Book Reviews

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The book is a conceptual history of love, beginning with the "foundation of Western love" in the Hebrew Scripture, where love is God and God demands love: it reviews philosophers and poets until the beginning of the twentieth century. *Love. A History* sails across the centuries through the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and the poetry of Lucretius and Ovid; then encounters the treacherous seas of Christianity, but, after a brief parenthesis from medieval troubadours' poetry to the Renaissance, safely reaches the shore with Spinoza and Rousseau, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, tempered by the poetry of Schlegel and Novalis. May concludes with an exploration of Freud and, most bizarrely, Proust. Love is a complex topic and any list of thinkers would have been partial; yet this choice of authors, their diversity, and the imbalance in the examination, seem to undermine the main argument of the book.

May traces four transformations. The Hebrew Scripture's commandment to love God evolves into Christianity's affirmation that God is love and, hence, love is the root of virtue. In the second transformation, from patristic Christianity to Luther, human beings are bestowed with the "divine power to love," for love is a gift of divine Grace. The third transformation, beginning in the eleventh century and culminating in the eighteenth, sees human beings themselves as worthy of the love once reserved for God. Finally, with Rousseau, the lover "becomes authentic through love" (12).

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May is at ease with philosophy and, when he leaves behind his excessive familiarity of style, the prose flows faultlessly. However his analysis of Christianity is, at best, erratic. At times he seems compelled to score points, and often misunderstands theological notions, thus reducing a complex and diverse tradition to contradictory doctrinal statements. He admirably traces the journey from love for God to love for humans (although this is not always supported by adequate evidence). The elaborate presentation, however, falls apart with May's main thesis: that love has become a religion and has replaced the vacuum left by the retreat of Christianity. Men and women, searching for an affirmation of the self, have idealized love and "imputed to human nature powers to love that were once reserved for God" (239). Love becomes the "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" (239).

May argues that human love cannot be unconditional, eternal and redemptive. Such an idealized notion of love is the result of a "misunderstanding" on the part of human beings, who have interpreted the original commandment to imitate God as loving in the way God loves. May, instead, puts forward a safer notion of love, as "the rapture we feel for people and things that inspire in us the hope of an indestructible grounding for our life" (6). He seems to suggest that this "grounding," or "ontological rootedness," is a deep psychological need for care and security, which sparks love. However, rootedness is not only the origin of love, but also its "condition": once love is aroused, the "condition" of rootedness, the trigger for love, has been satisfied and love loses its conditionality. By conflating cause and condition, May contradicts himself. He extends this logic to altruism, arguing that altruism is also conditional on rootedness. This, however, confuses cause with effect. Altruistic acts might engender feelings of "grounding" and self-esteem, but such feelings are not the motivation behind the acts.

May contrasts his realistic but wholesome "love as rootedness," with the secular idealized notion of romantic love. However, whilst the turn inward of modernity is well established, May seems unaware that his own notion of love, as a feeling of "rapture," is itself a product of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, this reductionism fails to acknowledge the increasingly globalized, fragmented and diverse societies we live in, where there are no univocal doctrines, and where *agape*, or compassion, can still be pre-

sent. "Love thy neighbour" is an ethical commandment and, as such, not "aroused," but willed. One is not commanded to *feel* any rapture, but to treat the other with respect, to have compassion, to act justly.

What *Love. A History* shows, unintentionally, is not the transformation of love, but the transformation of knowledge. May's qualms about the idealisation of love betray an almost literal interpretation of the philosophical notions and narratives explored. The love described by philosophers and poets, however, needs to be understood as myth. Myths convey truth, ideals, aspirations; they are not a handbook on how to live your life. Ideals need not be realisable to be true. One does not stop believing in justice because a just world is impossible or because justice is never really achieved fully. By trading an ideal for comfort food, May reveals his deafness to the music of love played by the long list of authors he chose. That nostalgia for the infinite, that pull towards transcendence of our human, bounded nature, that yearning for wholeness, is bartered for a prosaic feeling, to "ground" our wellbeing. May's love does not win over mortality, and finitude: it accepts human confines, and aspires to nothing more. He thus adheres to secularisation much more than the idealized notion of the love that he criticizes. He takes the sacred away, that which is separate from us and for which we long, and replaces it with something small and manageable, that cannot possibly survive.

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