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Mark Gerard Murphy

Book Review Essay: “Real Love: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Religion, Society” by Duane Rouselle

Review of *Real Love: Essays on Psychoanalysis, Religion, Society* by Duane Rouselle, Atropos Press, 2021 154 pp.

I've always thought My Bloody Valentine's (1991) *Loveless* was a strange album. There is something about the disjunction between the Word 'Love' on the album cover and the discordant rhythms of the chiming guitars that saturate it. For myself, that saturation speaks of a conception of love as a perpetual presence of failure and loss. However, this is not a pure absence—as if love is merely not 'there.' No, it is more about how love – in any relationship – constructs its very fiction from the repression of a necessary failure. Moreover, what we experience as love is the very phantasmatic distortion itself. As we know, psychoanalysis teaches us that discovering this imaginary distortion is repulsive in most instances. When confronted with our fantasy, we are rightly disgusted. However, what *Loveless* did (in my view) was invite us – through its sheer beauty – to explore distortion as love: to examine how we positivise loss in creating fictions for relationships.

To be sure, it's a cliché to talk about love being at the centre of academic exploration as a type of noble ideal we have lost and thus need to recover. Certainly, many theoretical excursions note how Plato placed love at the centre of philosophical exposition. And yes, there is certainly a need to return to love as a valid topic of exploration. Jean Luc Marion's (2008) phenomenological commentary on the erotic phenomenon comes to mind, as does the early work of Anders Nygren (1953). Still, we need to ask if our recovery method changes the object we seek.

Duane Rouselle's work makes a welcome return, avoiding the cloying, overly optimistic pop psychological expositions that we see hawked at Waterstones in the mind-body-spirit section,[1] which sees love in prosaic teleological utilitarian terms: Love as synonymous with meaning and happiness (Rich, 2016). He avoids such clichés precisely by problematising the proposed methodology for exploring love from the outset. He does not set out to give a systematic account of what love is philosophically or empirically. To do so would lock us in the distortion precisely by trying to clarify its density. Rather, he explores love as a symptom that appears in a diversity of 'social bonds' that are necessarily incomplete. He thus provides a set of snapshots to help us start thinking about love again. Snapshots precluding trite theories that conflate it with a flattened hope or a truncated passive determinative ontology. What Rouselle aims at in these explorations is a recovery of love as an interruptive moment. This interruption is associated with Being's incompleteness and thus a site of potentiality. It is important to note that Rouselle is a trained Lacanian psychoanalyst and

sociologist from the outset. These conceptual tools are drawn on thoroughly throughout.

The first chapter is an exposition of the necessity of belief in love. He explains that love occludes reason and that any writing about it has to start from *a posteriori* rationalisation that stretches out from impossibility. This formula of impossibility as love stems from the Lacanian dictum that a woman is a symptom (of man), (Lacan, 1974, p. 29) and the non-sexual rapport from Seminar XX (Lacan, 1999, p. 6). He gives an exposition of Genesis to expound on this point. It is – in essence – transportation of the one-all-alone in the singularity of the body toward the Other as the basis for the social bond in all its fragility. Throughout this chapter, Rousselle shows the character of the rest of the book; he explores the valences of love in theological reflection, societal observation, and the unconscious. What is most important – for me, as someone who studies theology, psychoanalysis, and mystical theology – Is that his theological exploration avoids the traps of Christian theology by moving beyond Badiouan overly Pauline formulations of Love (Badiou, 2003, 2012). He shows that an Islamic/psychoanalytic exposition on love here is just as necessary, if not more so.

Chapter two demonstrates how the logic of lack operates within the symbolic networks of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Broadly speaking, he shows how Judaism operates with belief as a neurotic instance that gives a place for doubt as repression within the same language game of Judaism itself. In Christianity, he shows that it operates via the logic of disavowal and perversion. So, whereas the space inherent in the symbolic allows a believer to doubt within Judaism, the doubt is thrust upon God himself in Christianity. God himself is an absence, and the perverse work of the Christian is about recreating this loss of loss (as affective castrative logic), which we see in the logic of apophatic theology. Finally, he gives an exposition of Islam, where it operates via the logic of foreclosure. Here there is a relationship to absence that involves the lack of the network to inscribe absence itself. Hence, faith itself – and thus love – has a relationship to certainty that simply does not cohere with the Judaic and Christian iterations. The most salient point in this chapter is how love and its constitutive lack operate. Rousselle speaks about loving from lack (what he calls the place of a non-haver) and a love that positivises lack as an object protecting the subject from the trauma of love. He ends the chapter by articulating the courage that if the choice is between love-in-certainty—as opposed to old Christological loving in doubt—and not loving at all, we should have the courage to do the former.

In chapter three, there is an exposition on love concerning communication and contemporary sociological theory. Rousselle speaks about the sociological theory of code concerning society and its ability to link with the other. Specifically, he gives an account of how love is not just a transient object within the multiplicity of codes constitutive of society. No, he shows that love is the primordial void upon which decisional structures are thus instantiated. He ends the chapter by suggesting that a return to love is based on certainty as the ground of communication. I found this a somewhat difficult and nuanced chapter, as it gives a sociological grounding to a concept that can become mired in philosophical positioning. Indeed, what is love if we do not have a contextual framing in which its operation flows?

Chapter four opens by positing how modern capitalism destroys the subjective experience of love as excess. Rousselle demonstrates how the contemporary subject steps into love as a type of commodified contractual experience. Remaining consistent with the aforementioned trauma of love as a type of wound that appears as the grounding of communication, he states that the Lacanian notion of the laughing saint shows what it means to navigate love in the modern world. At this point, he gives a wonderful exposition of the film *Joker* (Philips, 2019) building on Daniel Tutt's recent arguments (Tutt, 2019). This subject creates a name for himself out of the certainty of delusion and navigating between experiences of love that can either force him into capitalist discourse – as the mere navigation of contractual objects – or an overwhelming boundless love as sinthomatic potentiality. In short, Rousselle is giving an exposition on the functionality of the sinthome as the minimal coordinates via which the social bond can maintain itself. Real love is not about hoping for a future to passively arrive at us but about creating possibility by actively destroying our given world limitations. Falling into love can look nihilistic – most things that descend look nihilistic; all falling looks negative – but in such a falling, a new kind of determination of the Real appears, for which we have to take responsibility. This is a determination that involves the creation of a new name. And new names always

involve new worlds.

The fifth chapter is basically a summary of the argument mentioned above. This is a short but dense book, with chapter 3 being the most challenging. There are some parts of the work that feel a little disjointed. However, this in and of itself is completely overshadowed by the sheer originality of the work and its ability to engage in the late Lacan – concepts that are used only within the practicality of the clinic at the moment – and utilise them in a modern sociological context. Indeed, we see that in much modern social and philosophical theory, the Lacanian heuristic devices most utilised are those found up to – but no further than – Seminar XX.

Rousselle is doing important work here and is venturing into a difficult landscape whereby talking of sinthomes, singularities, the ones-all-alone, and the lathouse means that he will ultimately create a new symbolic we need to navigate. Rousselle does this elegantly and demonstrates that where a Christocentric and Eurocentric Žižek resides in the middle Lacan, he – in contrast – shows that an inventive use of Islam allows us to venture further into the latest Lacan (Žižek, 2000, 2016; Žižek & Milbank, 2009). In this sense, he is following an important path mapped out by scholars such as Stefania Pandolfo and others who are bringing Islam and Lacanian theory into dialogue with one another. (Pandolfo, 2018; Parker & Siddiqui, 2018)

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Note:

[1] Waterstone's is a popular bookshop in the UK.

Bio:

Mark Gerard Murphy is an editor for the political journal and blog Taiwan Insight and a visiting lecturer at St Mary's University, Scotland, Gillis Centre, convening courses on ethics, philosophy, and mystical theology/spirituality.

He completed his PhD in 2019 at St Mary's University, which examined the similarities and differences between the spiritual direction of John of the Cross and the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. It aimed to show how the practice of 16th-century Spanish spirituality was markedly similar to the ethical vision of Lacan's work in clinical psychoanalysis. At the core of the thesis was an examination and critique of the ethical problem of religious experientialism—and its relationship to 21st-century consumerism—within the practice of modern spiritual direction and mystical theology.

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