup>55</sup>

As Adriano Aprà observes, Olmi's work instead resembles that of Rossellini, a filmmaker born a generation earlier (Rossellini was born in 1906 and Olmi in 1931). In Olmi's films, Aprà states, "one feels the director's love for all of his characters, if not for the world in which they

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<sup>55</sup> All quotations by Morandini, Pezzotta, and Aprà are my translations. Interviews with Olmi are also my translations (with the exception of his interviews with Charles Samuels in *Encountering Directors* and the Criterion Collection which were already in English).

live. In this way, he is profoundly humanist, and . . . *rosselliniano*” (13). As Olmi himself corroborates in his interview with the Criterion Collection, Rossellini’s influence on his work was profound, particularly in terms of his philosophical approach to cinema. He states that from viewing Rossellini’s films, he intuited “that film could be a way of looking at the real world, not with the intent to escape from reality, but that films could suggest a key to understanding reality.” Neither filmmaker merely sought to denounce social ills, but rather to make sense of them for the benefit of their audiences.

The protagonist of *I fidanzati*, Giovanni, is a working-class welder from Milan. His social class is the key distinction that separates this film from the likes of *L’eclisse*, *Le Feu Follet*, and *Dolce Vita*, whose protagonists suffer from an existential anguish seemingly particular to the bourgeoisie.<sup>56</sup> However, although Giovanni does not share their burden of excess time and money, he is still directionless and emotionally detached. He has been engaged for a number of years to Liliana. They continually delay their nuptials, ostensibly for lack of money, but as Olmi explains, they are in fact “kept apart by moral and spiritual factors” (*Encountering Directors* 105), a reference to Giovanni’s unwillingness to take responsibility in his personal life. Jonathan Keates observes that the protagonist’s tryst with another woman is symptomatic of this directionless state: “Giovanni starts this affair less in the mood of genuine enthusiasm than out of sheer ennui” (29). The film’s plot is catalyzed by Giovanni’s decision to postpone the engagement further for another two years, when he accepts a promotion requiring a work transfer from Milan to Sicily.

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<sup>56</sup> Olmi himself was working class, born in Treviglio, outside of Milan. His first job was at Edisonvolta, an electric company, where his mother also worked. He made in-house documentaries for the company before making his first feature film. Olmi stood apart from his contemporaries in terms of his training and social class and the fact that he made his films outside of the collaborative film community in Rome. The subjects of his early films are working-class and are partially autobiographical.



As Lilita suggests in her letters to Giovanni, their relationship had become “mere habit,” and they had “never spoken as two lovers should.” They kept their thoughts to themselves, she observes, and “were content just to be with one another.” Lilita’s assessment comes as no surprise to the viewer, as Giovanni is a man who uses his words economically and bears a stoic countenance. In the absence of explicit dialogue and body language, Olmi uses instead the musical score to express Giovanni’s sentiments and a series of subjective flashbacks and flash-forwards (as memories and projected fantasies) to give a glimpse into Giovanni’s thought process. In selecting a soft-spoken and illegible character like Giovanni, Olmi calls on the viewer to participate intellectually and emotionally. Because the protagonist does not interpret his experience in Sicily for the audience’s benefit, the viewer projects his or her own reactions onto the character’s experience. This serves Olmi’s didactic aim of extracting Giovanni from the realm of the particular and placing him in the realm of the universal.

In the first half of the film, Olmi makes frequent use of nocturnal scenes. The opening shot of the film pans the length of a residential street in the dark of night. Streetlights, apartment buildings, and cars are visible, but the tableau is indistinct and anonymous. This cloaking effect is repeated during Giovanni’s nighttime arrival into the airport in Sicily. Giovanni’s (and the viewer’s) first impressions of the island are disjointed, illuminated haphazardly by fleeting beams of light. Olmi devotes nearly fifteen minutes to Giovanni’s first night in Sicily as he attempts to piece together a cohesive image of his new home in the dark. This protracted use of nocturnal settings is suggestive of Giovanni’s obscured vision and state of disorientation during this listless period of his life.

Giovanni expects to be welcomed by a Sicily energized with prosperity and comradeship, and instead he is confronted by institutional sterility and detachment. Olmi devotes a notably

long segment to Giovanni's arrival to the modern company hostel, his solitary dinner in a brightly-lit, large and empty dining hall, and a visit to the hotel's movie theatre where his northern colleagues stare at the screen blankly or nod off to sleep. Olmi holds these shots for extended periods, mimicking real time, and aligning the viewer's experience with that of Giovanni's. His use of sound and light is instrumental here in communicating emptiness and desolation.<sup>57</sup> The soundtrack alternates between diegetic pop music and extended periods of deafening silence. Likewise, the light alternates between flinchingly bright institutional interiors and the calm, dark skyline of the Sicilian landscape. The transition from music to silence, and from bright interiors to the dark night are sharp and unexpected, mirroring the abrupt contrast between industry and rural Sicily as well as Giovanni's own vacillations from the harshness of novel surroundings and the softness of solitude.

Over the course of two months, Giovanni will emerge out of his state of insularity that the opening nocturnal scenes represent, and he will connect with the people and the place, leaving behind the anonymity and loneliness of industry. The Sicilian approach to life and work will be a revelation to his northern cultural paradigm, and the long, lonely days will prompt the reflection required to evaluate his circumstances. Giovanni's internal change will be reflected cinematically by the prevalence of daylight over nighttime scenes, imagery of nature in lieu of artifice, and a cascade of dialogue between Giovanni and Liliana in place of silence at the end of the film. Giovanni's mood will lift, his horizon will clear, and his emotions, long suppressed in hibernation, will come to the surface. This transformation comes about through a relationship with a place and its people. Giovanni recognizes in the Sicilians an unshakeable sense of autonomy: a fidelity to their own identity and a refusal to bow to someone else's agenda. By the

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<sup>57</sup> See Clodagh Brook's "Beyond Dialogue: Speech-Silence, the Monologue and Power in the Films of Ermanno Olmi" on the role of sound and silence in Olmi's films.

film's end, Giovanni begins to internalize the significance of this autonomous spirit and translate it to his own circumstances, namely the need to set the course of one's own life direction, both in work and love.

Throughout much of the film, the viewer follows Giovanni on aimless walks through the town and the countryside. Over the course of the film, Olmi shows that the young man's meanderings are actually productive and developmental, and that he is arriving at a new awareness of place and self. The changes occur as Giovanni begins to observe and participate in what Michel de Certeau describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* as the "night-side of societies" (1256). The "night-side" comprises what governments, industry, and institutions cannot plan for; it is what individuals do *within* socioeconomic and political structures imposed upon them. In *I fidanzati*, the "night-side" is the Sicilian workers' response to the arrival of northern industry. As Giovanni witnesses quiet but effective acts of Sicilian agency, he too takes small liberties. These usually take the form of reveries or youthful playfulness, which breathe humanity and individuality into the anonymity of his working existence. This surfacing of his individuality awakens his senses, the first step in orienting his life path as he progresses through this stage of maturation.

The first visible manifestation of Giovanni's transformation occurs when he wanders into a church, drawn by the sound of children singing. The hymn ends, and the priest begins a pedantic oratory: "Children, how many times do I have to tell you? When you come into church, you musn't talk, or run, or laugh, or spit! You must pray." The priest is interrupted by a stray dog traversing the threshold of the church doors and the young congregation erupts into laughter, followed by mayhem, as the children get up from their seats to chase after the canine visitor. The dog's ingenuously profane act of entering sacred space could not have been timed more

perfectly, a fact lost neither on the children nor Giovanni. As Olmi surmises in an interview with Charles Owens, “That dog in the church, in some aspects alone and desperate like Giovanni, allows the children a feeling of joy and rebellion in a constrictive moment. That miserable dog helps them perform a gesture of freedom” (44).

This “gesture of freedom” resembles Michel de Certeau’s notion of the “tactic.” De Certeau identifies the use of tactics as “an art of the weak” because it gives those with limited power some freedom and agency (1253).<sup>58</sup> The tactic, he continues,

operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them, being without any base . . . . This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment. (1253)

The children in the church “seize” the moment, as they have done many times before. Prior to this scene, Giovanni encounters three children: a barista who works the night shift near his hotel, a barber in acolyte’s dress, and a third boy smoking on the beach. Children in the film are shown both under the power of adults and in playful confrontation with that power. The attention directed towards children in this film is a reminder of the vitality, individuality, and sovereignty children possess in spite of the limits placed upon them. In doing so, Olmi hints at a similar dynamic between adults and the economic and historical forces and institutions with which they contend.

In the church, Giovanni stands to get a better view of the dog and smiles in amusement. Giovanni is cheered and enlivened by the episode, and from this point forward, his demeanor gradually becomes more demonstrative and jubilant. In his interview with Owens, Olmi remarks that “gestures of freedom” such as these have a productive, rippling effect, and that they are

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<sup>58</sup> De Certeau offers two examples of a tactic to illustrate his definition: 1) “*la perruque*” the idea of “doing one’s own work in one’s employer’s time” (1247), and 2) a North African immigrant in Paris who creatively uses space and language to maintain his own identity.

“helpful to all, if only we had the courage to complete a little act of freedom useful to ourselves and to others” (44). The street festival has a similar influence on Giovanni and his colleagues. In this sanctioned time and place, adults subvert the social norms that regulate their day-to-day behavior. Men dress as women, men dance with men, and women assume anonymity by veiling their faces. There is a crumbling of order and time and use of space, one that is foreign but much appreciated by the northern workers. Intoxicated by the festivities, some of the men return to the hotel and engage in a series of retaliatory pranks. Giovanni becomes involved, and his face radiates with the same delight of the children in the church as he runs up and down the hallway of the stark, modern hotel. As De Certeau contends, tactics “use, manipulate and divert . . . spaces” (1248). Whereas the hotel at first was institutional and oppressive, it now takes on the role of a playground for the overgrown young men. Their playful insubordination is not a rebellion against their company or industry as a whole, it is against the feeling of ennui and isolation that their work creates.

Giovanni observes and learns from a number of other cultural tactics on his odyssey. He takes note of how the Sicilians react to the industrialization and immigration that is rapidly transforming life on the island. In one scene, a Sicilian worker brings her family of seven into a meeting at the factory headquarters. The cultural disconnect is made plain when the company secretary explains to the girl’s father, “I told you that only your daughter can come in. If all the employees brought their family to work . . .”. The viewer gathers from this digression that the Sicilians are adjusting to the presence of industry at their own pace and on their own terms.

Giovanni’s colleague confirms:

They won’t wear their protective eye gear. They’ve been working like this for too many years. They have a different work ethic and it goes back generations. Just think: at first, when it rained, they wouldn’t come to work. Everything stops here

when it rains. They don't have an industrial mentality, and there's nothing you can do. We need to start all over. With the new generation, who knows?

This is one of four conversations Giovanni has with fellow workers who attempt to explain the “Sicilian mentality” to him. One man says they are “a little crazy” from the heat of the sun, another respects them as shrewd capitalists (for increasing the housing rents in response to demand), and another dismisses them as backward and primitive. With these dialogues, Olmi points to the friction between northern and southern cultures, but he also shows how the northerners are trying to make sense of this friction. This is a part of Giovanni's education; it is a part of the challenge of his new circumstances that is changing the way that he thinks about his job and about his life in Milan. Increasingly, he is disillusioned by his new “promotion” as a specialized worker. It is not as lucrative as he anticipated, and though he is friendly with the engineers, he does not identify with this pedigreed class who chat about their professors in Rome. He does not have the “Sicilian mentality,” but he does not have the engineers' “industrial mentality” either.

The friction between these two opposing mentalities is expressed in De Certeau's analogy of a “trajectory.” He writes that the strategist (exemplified by the northern industrialist) attempts to map a path with a trajectory. With his series of graphs, the strategist projects that by moving a certain number of workers to Sicily, building a certain amount of factories, and employing a certain number of local workers, a certain amount of money will be made, benefiting employer and employees alike. The problem with this logic, De Certeau argues, is that

time and movement are thus reduced to a line that can be seized as a whole by the eye and read in a single moment. . . . However useful this ‘flattening out’ may be, it transforms the temporal articulation places into a spatial sequence of points. . . . It is thus a mark *in place of* acts, a relic in place of performances. (1252)

In other words, it does not account for tactics which use well-timed “acts” or “performances” to achieve their desired result. This graph neither accounts for the Sicilian workers’ refusal to work in the rain nor that the locals will hike up the rents. These “tactics” are not necessarily designed as deliberate acts of rebellion but they do serve as small, inadvertent acts of sabotage against the neat, prescribed plan of the northern industrialists.

As the graph does not account for the “Sicilian mentality,” it does not account for the effect that dislocation and loneliness will have on its northern workers. Giovanni’s exploration of his surroundings increasingly triggers a retreat into daydreams. His relationship to place evolves into a relationship with self, as during his solitary wanderings, he lapses into reverie. He thinks of his sad farewell to Liliana and then the lonely figure of his father, whom he has left behind in a nursing home, alternating between memories and fantasies. In one daydream, Giovanni melds elements of the street party in Sicily with the dance hall in Milan. In this surreal and melancholic scene, dancers wearing cone-shaped party hats step to the unnaturally slow accompaniment of a single piano under drifting snowflakes of confetti. As Olmi comments about this scene in his interview, “Mysteries of Life,” “there’s nothing worse than superimposing joy on a melancholic mood.” While submitting to the festive atmosphere of the Sicilian street party, Giovanni remains emotionally anchored in Milan. These reveries are neither ornamental nor digressive. In fact, they comprise the most important factor in his development; they are the layers of his subconscious that surface in isolation and that gradually orient his desires and longings towards Liliana.

When Giovanni and Liliana begin to exchange letters, the daydreams shift from melancholic to romantic in nature. Through the delayed exchange of words, the two fiancés become reacquainted, and the recent bitter memories of his departure are replaced with the sweet

recollections of their first meeting. As Liliana observes in her letter, despite the physical distance between them, they are emotionally closer than when they were together. Olmi conveys Giovanni's catharsis of thought and feeling through a symphonic flourish in the musical score and an image of the waves of the Mediterranean breaking over his overjoyed face. The imagery and soundtrack both communicate revitalization and release, a resolution of Giovanni's "*crisis dei sentimenti*." Through the craft of letter writing, their feelings find shape and expression. Giovanni writes: "How beautiful are the letters you write to me, Liliana. You're so good at expressing yourself. I am not so good and I often can't say everything I feel. . . . You speak for us both." The film ends somewhat abruptly, soon after Giovanni reunites with her in his heart and mind. In the closing scene, a rainstorm gathers and breaks the overpowering heat spell, an expression of the change within Giovanni who has reached the end of his odyssey. In the final sequence, the camera closes in on the face of two young village children and then of Giovanni looking out at the summer rain, before cutting to black. Olmi does not offer a conclusion to Giovanni and Liliana's story, but he establishes that Giovanni's feelings for his fiancée are reawakened, along with a feeling of connectivity with his surroundings and his own childish spirit.

### **Didactic Elements in *I fidanzati***

Giovanni's reunion with Liliana is contingent upon a period of separation, a modest version of an Odyssean voyage. It is, as Liliana says, "the distance that brings them together," and with that, the small series of revelations that come about through Giovanni's observations and interactions with Sicily, most notably: the children in the Church, the festival, and the Sicilian workers. As a result of this education, Giovanni emerges out of the anonymity of his



industrial worker identity to inhabit his individual self-hood. As Olmi explains, he ends the film with Giovanni and the two children to signify that the protagonist has gone “back to being a child again, he is freed from the spectre of the factory” (qtd. in Pezzotta 149).

Bert Cardullo writes that *Ifidanzati* offers an optimistic view of humanity in the industrial age: “Olmi seems to be telling us that the grim industrial plan, with its modern technology, is being sanctified if not softened by the spirit of the men who pass through it” (129). Giovanni, for one, rediscovers his own capacity for playfulness, imagination, and joy. In the case of the Sicilians, their spirit manifests in the refusal to adapt to the labor norms of the industrial north and a quickness to adapt to the opportunities that northern immigration presents. These “tactical” endeavors comprise the aforementioned “night-side” of society which De Certeau argues are ultimately more enduring and more powerful than its daytime counterpart:

When one examines this fleeting and permanent reality carefully, one has the impression of exploring the night-side of societies, a night longer than their day, a dark sea from which successive institutions emerge, a maritime immensity on which socioeconomic and political structures appear as ephemeral islands. (1256)

With this metaphor, De Certeau re-envisioning the dynamic between society and power structures. Instead of a factory of workers doing their prescribed part in the industrial machine, we see inside the mind and heart of a worker and enter an infinite labyrinth of place and time. This interior landscape is the “night-side” of society, and the factory is only an ephemeral island. Olmi’s subjective filmmaking style brings the viewer deeper into that night-side by exploring the memories and imagination of Giovanni, casting light on the resilience of humanity in a mechanistic age.

By devoting immeasurable detail and artistic flourish to an ordinary man’s story, Olmi makes the man and the story extra-ordinary, and by extension, the viewer’s life extra-ordinary. Giovanni is not the misunderstood poetic soul that we recognize in *Le Feu Follet*, *L’eclisse*, or

*La Dolce Vita*; thus he is not a fantasy of the viewer. He *is* the viewer, invisible and insignificant as far as most of the world is concerned, the everyday person whose thoughts and feelings are generally overlooked. With this identification between character and viewer established, the viewer is prompted to turn inward and evaluate his or her emotions and circumstances. The personal domains of love, family, and vocation, marginalized in an efficiency and profit-driven society, are refreshed with a renewed significance. Olmi emphasizes that these domains do comprise a substantive portion of human existence, and furthermore that one is empowered with a sphere of influence. Within that sphere, one should act deliberately with an informed set of principles. For the very reason that their significance is overlooked, Olmi explores the relationship between work, love, and family repeatedly in his work. Like Ginzburg and Buber, he is an advocate of identifying and committing to one's vocation: "Work has to be . . . an environment in which we realize our aspirations. Human activity is an activity that gives meaning to the rest of our life," Olmi states in his interview with Owens (43). In addition, Olmi localizes human emotions at the core of human existence and not as a peripheral outlier to rationalism. He contends that we have to "honor the fact that we are individuals capable of love. . . . Therefore just as we concern ourselves with breathing, drinking and eating, we have to pay attention . . . to . . . feelings." These feelings need not be exclusively devoted to people, but also "towards science, and for poetry . . . [and these] should be understood not as a work activity, but as a vocation of the heart" (43). This elevation of human emotion is the starting point for finding direction and meaning in the postwar industrial age. If one undermines the importance of one's own emotions, the world of commerce will set the personal agendas of its employees, and the employee will become a unit of labor first and a human being second. As Olmi laments, "up until the Second World War, the worker worked in service of the family. Today, this has changed

notably, to the point that the family breaks apart in service of work” (44). At the end of *I fidanzati*, Giovanni telephones Liliana for the first time and tells her that he would rather not go to work that day, simply because it is a rainy Sunday afternoon and he is enjoying that his thoughts are with Liliana. Olmi states that for Giovanni, this is a “beautiful declaration of love” (*Encountering Directors* 106), for he has implied with this simple intention that his feelings for Liliana are more important than his work obligations. His declaration, incidentally, also resembles that of the Sicilian employees who refuse to work outside in the rain, which asserts a boundary that defines what is reasonable to expect of human beings.

In response to criticism that he is a traditionalist, nostalgic for Europe’s agrarian past, Olmi claims that he does not find fault with industry and consumerism in their own right, but in the human adaptation to them:

Men have always understood that they must resolve certain problems: work, shelter, etc. So they produced a society rich in consumer goods. But men don’t act the role of responsible protagonists of their own lives; rather they become passive—this is the problem. . . . In my view, society must be made of responsible men, for those who do not take responsibility for the own lives are ripe to be led by a dictator. (*Encountering Directors* 104)

Rossellini made a similar observation in an interview with *Cahiers de Cinéma*, pointing out that those that obey rules and laws before their own conscience are the very people that allow dictators like Hitler to take power (176). With the remembrance of fascism and the war informing their work, both Rossellini and Olmi (and this is also true of Natalia Ginzburg) communicate that each person’s character and life choices have impact on a greater human history, no matter how insignificant they may appear. One’s principles are in the center of a series of concentric circles that ripple outward, affecting one’s family’s value system, which in turn affects the community ethos, a regional character, and a national history.

Inchoate principles and a lack of direction comprise “the moral and spiritual factors” that had prevented Giovanni from valuing and committing to love. In the greater context of history, his story with Liliana appears inconsequential, but as Olmi asserts in his interview with Charles Samuels, Giovanni’s inability to commit is symptomatic of a more grievous tendency of the postwar boom: a refusal to grow up. Olmi remarks of the postwar generation, “we do not act from conscience. We are like students who refuse to graduate. Our society wants to remain infantile” (105). That said, *I fidanzati* demonstrates that before striving for spiritual and moral maturity, one must first be alive to the world and have a personhood, as a utilitarian society endangers these very foundations of human existence. There are recognizable parallels here between Olmi and the personalists, whose very aim it was to defend the person from the dehumanizing effects of economic, political, and social systems. While personalism as a movement was localized primarily in France, Bert Cardullo points out how concerns about personality are particularly relevant to Italy. He states that Olmi “sees that the corporate syndrome is especially poignant in Italy, not because Italy has a long tradition of personal freedom—it hasn’t—but because it has a long tradition of *personality*” (125). Significantly, it is Giovanni’s personality, not heroism that emerges in the latter half of the film and pushes back against the “corporate syndrome.” *I fidanzati*’s optimistic finale suggests that his capacity to express emotions and perform a few “gestures of freedom” will later transmute into heroism within his personal sphere.

#### CHAPTER 4: Impersonal Love in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*<sup>59</sup>

As this dissertation has argued, there are two major turning points in the history of the philosophy of love during the twentieth century: the 1930s and the 1960s. By way of review, the first turning point in the 1930s is rooted in the emergence of a number of philosophers and religious thinkers (many of them existentialists and personalists) who seek to affirm and defend the complexity, unpredictability, and agency of the person against the effacing effects of materialism and positivism in the modern era. A tributary of this discourse turns to a reevaluation of love, marriage, and family life. In line with popular sentiment, many of these intellectuals of the interwar period reach a tipping point in their criticism of authoritarian bourgeois notions of “family respectability” and its reinforcement through arranged marriages, believing individuals ought to be freed from the imagined rules and regulations of an increasingly archaic class system. This group of intellectuals is quick to perceive hypocrisy and pretense and lament the exploitation of love as a part of the charade. This is of course not new to the twentieth century nor is it exclusive to the personalists and the existentialists; however, their philosophical grounding in freedom, agency, and the dignity of the person helps to shape and give voice to these ideas during this crucial transition in social history. For its part, the bourgeoisie is finding

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<sup>59</sup> A version of this chapter is published in *Studies in European Cinema* under the bibliographical reference “Making Sense of the Replaceable Beloved in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*.” *Studies in European Cinema* 14.2 (2017): 91-102. doi: 10.1080/17411548.2016.1258859

less utility in arranged marriages and the dowry system because as Nina Epton states in *Love and the French*, in the 1930s:

the hard facts of economic life had made most bourgeois realize that fortunes tended to be evanescent. There was not much point in parents' mathematical speculations about marriage. The emphasis was shifting, becoming more personal and individualistic. (341)

Indeed, this reorganization of social life reflects an increasingly popular belief in personal love and its place in marriage.

This discussion gains momentum during the Second World War and postwar reconstruction as public intellectuals—philosophers and artists alike—attempt to reassess and reconfigure approaches to human relationships as their points of reference for “normalcy” change or disappear. During this time period, society agrees with some finality upon a cultural value that defends the right to marry for love (Ferry 8). At the same time that this shift is occurring, many of these intellectuals are also grappling with the implications of this augmented agency in love. While varied in their beliefs, they agree that lovers should anchor themselves in lived reality and maintain realistic expectations, leaving behind nineteenth-century Romantic expectations of mystical merging with the beloved. In the postwar era especially, there is an identifiable trend of realistic renderings of the traditional love story. As we have seen, Ginzburg and Rossellini examine flawed marriages with nuanced detail and explore the complexity of factors that have led to their fragility and/or failure. The discourse is neither idealistic nor despairing and fatalistic. Instead, it presents a study of human relationships for the purpose of better understanding and potentially strengthening them. The notion is explored again and again that individuals need to engage in spiritual renewal or existential reflection and pursue a vocation with the awareness that this will benefit not only the lover but the beloved. Love is less about passion, transcendence, and merging and more about responsibility and mindfulness: it is two

distinct individuals working to perceive one another in their totality. Lovers are now meant to honor one another's independence and love the beloved as a unique and particular being.

As advocates of personal love, many of these mid-twentieth century intellectuals wish to liberate love from illusions and unrealistic expectations yet still hold it in high esteem. In addition to rejecting nineteenth-century Romanticism, these individuals also reject the inverse claim from certain nineteenth and early twentieth-century thinkers (like Schopenhauer and Freud) that love is merely biological and psychological in nature. These explanations of love assume a definition of man that is passive and without agency. For this mid-twentieth century group of intellectuals, love is a part of one's life journey made up of choices and reflection upon those choices. Understanding the beloved to be a separate, complex being of equal standing is central to creating this bond. For this reason, personal love is more esteemed than impersonal forms of love. During the time period between the 1930s and 1960s, there is considerable resistance against impersonal love in three disparate forms: the beloved should not be utilized as part of a family's financial or social strategy; the beloved is not to be beheld as an ideal incarnation of divine perfection; finally, the beloved is not merely a sexual partner nor a mate for procreation. Since one beholds and appreciates the beloved, one meditates upon his or her particularities, his or her singularity and his or her irreplaceability as a distinct being, a being who has never before inhabited this earth and will never do so again.

### ***Le Bonheur***

In 1964, Agnès Varda releases a film called *Le Bonheur* (or *Happiness*), in which the viewer witnesses one woman seamlessly replace another within the context of the family structure. This narrative is a notable outlier in the discourse about the irreplaceable beloved and

personal love. Because this film offers insight into belief systems about impersonal love—both old and new—it serves as a useful point of departure for better understanding some of the tributaries of *impersonal* love that are beginning to take shape in the 1960s.

“Happiness” is both the theme and title of Agnès Varda’s *Le Bonheur*. The death of François’s first wife (Thérèse) vacates a place for his mistress (Emilie) to enter his home within a matter of months and become the step-mother to his children. There is no indication that the relationship between François and his mistress is superior in any way to that of François and his wife. This is to say that Varda offers no logical reason as to why this transition is so apparently effortless and inconsequential. The viewer only knows that François likes to be happy and that he governs his life in accordance with maintaining this disposition. Because Varda leaves most of the interior emotions and thoughts of her characters a mystery, the viewer is cued to assess the situation from a philosophical distance. Varda employs visual poetics and hyperbole to position the film at arm’s length from authenticity, likening the film to a modern-day myth. In this tradition, the film speaks to a certain recognizable phenomenon in human experience: the replaceability of the beloved. This portrayal of love may not square with popular sensibilities of what relationships are or what they ought to be, but as Varda’s film reminds the viewer, when a society builds itself around eternal, sacrosanct monogamy and then in practice frequently counters this ideal with versions of polygamy and/or uninterrupted serial monogamy, the philosophical question of the replaceability of the beloved merits consideration. Is this film suggesting that the eternal and irreplaceable beloved is a naïve fantasy? Is it possible to love a second beloved simultaneously and with equal authenticity and intensity, without devaluing the first, as François claims he is able to do? Or is this film not about love, but about patriarchy? Is it commenting on the replaceability of the functional role of *women* as wives and mothers, as some



critics have suggested? When one reviews the criticism of this film, there is a wide variation of responses to these questions. Given the diversity of viewpoints and the cryptic nature of the film, one is left with the understanding that each critical response is as informative about the *critic's* worldview as it about the film's meaning. As T. Jefferson Kline puts it, Varda's "film is intended to provoke a series of moral and psychological questions rather than tell a satisfying 'moral story'" (xii).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the objective of analyzing *Le Bonheur* is to attempt to make sense of the replaceable beloved as Varda conceptualizes it and to contextualize the idea of the replaceable beloved within a matrix of paradigms of impersonal love from Europe's philosophical and literary past. In doing so, one is hard-pressed to find the perfect ancestor for the ideas about love in this film. Instead, one recognizes a unique hybrid of ideas from intellectual history combined with more recent ones particular to the postwar era.

Varda offers three possible ways of understanding the phenomenon of the replaceable beloved. First, she links the replaceability of Thérèse with nature. The abundance of imagery depicting flowers, trees, seasons, children, fecundity, and death indicates that the mistress's replacement of the wife is a part of the natural cycles of life. Nature does not discriminate between our particularities; it is concerned mostly with virility and reproduction, and a replacement of mother and wife is in keeping within its objectives. Because nature is impersonal, love (when one takes the long view) is also impersonal. Lovers may *feel* that their love is personal and unique, but this is an illusion; it is nature's sophisticated mechanism for ensuring its own continuation. This view of love was famously articulated by Schopenhauer when he writes: "For all love, however ethereally it may bear itself, is rooted in the sexual impulse alone, nay, it absolutely is only a more definitely determined, specialized, and indeed in the strictest sense

individualized sexual impulse” (191). With this cinematic portrayal of personal love serving the larger impersonal force of nature, one can view this film as another iteration of a well-established tradition in Western thought in the philosophy of love, but one that notably has had rare representation in the decades immediately preceding the 1960s.

Secondly, Varda links the replaceability of the beloved with the characters’ belief that the purpose of life is to be happy, sometimes at the expense of conflicting concerns. To render this happiness visually, Varda depicts the grace, beauty, and idyllic nature of France’s *joie de vivre*: picnics, gardens, family gatherings, dancing, eating, and drinking. In this Eden, François and his wife live charmed, simple, and carefree lives. They are attuned to nature, their instincts, and their senses. With ease and serenity, they embrace the pleasure and warmth of domestic life. With the positioning of the camera, the choice of color scheme, and use of focus, Varda also evokes the France of the nineteenth-century Impressionists, conjuring Monet’s gardens and Renoir’s dancing lovers (Grossvogel 135; Flitterman-Lewis 232; Smith 26; Neupert 349-40). The setting that Varda “paints” is infused with love, as it is with the perfume of the flowers and the soft summer sunlight. Like the spring and summer gardens, François and Thérèse are flush with youth, the joys of two small children, and sensual beauty. François and Thérèse passively exist in this endless summer in a seemingly impermeable state of bliss. When François meets Emilie, he is obliged to reconcile his affair with the rule of fidelity within marriage, the socially inscribed building block of this domestic paradise. With his metaphor of an apple orchard, he explains to his wife that he has initiated an affair with Emilie in an innocent celebration of *more* joy and *more* sensuous pleasure. In effect, François articulates a belief system about impersonal love that sublimates the particularities of the beloved to the feeling of love and to the state of being in

love. For François, the beloved can be multiplied or replaced because the organizing principle for his life is happiness, which constitutes a total surrender to his instincts and the power of beauty.

For perspective on François's worldview, one may need to view the film through the prism of a paradigm from the past. This study will draw comparisons between François's philosophy and the nineteenth-century ideas of German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel, in which one recognizes the same veneration of nature, beauty, and the feeling of love, as well as the disregard for monogamy, fidelity, and the specificities of the beloved. Additionally, it will consider the ideas of critic Philippe Person who argues that the film's focus on domesticity and its pleasures resonates with ancient Mediterranean and European culture. He writes that *Le Bonheur* is "a hymn to life" that could be understood as "paganist," and that to comprehend the complexity and depth of this film, one may need to put aside "Judeo-Christian codes" (my translation) (112).

Thirdly, Varda links the replaceable beloved with the historical process—that is, the series of inevitable changes that take place as one era folds into the next. Although the film is set in the 1960s, François and his wife, Thérèse, give the impression of belonging to an earlier time period. They are part of the artisan class (he is a carpenter and she is a seamstress) that manages to live a quasi-preindustrial existence in a village-like suburb of Paris. The previously mentioned evocations of nineteenth-century Impressionism further situate François and Thérèse in a France insulated from the challenges of a modernizing landscape. That said, modernity has a notable visual presence in the film, represented by skyscrapers, icons of popular culture, and Emilie herself. In fact, Varda juxtaposes the old-world, artisan-class France of food, wine, gardens, and family picnics with a changing world of suburban apartment buildings, minimalist design, and

“modern” values as a parallel construct to the differences between the (old) wife and the (new) mistress.

With Emilie, the mistress, Varda presents what will become the new norm in decades to come: the modern European woman, notably distinct from Thérèse in her fashion sensibilities, attitudes towards marriage, and choice of work outside the home as a postal clerk. As this chapter will show, this glimpse into the France of the future reveals a relationship between the postwar economic boom and cultural approaches towards love and the beloved. In this form of impersonal love, the object of the lover’s desires is new, fashionable, and interchangeable, not unlike an object in a store window. Fast-forward to the twenty-first century and contemporary philosopher Simon May will argue that approaches towards love in the present day have been influenced by the culture of capitalism. He states that there has been “a spread of consumerism to love: the demand for quick satisfaction here, as in other areas of desire, and the urge to repeatedly move on to new partners if we don’t find it. Indeed to keep ‘moving on’ over a lifetime” (xiii). While this would be an overstatement to describe François’ behavior in a film from fifty years ago, this chapter will point out that there are markers in *Le Bonheur* that create associations between a new form of love and novelty and expendability.

That said, Varda does not ostensibly privilege one type of woman over the other in *Le Bonheur*. Likewise, there is neither apparent nostalgia for an old France nor a predilection for a new one; both are a part of an historical process. To conceptualize the replaceable beloved in these terms, one can perceive the transition from Thérèse to Emilie as one perceives changes in technologies, architecture, and social norms: an inherent reality of the passage of time. While Varda may convey a certain sadness intrinsic to this process, this lamentation is countered with what is fresh, luminous, and optimistic about the future.

This chapter will presently examine these iterations of impersonal love in more detail, while indicating the common characteristic that unites them: the characters' passive role in relationship to more powerful biological, cosmic, and historical cycles and waves. This portrayal of love is one that is far beyond the reach of human influence, the work of larger, remote forces that have little concern for an individual's particular emotions, desires, or identity. As Yvette Biró states, Varda's films contain "suggestive allusions to the limits of human potential" (1).

This approach to *Le Bonheur* is pertinent to this dissertation because the element of passivity runs counter to the meditations on love put forth by the artists and philosophers of the mid-twentieth century that have emphasized the human will and capacity to change one's perspective, attitudes, and behavior in love relationships. Recognizing this contrast helps to further conceptualize the paradigm of the 1930s to the 1960s in terms of what it is *not*. At the same time, Varda's film demonstrates the enduring continuity of impersonal love in Western thought, even though it was sublimated in the shadows during the Second World War era.

Before revisiting these forms of impersonal love, I pause to consider the unsettling undercurrents of this film. These are especially perceptible after Thérèse's death when Varda depicts Emilie replicating Thérèse's role, taking her place in her bed, caring for her children and performing her household chores. With these closing scenes, Varda writes in a dissonance that cues the viewer to feel that a taboo has been broken. Because of moments like these in the film, many critics argue that Varda's film is a social or moral critique, be it of patriarchal constructs (Flitterman-Lewis), the 1950s and 1960s cult of domesticity (DeRoo), the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie (Hottell), or of François's self-serving philosophy of happiness (Grossvogel). Indeed, this film is partially about the false appearance of domestic bliss, or as Varda puts it, "the seemingly perfect fruit with a worm inside" (qtd. in Hottell 63). Ultimately, however, I believe it

is difficult to argue that the film is unequivocally a critique. The film is rather a paradox that lays bare a number of social, moral, and psychological flaws. Yet it also acknowledges a number of larger, impersonal forces at work beyond human control, and even accepts and embraces certain elements that it simultaneously indicates as injurious. Varda keeps this paradox alive and dynamic by inscribing various conflicting clues in the film and in her interviews.

One such enigma is Thérèse's death. Whether one interprets her drowning as accidental or as a suicide makes a significant difference in how one perceives the characters. Many viewers, myself included, are inclined to view it as a suicide. This being the case, did Thérèse gracefully and deferentially remove herself from the picture for the benefit of her husband's happiness (a concession to patriarchy) or did she end her life because she was overwhelmed and saddened by his capacity to share his love between two women (a rejection of patriarchy)? In an unusual interpretation of this episode, Varda herself reframes the morality of the suicide in terms of the well-being of François and Thérèse's two children. In an interview with *Image et Son*, she states that Thérèse, the wife, is a coward: "I find it's a terrible cowardice to commit suicide when you have two children. You should at least try and resolve your problems before you abandon your kids" (*Interviews* 40). She follows this with the assertion that Emilie, the mistress, is courageous: "the young woman could cave under the weight of her guilt, and, my God, how many women her age are there who could forge ahead and care for the happiness of the two children who are not hers" (*Interviews* 40). With these comments, Varda calls attention to the fact that there is more at stake in this film than issues of infidelity and polygamy. The viewer is subsequently urged to question his or her hierarchy of values. Then one must consider: what if Thérèse's death were accidental? In that case, one's sympathies might be directed towards François and his loss. In an interview with *Cahiers de Cinéma*, Varda reminds the viewer that, "There is nothing to prove

that the woman has committed suicide, even if no one in the audience doubts that she has. . . .

We are conditioned by an entire classical and Christian tradition to feel guilt. I think she killed herself, and yet I also have my doubts” (*Interviews* 32). Indeed, one’s assumption that Thérèse’s death is a suicide could very well be a projection of the viewer’s moral framework, one that is adverse to François’s act of infidelity and polygamy and that is predicated on a certain identification or sympathy for Thérèse. In essence, one’s moral codifications condition one to believe that Thérèse *must* be upset about François’s affair and therefore *must* have taken her own life. In terms of visual clues in the film itself, there is what appears to be a poignant look on Thérèse’s face and then a thoughtful pause before she takes leave of her family and goes on her fateful walk at the pond’s edge. The acting and direction certainly hint at suicide but ultimately are too subtle to be conclusive. There is only one scene of her death, and it is a long shot of an indistinguishable woman in the distance struggling in the water, evidence *perhaps* that her drowning was an accident. However, as Grossvogel suggests, this shot could be an instance of subjective camera work (137), projecting François’s imagined replay of her tragic death in the way that *he* wants to see it. This type of uncertainty regarding character motivations pervades the film. As such, the characters remain opaque. This ambiguity gives one pause before landing on any firm moral conclusions. The ambivalence serves to dislodge the viewer’s “conditioned” paradigms (Varda, *Interviews* 32), which I believe is one of the primary objectives of this film. In my view, Varda creates disequilibrium in order to activate the viewer’s intellectual and emotional response system, but then does not satisfy the intellect’s desire for certitude in order to keep critical thinking in play. The film’s refusal to be decoded serves to create a barrier between the viewer and the characters, to prevent the usual process of viewer/character identification. By

destabilizing the audience with the characters' passivity and simplicity, Varda demands that the viewer deliberate on the ethics of a situation that the characters ignore.

### **Uninformative Images**

Varda also keeps paradox and ambiguity alive by calling on the viewer to meditate on the multiple meanings and enigmatic nature of the produced image. She makes frequent allusions to photography, art, advertising, and cinema, which direct attention to the artifice of the frame, the manipulation of the lens, and the selection of a moment in time. Varda poses the question, "What do you see and what do you *not* see in a given image?" In an interview with *Cahiers de Cinema*, Varda states that her idea for the film started with family photos:

In one you can make out a group of people sitting around a table under a tree, their glasses raised, smiling at the camera. When you see the photo, you say 'That's happiness.' It's the first impression. When you look more closely, you get an uneasy feeling: all these people, it's simply not possible, there are fifteen people in the picture old people, women, children; it's not possible they could have all been happy at the same moment. . . . Or else you wonder, what *is* happiness since they all look so happy? The appearance of happiness is also a form of happiness. (*Interviews* 31)

In *Le Bonheur*, Varda holds on a family photo of François, his children, and his extended family on holiday after his wife's death. This cheerful photo at the seashore, which reveals nothing of their recent tragedy, reminds the viewer that a smiling photo tells us little about happiness.

Images, we are reminded, are unreliable sources of information. In a less explicit instance, Varda frames a bride (one of Thérèse's clients) in a doorway and then follows her as she emerges from the church and pauses for a number of photos with the groom and her family. Thérèse looks blissfully upon the scene with her two children in hand, unaware that at that very moment her own husband is with Emilie. With this brief, seemingly digressive sequence, the viewer is shown the photographic documentation of marriage, happy and innocent (we trust) on its inaugural



wedding day, juxtaposed with the compromised marriage of the main narrative. This dissonance casts doubt on what is so often taken for granted: the appearance of happy marriage *is* a happy marriage. Dramatic irony—in this case, the juxtaposition of the viewer’s privileged awareness of François and Emilie’s clandestine affair and Thérèse’s oblivious and complete trust in her husband’s fidelity—will be capitalized upon on numerous occasions in the film. In contrast, the presentation of the imagery will remain harmonized and beautiful, echoing Thérèse’s deluded contentment and François and Emilie’s private joy, so that the viewer is seduced and tranquilized by the image while feeling unsettled by the poignance of Thérèse’s ignorance.

The homages to Impressionist painting in this film such as Monet’s gardens and Renoir’s dancing lovers extend this concept of the uninformative image. François and his family in the *Bois de Vincennes* are rendered as subjects of such paintings—part of the overall beauty and the image but devoid of unique individuality or complexity. Here we have the mood, the spirit, and the sensation of happiness created through color, light, hazy textures, and imagery of picnics, flowers, water, people strolling, fishing, and resting in the sunlight. We are reminded that Impressionism is just that, an impression of a singular feeling. The reality and the nuance of the figures’ identities, feelings, and stories, are opaque.

Alison Smith offers another possible motive for drawing upon the Impressionist aesthetic. She points out that Varda’s use of an “Impressionist palette” can be seen as a formal device for rendering “transitoriness”:

Varda has described her pleasure in ‘playing with colours’, knowing that the transitoriness of film was the very effect that the Impressionists sought, with enormous difficulty, to fix in painting (*Varda par Agnès* 62). Opposition between the fleeting and the apparently stable is central to *Le Bonheur*” (36).

In the same passage that Smith references here in Varda’s own book, *Varda par Agnès*, the filmmaker states: “In a film, colour circulates like blood, continuously. Suddenly, one feels the

color hit with great strength, the colors make an impression on us, in the space of an instant. I like the irregularity of sensations, in color or not. Cinema, it is the movement of sensations” (62). With this cinematic interpretation of Impressionist style of painting, Varda is able to render the dynamism and complexity of human love and its capacity to be beautiful, joyful, and unjust all at once, liable to change at a moment’s notice.

The street-dancing scene is illustrative of Varda’s “movement of sensations.” Reminiscent of Renoir’s series of dancing lovers, this is a joyous and lyrical scene in which nearly the entire cast (François, his wife, his mistress, and his extended family) enjoy a waltz on a summer evening at a festival in Fontenay. The camera is held at a slightly high angle, cueing the viewer to look at the characters in a different way, as figures in a tableau, or even more abstractly, as swathes of dancing color traversing the frame. The music carries the dancers and the viewers from one partner to the next. As the camera pans slowly left and then right and back again, it encounters a tree trunk in the foreground. The camera focuses on the trunk and blurs the foliage and the dancers, as François glides behind this temporary screen from his wife to his mistress and back again. The tree maintains separate domains for Thérèse and Emilie. At the end of the scene, Thérèse beckons to her dancing partner to travel in the direction of her husband who is on Emilie’s side of the tree, and this fragile boundary is crossed. Only the viewer, François, and Emilie would be aware of its significance, and once again, Thérèse’s ignorance of her husband’s extramarital romance and the presence of his mistress tinges this scene with pathos. Otherwise, this scene is aesthetically harmonious in symmetry, rhythm, movement, and color. Both love’s joy and sorrow are communicated in this animated painting of impersonal love, a love which interchanges beloveds with the ease, levity, and innocent candor of a social dance.

In addition to references to photography and Impressionist painting, two critics have pointed out that Varda makes ironic use of 1950s cinema in *Le Bonheur*. Richard Neupert writes,

Varda's set design alternates the nostalgic impressionist scenes with a flat poster style and primary colors. . . . Further, she also includes color fades between scenes, including fades to yellow, blue, and white that seem to mimic 1950s Hollywood romantic comedies such as *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*" (350).

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis states that "in exaggerating the conventions of melodrama and the musical, . . . Varda produces in *Le Bonheur* a level of formal critique of commercial narrative cinema, just as certainly as she challenges patriarchal social relations" (234). Varda's nods to contemporaneous cinema contribute to the argument that this film is more of a social critique. Together with references to magazine advertisements of the time period (which will be discussed later in the chapter), they provoke social questions of patriarchal hegemony and, as DeRoo states, "interrogate myths of domestic harmony" (191). Varda's crafted use of references to photography, painting, and cinema contributes to the dialectic that she puts forth in her film: one voice of beauty and acceptance and another of dissonance and critique, resulting in a deconditioning of the viewer's comforting assumptions and his or her continual engagement in deciphering and interpreting.

### **The Omnipotence of Nature: Love as the Life Force**

I return now to my objective of detailing and making sense of the three frameworks associated with impersonal love: the supremacy of nature over individual needs and wants, the veneration of happiness as a life-philosophy, and the inevitability of historical change. Of these, the link between the replaceability of the beloved and nature is the one that most clearly stands outside the parameters of moral binaries. The characters are beyond reproach since they are merely playing out the life cycle encoded in their biology. Images of both fecundity and death pervade

the film. Grossvogel interprets the sunflower in the opening scene as symbolic of “the undeflectable assertion of a life force” (137). Like its French name indicates, the *tournesol* “keeps turning in the persistent quest for the sources of brightness and life” (137). Richard Neupert points out that in this same scene, François and his family are out of focus, so that it is unclear which woman is with him (350). These two images in one frame conjure an association between the insistence of the life force and its disregard for the particularities of *who* exactly is perpetuating it.

The discussion of the sunflower extends to the color yellow in Neupert’s analysis of the “‘on the hunt’ montage” (351), referring to François’s drive to Vincennes, where he will meet Emilie. Images of “François speeding along in his truck with the yellow sign, as if perhaps he is in some golden chariot” are intercut with “several shots of lions” including “a shot of a male and female lion snuggling” as François passes the zoo (350-51). The bright golds and yellows, and the pacing and tone of this scene—fast and buoyant—visually render the energy that drives François forward, rushed downstream by an “underground river of instincts” (Varda, *Interviews* 44).

For Carol Mavor, the color yellow in *Le Bonheur* is associated with madness, like Perkins Gilman’s “Yellow Wallpaper” and Van Gogh’s “‘meat-eating sunflowers’” (160)<sup>60</sup>. She writes: “In *Le Bonheur*, yellow penetrates past barriers and sounds like Mozart and grows fast and unnervingly large like summer sunflowers” (160). Mavor’s reading brings the viewer’s attention to the irrationality of nature and the idea that human beings are limited in their ability to control the subterranean forces that drive their behavior. Varda’s film confronts viewers with a

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<sup>60</sup> Mavor quotes Kevin Parker. See Mavor’s footnote on p. 198 of *Blue Mythologies*.

hyperbolized depiction of nature's preeminence, reminding them that this force persists, despite twentieth-century illusions that rational thinking has triumphed over it.

The idea that the life force ultimately drives romantic behavior has precedence in Schopenhauer's *The Metaphysics of Love and the Sexes*. Philosophers Irving Singer and Simon May place Schopenhauer in a broader tradition of the intellectual history of love (which includes Lucretius, Ovid, and later Freud) that perceives love as mere libidinal impulse.<sup>61</sup> This libidinal impulse, accompanied as it may be by feelings of love, is actually nature's "will to live" (Schopenhauer 192). His pragmatic approach deems it naively romantic to believe that there is an uncanny, unique, spiritual bond between the lover and the beloved. Although the lover may not realize it, he or she is on a predetermined trajectory towards procreation. Nature, Schopenhauer contends, has devised the complicated rituals of romance and the depth and duration of emotion to create the illusion of love in order to bring and keep together a suitable couple for optimal offspring. Schopenhauer states:

The ultimate end of all love affairs . . . is really more important than all the other ends of human life, and is therefore quite worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it, that which is decided is nothing less than the composition of the next generation. (191)

In a sense, lovers are "made for each other," but their destiny together is inscribed by their biology, not any kind of spiritual or intellectual compatibility. The "will" operates in service of its own agenda and has no regard for human happiness nor interest in what the lover consciously needs or desires in the beloved.

The "will to live" becomes more nuanced insofar as both men and women are instinctively driven towards the same goal, but men focus on the quantity of offspring and

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<sup>61</sup> For more on Schopenhauer and his place in the intellectual history of love, see May, ch. 5 and Singer, vol. 2, pgs. 443-68.

women focus on maintaining the survival of the offspring. This is why, Schopenhauer contends, the “man is inclined to inconstancy in love,” and “always looks about after other women” while the “woman sticks firmly to one man,” . . . “for nature moves her, instinctively and without reflection to retain the nourisher and protection of the offspring” (195). When it comes to the social institution of marriage, fidelity “is with the man artificial, with the woman it is natural” (196).

Schopenhauer’s nineteenth-century ideas will appeal to a number of twentieth-century thinkers. Freud will take up the mantle of an unconscious life force (which he will call “Eros”) as the primary mechanism behind romantic behavior. Scientific investigation, including Darwinist theories of evolution, genetic determination, and neuroscience will vindicate many of Schopenhauer’s theories (Singer 455-56). But the mid-twentieth century existentialists and personalists push back firmly on this deterministic idea of love. They will argue that a human is born a blank slate, and as William Barrett surmises, “makes his own nature out of his freedom and the historical conditions in which he is placed” (102). Their belief that one’s existence precedes one’s essence (or nature) opposes Schopenhauer’s belief that an individual’s nature is determined the moment that “the will” brings together two complementary mates, i.e. one’s parents. Schopenhauer writes:

As the being, the *existentia*, of these future persons is absolutely conditioned by our sexual impulse generally, so their nature, *essentia*, is determined by the individual selection in its satisfaction; i.e., by sexual love, and is in every respect irrevocably fixed by this idea. (191)

This idea was objectionable to the existentialists and personalists because it precluded all mystery to human existence and denied the influence of free will.

*Le Bonheur* does not argue that love is solely about the perpetuation of the human species, but it does suggest that the indomitable life force has played a part in François’s

behavior. His unchecked gravitation to Emilie and his quick action in procuring her as a second mother to his children could be explained by this larger, more powerful “will to live.” Visually, Varda’s sunflower motif and the patterning of the color yellow suggest such a notion.

Schopenhauer’s theory that there is a feminine iteration of this “will” also appears in the film.

François’s wife, Thérèse, is emblematic of such an archetype, but his mistress’s behavior could be illuminated by this idea as well. Varda communicates the power of these natural forces through the use of color. For example, François’s “on the hunt” montage, hued yellow, is complemented by a montage in pink from the subjective perspective of Emilie. This scene takes place at the coffee shop, *Le Chateau*, which is adorned with coral tiles and a rose awning. The sequence begins from François’s perspective with a close-up of Emilie’s heart locket around her neck. The point of view then transfers to Emilie who looks straight at François’s flirtatious smile. His face briefly fades from focus and the viewer’s attention is directed to a woman in pink blouse with white polka dots who sits down behind him, followed by another woman dressed in pink who greets and kisses a man in a bubble-gum colored shirt. Varda then holds on two pink and red placards, on which are written the words: “*Le Mystère*” and “*La Tentation*.” In their brief dialogue at the cafe, François mentions “roses” twice. This sequence, sewn together in a similar fashion to the montage in yellow, is the sentimental, feminine depiction of a woman falling in love. It is the counterpart to François’s masculine pursuit, which Varda has associated with golden lions and golden chariots. This feeling of love, this strong feeling of gravitation towards François will override Emilie’s qualms and concerns about the affair. Although at various moments in the film, she voices her awareness that the polygamous arrangement is problematic, and that taking Thérèse’s place may be inappropriate, her unconscious drive towards a mate is stronger. With the yellow and the pink montages placed in proximity to one

another, Varda depicts the contrast of gendered love: virility and pursuit on the one hand and sentimentality and attachment on the other, deliberately clichéd, poetic renderings of the inconstant male and the constant female.

The comparisons between Schopenhauer's *Metaphysics* and Varda's *Le Bonheur* are of course limited, as they are distinct in spirit, approach, discipline, and scope. However, when viewed in terms of the intellectual history of love, they both can be considered as nodes of thought in a long discourse that perceives love as a natural phenomenon having to do with sexuality and the perpetuation of the life cycle.

In *Le Bonheur*, Varda not only meditates on the generative role of the life force in influencing romantic behavior; she looks to the end of the life cycle as well. While the sunflower and the color yellow signal virility and the irrational impulse that propels François out of his "square field" with Thérèse to seek "another apple tree" (*Le Bonheur*), there are also corresponding visual markers of death in the film. Most notable of these is the change of the seasons from summer to fall, which corresponds to the change of the female figure in François's household. The closing scene of François, Emilie, and his children in the Bois de Vincennes (where he and Thérèse would also picnic) is hued entirely in the colors of autumn leaves. The palette of browns, dark yellows, and burnt reds connote death and dying, even though this scene depicts a family's new beginning. Varda scores this finale with the same piece by Mozart used in the opening scene of the field of sunflowers. In the context of this scene, the music sounds somewhat forceful and aggressive, and this incongruity with the imagery of a subdued autumn landscape underlines the persistence of the life force through and beyond tragedy. This same point is made with more subtlety in the scene of Thérèse's funeral. The shot is composed solely of a brown mound of earth, mourners in black, and the ever-present yellow flowers.



By creating a parallel between the change of the seasons and the change of the female figure, Varda makes another association between natural processes and the replaceable beloved. In her interview with *Cahiers de Cinéma*, Varda explains that the “interchangeability” of human beings is not a “practical proposal” (*Interviews* 34). In other words, she is not accepting or condoning this concept with her film. “No,” she continues, “it’s really a tragic element that occurs within happiness. It’s an idea that’s both cruel and intellectually satisfying. Like the seasons of cruelty: the cycle of the seasons is both satisfying and perfectly cruel” (*Interviews* 34). As Varda reminds the viewers, the replaceable human being is a fact of life. In an interview with the *Real Paper*, she states, “That’s what life is about. A man is replaced by another man in war. A woman is replaced by another woman in life” (*Interviews* 89). The idea that human beings are replaceable *is* cruel, but it must at times be viewed from an impersonal distance in order to accept its inevitability as part of the human condition.

While Varda does present the replaceable beloved from a distance (by way of her simplified, archetypal characters), she still renders the painful effect that this reality has on the human psyche by unnerving the viewer with François’s resilience and Emilie’s concession to take Thérèse’s place so heedlessly. Yvette Biró writes: “The willful parody of serial love, its ironizing intentions, are unveiled quite flagrantly, by the near instantaneous re-establishment of harmony in our heroes’ little universe” (6). Ruth Hottell adds that Varda hyperbolizes the shortness of the mourning period (two months) in order to “peel back the skin from the fruit and expose the worm that the Order would keep under the skin” (63).<sup>62</sup> Whereas traditionally the viewer looks to the characters as agents of cruelty, the viewer of *Le Bonheur* is also prompted to

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<sup>62</sup> Hottell here refers to Varda’s previously cited interview in which she describes *Le Bonheur* as “a beautiful, seemingly perfect fruit with a worm inside” (Varda, qtd. in Hottell 63).

consider the mechanisms of nature and its blindness to the complexity of the human emotional experience.

Yvette Biró offers a more poetic and mythological configuration of nature's omnipotence in *Le Bonheur*. She reframes the phenomenon as the omnipotence of time: "time itself is the main protagonist of Varda's films . . . time as messenger, death's herald" (1). "Its fertile construction-destruction" overwhelms the particularities of the individual and puts personal tragedy in its place (1). Biró writes:

A woman dies, a victim of suicide. Yet the director is never for a moment tempted to embellish her with the romantic aura of irreplaceability. Her presentation is more sober and objective: instead, she examines the elements that allow one to transcend this moment in search for a kind of equilibrium. Quite obviously, she denies neither the emptiness nor the disorder caused by grief, but refuses instead the sanctifying and demonizing gestures toward death that are the stuff of funerary eulogies. (5)

By minimizing the ordeal of mourning, Varda elides the cathartic release that concludes the traditional tragedy, leaving the viewer unsettled and dissatisfied. To arrive at a sense of completion, the viewer's inclination is to attempt to make sense of "the elements" that allow François to transcend his grieving "in search for a kind of equilibrium."

### **Love and Happiness**

I turn now to Varda's second approach towards understanding the replaceable beloved: François's steadfast observance of a philosophy of love and happiness. In a series of conversations with Thérèse, Emilie, and his colleagues, the viewer witnesses François's attempt to reason through his life choices. Until meeting Emilie, allowing his "five senses" and "social instincts" to guide his life was unproblematic (Varda, *Interviews* 32). In fact, this *modus operandi* appears to be the norm among his friends and family. It is arriving at this fateful

juncture with Emilie that pushes this unconscious way of life to develop into a conscious philosophy. As Varda explains, committing adultery “requires that he will have to invent some ethical position” (*Interviews* 39). Concerned that his choice may do injury to his wife and mistress, he feels he must identify the philosophical foundation for his decision so that all three can feel at ease with (and ideally embrace) the arrangement. In most basic terms, his belief is that one should pursue happiness and pleasure and eschew sadness and discomfort. The simplicity of François’s attitude is revealed in the following conversation during a Sunday stroll with his wife.

*Thérèse:* A new client came yesterday. Ugly and fat, mean-looking.

*François:* You should have said you were too busy.

*Thérèse:* I said so. . . .

*François:* You’re wonderful, always doing what I’d like you to do. Except rice with chocolate.

*Thérèse:* We can’t have it every day.

*François:* What I love I can have every day. Radishes, fried potatoes, rice. And you as a second dessert.

Whether it is food, wine, work, or leisure, François’s approach is to glide over all things distasteful or unpleasant and embrace all things appealing. In one respect, this dialogue, voiced in familiar, gentle, and teasing tones, exemplifies François’s valorization of simple pleasures and his love of life. In her interview with *Cahiers*, Varda expresses sympathy for François’s outlook, in particular his choice to maximize happiness over wealth: “François just looks simple, but in reality he is a wise man.” However, Varda continues, François “gets to the point where he knows no limits” (*Interviews* 33). Although this conversation between François and Thérèse is light and intimate, the fact remains that François’s pleasure principle, harmless enough when applied to work and rice with pudding, has now been extended to women. At a certain point, Varda states, happiness can become a “cruel structure that organizes everybody’s activities” (*Interviews* 75).

Upon sifting further through the dialogue in this film, one can identify five features of François’s philosophy, each of which is some iteration of impersonal love. This is to say that

while the beloved's individuality or difference is not fully ignored, she is more esteemed for the feeling she creates than her complexity as a distinct person. In this conceptualization of love, the lover is at the center and the beloveds are marvels of beauty that delight the lover and make him feel alive and joyous. The first feature of François's philosophy is that *happiness is bounty*. "Happiness works by addition," he tells his mistress. To his wife, he explains, "You and I and the kids, we're like an apple orchard, a square field. Then I notice an apple tree that grows outside the field . . . and blooms with us. More flowers. More apples. It adds up, you know?" When François looks at the beloved, he sees a revelation of nature that delights the senses and offers itself as a gift for the taking. As François explains to his wife, one should not look for it, but when love presents itself, "It's too bad to deprive yourself." This constitutes the second feature of his philosophy: *when eros descends, one must seize the opportunity*. Poor timing and other obligations are unfortunate, but they are secondary considerations. Thirdly, for François, *all love is eternal*. He assures his wife that though he has taken on a mistress, his love for her has not waned. He tells a colleague, "I like fidelity. . . . I am not capricious. When I love I can't stop." Here he redefines fidelity solely as eternal devotion rather than eternal devotion to a single beloved. While he loves both women equally, he appreciates the two women for different reasons. This leads to the fourth feature of his philosophy: *the beloveds are distinguishable, but only insofar as they appeal to the senses*. Emilie asks François: "Are she and I the same to you?" "No, very different," he responds. Thérèse is a "hardy plant" and Emilie is an "animal set free." Thérèse is a "dessert" and Emilie is a "new wine" that makes his "head spin." Rather than distinct and complex individuals, according to François's fifth and final belief, the *beloveds are agents of the lover's happiness and personal growth*. While Emilie's and Thérèse's identities become somewhat effaced in their plurality, François's sense of self only expands. François says

to Emilie, “I can’t say I am different since I met you. On the contrary, I am even more myself.” In voicing these sentiments, he indicates that these statements are not mere musings—he is using these principles to guide (or perhaps justify) his actions.

For François, his love for two women has an intrinsic moral structure. It is not (at least consciously) mere sexual attraction or a cavalier exercising of his male power. Instead it is an expression of his love of nature’s bounty and love itself. His belief system is a kind of hedonism, but it is not tainted with gluttony, greed, or power. On the contrary, in his mind, this form of impersonal love is about the innocence, purity, and secular blessedness of beauty and nature itself. For François (and Emilie), happiness *is* goodness; other moralities are temporary and secondary. The mere beauty of life’s pleasures sanctifies the pursuit. As Grossvogel puts it,

François is an altogether *natural* creature. Whatever would cause the upset of other worlds remains innocent and benign in his. For him, delight in a new love can only mean equivalent delight for everyone. He assumes that his natural Eden extends to all those around him, the harmony he feels must perforce be theirs as well. (137)

When Thérèse dies, it does not occur to François that his infidelity may have caused her to commit suicide. Instead of feeling guilt, he feels the poignancy of his own loss. However, because he is predisposed to happiness and because he believes in happiness as a way of life, he does not comprehend why he should have to lose *both* apple trees when Thérèse dies. In his grieving, it is both instinctive and rational to bring Emilie, the living apple tree, closer to him. As Varda states, François is “pretty logical in the sequence of events that confront him” (*Interviews* 39). By marrying Emilie, François is not so much replacing Thérèse as ensuring that all of his happiness will not die with her. Hence he begins his proposal to Emilie with the words, “I still want to be happy, and if you are willing . . .”

This insistence on maintaining happiness is interpreted by Grossvogel as self-serving and narcissistic. He perceives the film as an entirely subjective expression of François's distorted worldview:

The camera conveys François's ability to bend every vision to his own. . . . This conformity of perception to François's finally compels spectators to realize that what they have been seeing is not a real world, but the world as François sees it. Its unblemished beauty tinted with unnatural color and accented by Mozart, its unyielding focus on the light (the sunflowers, of the sun in a land without clouds), are the unconsciously perverse vision of a single man. François is a pathological case of selfishness, one that is monstrous to the point of altruism. He is a man possessed—someone so incapable of being unhappy that he knows his possession must inevitably be a force informing all whom he encounters: even the death he causes cannot alter that certainty. (137)

While Grossvogel describes François's worldview as "pathological," Philippe Person perceives François as an historical anomaly. As mentioned previously, Person argues that there is a "paganist" sensibility to *Le Bonheur*. There is an acceptance of the cosmos and its apersonal and enigmatic definition of order and equilibrium. There is also a celebration of that which is earthly, sensory, and tactile. Person acknowledges that François's understanding of happiness as a banquet table of delights and pleasures is discomfiting to the Judeo-Christian paradigm. He urges the critical viewer to dissolve Judeo-Christian morality with its laws and its binaries: "how does one speak about amoralism in this universe where moral codes do not exist?" (my translation) (112). In doing so, watching *Le Bonheur* becomes an entirely different viewing experience. The characters recoup an innocence and even a certain charm in their love of happiness and beauty. The replaceable beloved becomes less of a transgressive act and more conceptual and mythical, a part of the ebb and flow of fortune and misfortune that characterizes the human experience. With Grossvogel and Person, one is presented with two opposing frameworks for understanding François's pleasure principle, one which deems it particular and pathological and another which perceives it as imbued with ancient wisdom.

A third way of understanding François's approach to love and happiness is to view it as a legacy of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Like François, the Romantics privileged the feeling of love, nature, and passivity. Perhaps the ideas most relevant to *Le Bonheur* are those of Friedrich Schlegel, which were made famous in his novel *Lucinde and the Fragments*. For Schlegel, love is "a great unifying and redeeming force" (May 166). A truly great love converges all loves—love of beloveds past and present, love of nature and of the world—into one sublime energy. For this reason, he recognizes value in having multiple lovers over one's lifetime. Every beloved educates us and "becomes part of the fabric of our being" (May 168). As Simon May surmises:

The guiding idea is that love—like God—is one; and so genuine love aims at the maximum unity with the world around us. Rather than shielding us from the world, love opens us to it. Rather than causing us to forget the world and our past, love is how we incorporate them. As one of the lovers in *Lucinde* proclaims: 'the sanctity of marriage has given me citizenship in the state of nature.' (168)

Through the magical powers of love, the lover and the beloved leave the civilized world of work, money, and achievement for the natural world. Ideally, the lovers begin to resemble passive elements of nature, the inanimate, unconscious participants in a greater ecology. Schlegel suggests that women are fortunate in this regard because their temperament is naturally more passive, that is, more "vegetative" (Singer 390). Hyperactivity is "nordic barbarity" while "the more divine a man or a work of man is, the more it resembles a plant; of all the forms of nature, this form is the most moral and the most beautiful" (Schlegel, qtd. in Singer 319). As opposed to some Enlightenment era philosophers that took a more reasoned, practical approach to love, Schlegel acknowledges the subterranean forces that "determine behavior and lie hidden beyond the reach of reason" (Singer 391). Singer writes about nineteenth-century Romantic love:

What established the value of loving another person was more than just a reasoned harmony between male and female, or any sensible and enlightened

arrangement of mutual advantages, but rather the ability to experience organic growth. And that required a willing duplication in oneself of the passivity in vegetative processes. The governing image of Romantic love such as Schlegel's is the reed or strand of kelp forever bending in response to ocean waves, to currents that create its natural and developmental rhythm. (391)

A number of parallels surface when comparing *Le Bonheur* with Romantic thought. For one, Varda's characters are exemplary of the passive, plant-like state of being that Schlegel believes to be requisite to great love. Secondly, like Schlegel, Varda renders romantic love as a unity of loves, a co-mingling of the love of nature, family, and worldly pleasures. Thirdly, in François's philosophy, one recognizes Schlegel's belief that multiple loves enrich and educate one's personhood. Finally, both François and Schlegel express more interest in the feeling of love and passion than the particularities of the beloved. The impersonal form of love presented in *Le Bonheur* may very well have inherited some core beliefs from the nineteenth-century Romantics, along with Europe's "pagan" past.

### **Love and the Historical Process**

Varda's third and final associative framework for the replaceable beloved is the historical process, or the way in which new tastes, values, and ways of life inevitably replace the old with each generation. The film documents life in the periphery of early 1960s Paris in which the slower-paced traditional lifestyle coexists with novelty in the form of utilitarian housing, billboards, and emblems of popular culture. Viewed one way, the character of Thérèse is symbolic of a France of the past that will become increasingly obsolete, and Emilie is symbolic of the France of the future that is preparing to take its place.

Varda states that in creating the characters of Thérèse and François, she "intentionally chose the only social class where people are neither bosses nor workers" (*Interviews* 33). As



seamstress and carpenter, “they both labour at stitching and joining together” (Mavor 162). Varda’s choice functions to associate them with a traditional, semi-rural society made up of artisans and their family collectives in which life and work are fully integrated. Work runs from sunrise to sunset, but it is interwoven with leisure: coffee, aperitifs, and chats with neighbors, family, and friends. The cozy interior of François and Thérèse’s apartment is painted blue, decorated with flowers and wooden furnishings. There is a common space outside this old, stone edifice where the children play and the neighbors exchange pleasantries. Thérèse herself fits into her surroundings with her golden, wheat-blond hair, her homemade, flower-print dresses and her natural, child-like beauty. Like François, she loves nature and their Sunday picnics in the *Bois de Vincennes*. Thérèse’s overall aesthetic and demeanor is pastoral, floral, warm, sweet and gentle.

Though nearly the same age as Thérèse, Emilie is more representative of the generation that grew up during the postwar economic boom. Unlike François and Thérèse who integrate their leisure into their workday, Emilie’s work outside the home as a postal clerk affords her independence and evenings out with friends. When she meets François, she is about to move into a new apartment building in Fontenay, a quiet suburb which she fears will lack the lively street life of Vincennes. As she settles into her new apartment, she decorates the stark-white walls with clippings of popular icons from magazines. More reminiscent of a dormitory room than a home, the apartment suggests detachment, flexibility, and anonymity. Her self-presentation corresponds to this aesthetic with her white-blond hair cut neatly below her ear and her bright, often monochromatic dresses. Like Thérèse, she is also blond, sweet, and demure, but her appearance is light, crisp, fresh, and slightly more urban.

The differences between Thérèse's and Emilie's work, lifestyle and aesthetics are reinforced by their disparate attitudes towards love and marriage. Emilie enjoys her independence and does not feel an urgency to marry. As she begins her affair with François, she tells him: "Don't worry. I'm free, happy and you are not the first." Thérèse, who has more traditional sensibilities, met her husband and had children at a young age and can barely conceive of a happiness outside of her family. In response to François's metaphor of Emilie as "another apple tree," she is slightly stunned and saddened, stating simply, "You're the only one I love. I'm your wife."

François has more in common with his wife in terms of aesthetic sensibilities and love of nature and family, yet he identifies with Emilie's free attitude towards love, marriage, and happiness. While Emilie's views are distinctly modern, his are timeless and universal. He is representative of a type of person who is naturally predisposed to happiness and who is open to all possibilities of love, old and new. His openness and enthusiasm for all kinds of beauty, along with the cheerful and energetic tone of the film are elements that gloss this film with an acceptance of historical change itself.

*Le Bonheur* appears to present popular culture as an upbeat, cheerful phenomenon and the film seems to welcome (or at least accept) the aesthetics of modernity. However, as Grossvogel would suggest, this impression may be more representative of the characters' passive and accepting worldview. Upon closer examination, there is a subtle critique of consumer culture sewn into the lining of this film and a prescient association made between this consumer culture and the François-Emilie love relationship. The most striking example is the closing shot of the film when François, Emilie, and the children walk away from the camera into the woods in a symmetrical line, hand-in-hand, wearing identical, braided golden sweaters. While Varda has

upon occasion dressed the characters in like colors for an aesthetic effect, this is the first instance in which the carefully arranged elements of the composition connote conformity. This final image is part of a system of visual and dialogical clues that quietly hint at the fact that Emile and her relationship with François are linked with a new consumer-driven, conformist culture characterized by reproduceability and expendability. Another example of such a marker is the visual digression of the postal stamp depicting Chagall's famous image of the floating bride and groom. As Emilie leafs through a book of stamps at the post office, Varda closes in on one individual stamp, allowing the viewer to meditate on this thematically relevant image of marriage. In juxtaposition with this close-up, she also holds on a shot of a *sheet* of multiple Chagall stamps, suggesting that marriage is not unique and can easily be reproduced. As Alison Smith writes, the Chagall image "is reduced to a very everyday object performing a useful function within the framed and clichéd world, and reproduced so small that there is no need for it to be considered in its fullness, and to Emilie, it is once again, the object of a transaction" (35). A third harbinger of consumer culture's relationship to love (and sexuality) is the motif of the pretty blonde, which manifests in the form of the Thérèse and Emilie characters, but also in the form of popular iconography. There are three distinct shots in which the blonde beauties on posters and magazines are the focal point. In the carpentry shop, Varda holds on a shot of François with a poster of the blonde pop star Sylvie Vartan behind him. Added together with the shot of the pin-ups up on the cabinet in the carpentry shop and the shot of Brigitte Bardot and Marilyn Monroe on Emilie's walls, these images take on a meaning not just of typical popular décor, but of reproductions of bodies and faces on thin, dispensable paper, ultimately interchangeable and indistinguishable. Varda reinforces this point with dramatic irony in a brief dialogue between Thérèse and François, when Thérèse unwittingly and playfully asks which

blonde beauty he prefers: Brigitte Bardot or Jeanne Moreau? Viewed together, all of these moments hint at the sameness and reproduceability of the decorative blonde. Thérèse, Emilie, Vartan, Bardot, Monroe, and Moreau all become variations on a theme. This is a new kind of impersonal love, one that belongs to the society of the postwar economic boom in which the pervasiveness of media and consumerism has influenced the public's romantic sensibilities.

In her book, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, Dagmar Herzog states that love, sex, and romance in the 1950s and early 1960s in Western Europe can be characterized by two narratives: one of "lingering traditionalism in gender and sexual values" and another "of economic and cultural optimism, greater opportunities for consumerism, [and] increased aspirations for fun" (107). In film and advertising, women were presented with two corresponding images of the feminine ideal: a "dutiful housewife" and an "object of desire," as well as a nearly unattainable blended version of the two ideals (107). Herzog states that there was

a prevalence of the bombshell beauties in advertising of everything from soap to stockings to margarine. In a complicated interplay between intimidation and inspiration, women strove to navigate the conflicting injunctions to be both wholesome and sexy and learned to measure themselves with and against the circling images and popular magazine chatter. (107)

Cinema brings the bombshell to life in the form of actresses like Brigitte Bardot and Anita Ekberg, animating her with a voluptuous body and a willful, sexual energy. Herzog states,

The free sensuality of Silvana Mangano in Giuseppe de Santis' *Riso amaro* (1949) or Brigitte Bardot in Roger Vadim's *Et Dieu...créa la femme* (1956) was unreachable (or not even imaginable or desirable) for the vast majority of women. Nonetheless, movies as well as magazines following the lives of the film stars from marriages to affairs to divorces not only imparted new ideals of female attractiveness but also emphasized the importance of love (and not just marriage) as the key to justifying sex.

As Herzog notes, popular cinema plays a role in relaxing rigid social mores about “a woman’s honor,” by offering examples of sexually free women that maintain their dignity so long as they are confident in their sexuality and are in love. As with the hierarchy of values of nineteenth-century Romanticism, true love trumps social mores, but in this postwar version, the woman, the diva, is the protagonist—grand, and almost heroic in her bold sexuality.

Emilie does not embody this prototype *per se*, but by associating her with the magazine cut-outs on her wall, Varda points to the function of advertising and film in shaping Emilie’s self-concept and attitudes towards love. As Varda’s avatar for the modern woman, Emilie lives out a version of both narratives described by Herzog: first a sexually liberated object of desire, and then a dutiful housewife. Emilie’s understanding of herself as a woman with priorities outside of marriage may be sincere, but considering that her transformation to domesticity is so sudden and complete, it retrospectively reads as a part of her identity that may not have been fully internalized. Through the portrayal of Emilie’s abrupt change in identity, Varda offers the idea that “the modern woman” is a new style or a new flavor in the marketplace. It may be an appealing idea to both men and women, but it is a fantasy, generated by a consumer-driven media. Although the attraction between François and Emilie is heartfelt, Varda suggests that their affair is fueled somewhat by the pervasive imagery of sexualized beauty in popular iconography.

As multiple critics have noted, Varda also comments on the media-generated imagery of the “dutiful housewife” who finds fulfillment exclusively through homemaking. Amy Taubin compares the film to *The Stepford Wives* and Ruth Hottell describes the film as a precursor to Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*, pointing out “that great emotions are diminished in importance, while daily tasks are punctuated by *Le Bonheur*’s distinctive score” (64). Rebecca

DeRoo discusses the similarity between the magazine advertisements of the time period that show close-ups of women's disembodied hands performing household chores and two montages in the film: one of Thérèse's hands and another of Emilie's hands, rolling dough, watering plants, ironing clothes, and tucking the children into bed. DeRoo states:

According to Varda's film, the message propagated by women's magazines—that family life was the path to love and satisfaction—was not only problematic but dangerous, because a woman who strove only to achieve a family life could lose herself to such an extent in her role that she could one day easily be replaced. (203)

Varda herself makes a similar remark thirty years after the release of the film in her book, *Varda par Agnès*:

I had painted a happiness, a colorful, impressionistic, and familial happiness around a painful and simple idea . . . : each of us is unique but replaceable. If a woman fulfills her functions as a wife, mother, cook, and gardener, the family does well. Every woman may discover her identity, her talent and her place but she is replaceable insofar as she fulfills her social function. (my translation) (71)

Here the replaceable beloved becomes an unintended consequence of a long-standing pattern of social organization. This constitutes another larger impersonal force that impacts the shape and directs the currents of romantic love. In the traditional construct, both men (as providers) and women (as homemakers) *become* their social function at the expense of the nuanced complexities that make them indispensable individuals.

## **Conclusion**

Within the context of love and marriage, the replaceable aspect of the beloved originates in impersonal love, the love of the beloved for what he or she represents and not for his or her complexity and uniqueness. This film recognizes the “cruelty” of this reality, but it also recognizes that impersonal love is part of the grander cosmos, that is—the perpetuation of the

life cycle and the maintenance of equilibrium in the universe. This notion is given shape through the film's structure: "the film proceeds by a series of repetitions, refrains that highlight the ritual, episodic nature of the familial (and sexual) interaction" (Flitterman-Lewis 234). These cycles and repetitions reflect aspects of love, marriage, procreation, infidelity, and separation that are automatic, self-perpetuating, governed by instinct, and not wholly within human control.

Furthermore, if one stands at distance from the film (like one does with an Impressionist painting), beauty gilds and glosses the unsettling elements. Varda creates a mythical world of "unreal beauty" with symbolic characters that have "no conscience" (Grossvogel 136; Neupert 348). For example, with the character of François,

we are confronted here with a man who is from a different psychological universe. Because not only does he seize upon happiness and hunger after others, almost with gluttony, but he sincerely believes in his power to *simultaneously* love multiple women. . . . He is Dionysian with the candor of an Apollonian. (Ouellette 430)

Because of the hyperbolic and mythic nature of the characters, some viewers do not believe that the characters should be subject to moralizing or judgment.

For others viewers, there is neither redemption through beauty nor absolution through François's blissful simplicity. The cruelty, however natural or man-made, has the last word. This is partly because these viewers see a tainted beauty, a harmonious aesthetic that has run off its tracks. As Varda states, *Le Bonheur* is "constructed" out of the "contradiction-juxtaposition" of "sugar and poison" (*Interviews* 85). Alison Smith offers an example, stating that nearly

every image from the film, taken singly, could be read as an epitome of stable happiness. It is the way in which they are linked, the progression between them, which dislocates the apparent stability, reconstructing the image of the beginning, at the end, with a different character substituted. (43)

The disturbance felt by this viewer derives from the juxtaposition between the harmony of form and the dissonance of content.

The setting of the film in (what was then) contemporary Paris is the other reason for disquiet. Had Varda set this film in a bygone era or a remote foreign or fictional land, the characters' emblematic nature would have been unchallenged, but the markings of modernity—the skyscrapers, the billboards, the posters of pop stars—present the viewer with a too-familiar scene, a mirror of his or her own society. With these markers of modern life, the question is posed: to what extent was this film exploring universal human nature (as mythology does) and to what extent was it commenting on contemporaneous historical realities?

Through her portrayal of Thérèse and Emilie as mothers, wives, mistresses, and homemakers, Varda explores the early 1960s as a time of latent but burgeoning social friction. *Le Bonheur* illustrates how love is depersonalized in both the traditional and the modern narratives of the feminine ideal, and in the attempt to navigate both of them simultaneously. As Philippe Person observes, this film exposes tensions particular to the De Gaulle era. He states that De Gaulle was a “modernizer in terms of economics but a great conformist in terms of social mores” (my translation) (113). In other words, there was the expectation that despite rapid and significant changes in labor and consumer habits, family structure, and norms would remain static. However, as the twenty-first century viewer is well aware, the economic miracle would impact public views of love, sex, and marriage, contributing to the profound changes that occur from 1964 to 1968 (Herzog 134). Released in 1963, *Le Bonheur* is a prescient film that points to signs of modern life affecting attitudes and behaviors in romance.

Both a timeless myth and a pointed critique of the present, the film challenges viewers to continually reconsider their initial reactions to this film and to question their own moral paradigms. Flitterman-Lewis frames the film in the following way: “It is a form of Brechtian



outlining of a social situation that highlights certain elements while leaving the spectator in the productive position of forming his or her own conclusions” (234).

Within the context of this dissertation, part of the purpose of examining *Le Bonheur* has been to indicate the end of an era in the intellectual history of love. The emphasis on personal love and love as responsibility from the 1930s to early 1960s will be eclipsed by the sexual revolution, and the discourse will shift towards the politics of love and sexuality. The mid-twentieth century paradigm becomes outmoded for a number of reasons. The turning point occurs when a generational cycle has completed itself since the end of the war and a new historical reality has become entrenched. For the generation coming to adulthood in the 1960s, the primary formative experience has been the postwar economic boom. The pervasive optimism, prosperity, mobility and opportunity render the need to deliberate and reflect on the intricacies of human relationships less urgent. It is a generation that continues and expands its predecessors’ efforts to free itself from hierarchy and oppressive family structures and sever the tethers of obligation and duty. The needs and the rights of the individual begin to take precedence over interpersonal accountability. Social change by way of external forces, such as political and economic policy, is now more sensible than approaches that emphasize internal shifts in attitude, beliefs, or spiritual renewal.<sup>63</sup>

*Le Bonheur’s* exploration of impersonal love arrives at this crucial juncture. By comparing some of its facets with ideas about love from Europe’s past (i.e., Schopenhauer, paganism, and Schlegel), we are reminded that impersonal love has in fact been more the norm than the exception in the intellectual history of love. In its most exalting forms, impersonal love has

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<sup>63</sup> The religious grounding for this latter approach had also become irrelevant in an increasingly secularized Europe. In addition, this era expires because many of the philosophers and theologians in question are no longer living by the mid-1960s (Weil dies in 1945, Berdyaev in 1948, Mounier in 1950, and Buber in 1965).

characterized Platonic thought on love, medieval courtly love, and nineteenth-century Romanticism—all belief systems which view the beloved as an ideal and love as means of transcendence. In its more mundane forms, impersonal love has characterized belief systems that view love as an illusory mechanism for perpetuating the species or as a creative and wishful exaggeration of sexual desire and attachment. Given the prevalence and dominance of impersonal love in Western thought, the period between 1930 and the mid-1960s takes on a renewed importance as a relatively uncommon moment when a number of intellectuals and artists arrive at similar conclusions about personal love. While the ideas themselves are not without precedence, they are unique in terms of the historical circumstances that shape them, a time period of rapid change, suffering and disquiet, but also of clarity.

## CONCLUSION

The mid-twentieth century ideas about love presented by Nikolai Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Simone Weil, Denis de Rougemont, Simone de Beauvoir, Erich Fromm, Natalia Ginzburg, Roberto Rossellini, Ermanno Olmi, and Agnès Varda break from the past and illuminate a way forward at a crucial juncture in Europe's social history. They deny the nineteenth-century Romantic notion that love is an absolution of one's being and a means of transcendence, and they refute scientific and psychoanalytic theories from the early twentieth century that reduce love to a biological or psychological phenomenon. Instead, they consider love to be a real and essential element of human existence, as well as a journey, a practice, and a commitment that requires continual renewal and observance.

As I discuss in the introduction, there is a moral and a senso-spiritual dimension to this belief system. The moral dimension seeks to do away with the hyperbole and unrealistic expectations associated with Romantic love. It emphasizes the individual integrity of the beloved as well as reifies a real, breathing, and imperfect beloved that is neither a fantastical ideal nor an object of desire. It is crucial (especially to Ginzburg, Buber, Berdyaev, and Rougemont) to perceive the beloved as unique, complex, irreplaceable, and always changing. Furthermore, for Weil, Beauvoir, Buber, and Fromm, the lover should respect and revere the beloved's otherness in order to give him the freedom to be himself and to evolve as he sees fit. Finally, as Ginzburg, Buber, Olmi, and Beauvoir contend, the lover must work independently to realize his own

potential and determine his life purpose both for his own sake and for the benefit of the beloved. This tri-partite approach to romantic relationships comprises the basic underpinnings of the moral dimension of the mid-twentieth century belief system.

The senso-spiritual dimension of this belief system is a reaction less against beliefs from the past than to the realities of the present. Berdyaev, Rougemont, Fromm, Rossellini, Olmi, and Varda all meditate on how capitalism and consumerism have affected the individual and subsequently how the individual approaches romantic relationships. These artists and intellectuals see a Europe that is becoming increasingly materialistic and impersonal, and they fear that love will fare badly in a society that is spiritually barren and/or which denies the importance of human emotions and the interior life of the individual. They contend that the lover and the beloved have to fight against the depersonalizing effects of economic and political systems by affirming their humanity and the centrality of love to their existence.

Both dimensions of this belief system emerge out of historical developments of the twentieth century. While I discuss a number of them in the dissertation, three stand out as the most relevant and influential: an increasingly materialistic and consumerist society, a declining regard for the spiritual life, and the changing roles of women. In attempting to make sense of these seismic changes and how they affect the individual, the intellectuals in question go further to meditate on the nature of love and *how to* love in changing times.

Though this mid-twentieth century belief system becomes outmoded beginning in the late 1960s, the notion of a personal love grounded in lived experience resurfaces in contemporary beliefs about love. Arguably, the belief system also has had a hand in popularizing contemporary notions of love as partnership. The extent to which its legacy will persist or change in the twenty-first century remains uncertain, but it is a worthy subject for further investigation.

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