Fleeing Clarissa: A Meditation on the Nature of Love, Enduring or Otherwise

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An advertisement for a recent psychoanalytic conference on love contained the following statement:

The literature on development tells us that attachment is a fundamental human striving. We might expect, therefore, that most individuals would successfully achieve the condition of loving and being loved. However, the impediments to love are so numerous and so complex that failed relationships are probably the single most common complaint of patients coming to treatment.

Indeed, “failed relationships” seem to be the rule rather than the exception in our therapeutic universe of discourse. But what does this rhetoric of failure and success imply about the nature of love in our time? How is love an achievement? And what of the ambiguous slippage between the words “attachment” and “love,” words which seem to belong to two different discourses. Attachment seems a neutral term, more related to biological need or survival than to the complexities of human desire, while love, which one might consider a particular kind of attachment, is nevertheless saturated with social meanings, and predicated on cultural sublimations tied to desire.
Certainly it is not attachment but love that has been the enduring subject of our literary tradition, love which has been defined as a central goal of human life—love along with work that Freud said gave some needed meaning to life. Yet the meaning of love itself has been ambiguous, its conventional representations shifting over the centuries, often yielding definitions that are mutually exclusive. Consider some of its more blatant permutations over time in Western culture: an Eros tied to madness in Greek myths, a lyrical sensual love glorified in the “Song of Solomon,” a plaintive service-oriented love tinged with masochism in courtly love, and also transferred in great part into Renaissance sonnets, a rationalist love under the rubric of reason as in the enlightenment fictions of Jane Austen, a melancholic celebration of impossible love in 19th century Romantic poetry, and in modern times, the increasing attention to prohibited proscribed love, first in the new kind of love that could not speak its name—-the homoerotic and often anguished love between same sexed partners—in the early 20th century (one thinks of Radcliffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* as a prime example) and what was and still is even more unspeakable, the incestuous love between parent and child that was scandalously proposed as a universal wish by Freud and subsequently acknowledged by many to be the mimetic foundation of all adult love. Not surprisingly, then, from the psychoanalytic point of view, one of the biggest impediments to love is its unconscious connection to incestuous objects, against which the ego puts up innumerable resistances. Now, as we move into the 21st century, what do we speak about when we speak about love? As a host of contemporary fictions suggest, what a good number of writers speak about fits under the rubric of perversion, a gratification of desire beyond Oedipus, or
before him. That is to say, love is not only being questioned, but it is being constituted in a more expansive – or regressive-- mode, as an Eros outside the boundaries of the normal Oedipal constellation and its repressions, outside the depressive position.

It was for its title alone that I first picked up Ian McEwan’s *Enduring Love* a title that seemed to offer a reflection on love, enduring or otherwise. Indeed, there is a blatant irony in the double meaning of the term *enduring*: the adjective giving a positively toned meaning to love as long-lasting, defying time, the verbal gerund-- suffering an unpleasant, painful or imposed experience—a meaning that negates pleasure. Thus the very title alone seemed to destabilize the meaning of love and the narratives that support it. Was this what the novel was about?

Just as the title itself, like Freud’s antithetical meaning of primal words, performs the instability of meaning in the term enduring *love*, so does the novel’s opening chapter seem to twist an intended love narrative into another direction. The novel begins with a conventional romantic situation-- two people “in love” are about to have a picnic in the English countryside. Joe, a science journalist who narrates most of the novel, has planned this picnic as a surprise for his beloved Clarissa, a literature professor (of romantic poetry!) who has just returned from a professional trip. On the opening page, in a sort of upscale version of a jug of wine and thou. Joe is about to open a celebratory bottle of vintage wine-- a detail that situates him as one of us (one of McEwan’s readers). But even as he narrates his action and sets up the scene for the reader, he simultaneously
undermines his romantic idyll on which the sun shines by hinting proleptically of an impending trauma about to darken the landscape; in this odd double voice, his narration anticipates after the fact an intrusion on his design, one that will push the limits of the enduring love between Joe and Clarissa.

That anticipation is realized almost immediately; the romantic picnic that Joe has arranged is suddenly interrupted by a cry for help, and a more compelling scene -- a runaway balloon carrying a child-- enters Joe’s perceptual field and directs his attention away from the intended love-scene and into another narrative over which he has no control. Responding instinctively to the cry to save a child, Joe finds himself one of five men racing across a field toward the balloon from different points on a circumference, like a pentangle collapsing inward on its center. At the center of this rescue attempt is the terrified child who has panicked and is huddled inside the basket in a fetal position.

While Joe’s impulse to rescue can be seen as the kind of instinctual biological species-survival mechanism that his viewpoint as a scientific rationalist would support, it also recalls Freud’s discussion of rescue fantasies, which Freud linked to the psychological desire to return life for life -- to be the omnipotent parent who gives life. Not surprisingly in this context, the center of the trauma to which Joe runs induces in him a manic sense of grandiose competence and authority. As he runs, Joe thinks of himself as a heroic rescuer, taking on the forces of nature, a refrain that runs through the text. One recalls Conrad’s romantic Lord Jim, being tested by the disastrous shipwreck, and failing.

Significantly however, that it is the men who struggle to rescue the child, huddled like a fetus in the balloon basket -- itself a suggestive image of maternal
enclosure and entrapment, protective but also dangerous—reinforces the sense that this seen is dominated by an unconscious wish to rescue the child from the clutches of a fantasmatic maternal womb, indeed, to appropriate the maternal power to give and take life. If we add to this the knowledge that Joe’s wife Clarissa, who is running behind him, is all but obliterated from his perceptual field and consciousness—she is not part of the pentangle of men—the exclusion of the female figure and all she represents seems prophetic of the novel’s trajectory of desire. This unconscious displacement of the mother, a response to the terror of subjection to natural forces beyond one’s control, is one of the central themes of McEwan’s exploration of enduring love, and is elaborated in a number of subsequent incidents. It is, I would suggest one of the reasons his protagonist idealizes the achievements of science. But as McEwan knows, such a mastery of Mother Nature is not accomplished easily.

For a moment the men seem to be successful in drawing the balloon down to a stable position. But as if to knock out their hubris, a sudden wind assaults them and lifts the balloon away from the earth, with the five men dangling. Their weight insufficient to bring down the balloon, four let go, including Joe, leaving one to bear the burden of rescue; alone he is himself as helpless as a child, and without any support, he falls. McEwan’s description which ends the first chapter is gripping:

He was two hundred yards away now, and perhaps three hundred feet above the ground. Our silence was a kind of acceptance, a death warrant. Or it was horrified shame, because the wind had dropped, and barely stirred against our back. He ha been on the rope so long that I began to think he might stay there until the balloon drifted down or the boy came to his sense and found the valve
that released the gas . . . Even as I had that hope, we saw him slip down right to
the end of the rope. And still he hung there. For two seconds, three, four. And
then he let go. Even then, there was a fraction of time when he barely fell, and I
still thought there was a chance that a freak physical law, a furious thermal, some
phenomenon no more astonishing than the one we were witnessing, would
intervene and bear him up. We watched him drop. You could see the
acceleration. No forgiveness, no special dispensation for flesh, or bravery, or
kindness. Only ruthless gravity. And from somewhere, perhaps from him,
perhaps from some indifferent crow, a thick squawk cut through the stilled air.
He fell as he had hung, a stiff little black stick. I’ve never seen such a terrible
thing as that falling man. (p. 17)

This is a terrifying perception, bearing with it all the accumulated associations to falling
as a primal terror, including perhaps a primal memory of falling involved in the birth
trauma. [In this regard, one might see the metaphor of “falling in love” as already
predicated on a traumatic recognition of the loss of control against which the typical
idealization of love is a reaction.] For me, the key phrase is “ruthless gravity.” It is in
this phrase, ruthless, without pity, the antithesis of the mother of the Pieta, that the
perception of there being no help anywhere becomes associated with a cold and
indifferent maternal principle that drains all value from human identity. This is negation
writ large.

If the realistic fear of falling to one’s death has compelled four of the five men to
let go; yet the consequence for all is a shared shame at their mutual cowardice, and a
shared guilt for the death of the singular man who had risen above his fear (another
metaphor concretized)—who might not have died, Joe thinks, had they all shared the
risksy obligation to hold on. Holding on is another thematic line with ambivalent connotations; concretized in the accident, it is also seems a metaphor for commitment, and recalls Joe’s sense of shame for “not holding on” to his original and risky professional desire to become a scientist, a profession he idealizes as having access to the highest truths. Having been temporarily deflected from his career path in science, he returns to it too late to enter the competition—was this the purpose of his deflection? — and finding he must give up on his desire, he opts for a more easily accessible profession—that of science journalist. But that displacement of desire is experienced as a defeat, a humiliation, which returns to him after the traumatic, failed rescue.

Ironically, it is that compensatory profession which makes him a reliable narrator. An articulate observer, his detailed version of the events as they accumulate is made convincing to the reader. He tells us of his first encounter with Jed Parry after the accident as they walked to the place where the singular man, John Logan, had fallen, of the strange eye-contact Jed tries to make with Joe as they view the corpse, of Jed’s demand that they pray on the spot, which Joe refuses, turning his back on the unhealthy intensity of Jed’s fixated gaze. And although McEwan doesn’t say this directly, the reader might well think that their shared traumatic experience, with its attendant guilt, shame and terror, has provoked Jed Parry’s instantaneous erotomaniic attachment to our Joe. Joe comes to represent the good father who has tried to rescue, but in his failure, in his impotence, requires rescue by the son; Joe is also the brother, a narcissistic double, like Jed requiring a link to the super-ego ideal, rescuer, the paternal God. ³

It is at the moment of presumed recognition of their affinity at the scene of trauma that Jed Parry refuses to let go of this new-found object, insists on rescuing him for religion through love, and Joe, the reasonable everyman, is compelled against his will to
become the container of the other’s unreasonable but intense homo-eros. In short order, a perverse stalker narrative of pursuit appropriates the love-romance of Joe and Clarissa, as Joe and Jed become almost mirror images of obsession, one to let go, the other to hold on. And as Jed’s love accumulates, each encounter twisted to provide more food for his projections; he persistently tries to transmit those feelings, often by phone, while Joe tries to block that transmission, to not answer the phone.

Yet in spite of Joe’s efforts, a kind of psychotic counter-transference begins to occur, a blurring of time and space boundaries that Joe himself comments on, as when he finds himself “talking to [Jed] a stranger in terms more appropriate to an affair, or a marriage on the rocks.”

It was as if I had fallen through a crack in my own existence, down into another life, another set of sexual preferences, another past history and future. . . . The language Parry was using set off responses in me, old emotional subroutines. It took an act of will to dismiss the sense that I owed this man, that I was being unreasonable in holding something back. In part I was playing along with this domestic drama even though our household was no more than this turd-strewn pavement.” (71)

That “this domestic drama” involves projective identification on both parts here makes this perverse household seem also a particular kind of transference love—an unconscious repetition of a prior wish. When Joe remarks of Jed: “He was young enough to be my son!” And when one recalls that Joe and Clarissa cannot have a child, this wish seems connected to Joe’s wanting to be a father, or perhaps more accurately, wanting to be within the full intimacy of a father-son relationship in which there are no holds barred, so to speak.
The wish to be a father is articulated a number of times in the novel, but most especially when Joe visits the now fatherless family of John Logan, the man who died. As he meditates, “It was with a touch of sadness that Clarissa sometimes told me that I would have made a wonderful father. She would tell me that I had a good way with children, that I leveled with them easily and without condescension” (127). Yet he also confesses, “For all that there’s an uneasiness I have to conceal when I meet a child. I see myself through that child’s eyes and remember how I regarded adults when I was small. They seemed a gray crew to me, too fond of sitting down, too keen on small talk, too accustomed to having nothing to look forward to” (127-28). In this representation of Joe’s split identification, here with both child and father, McEwan gives us sufficient allusions to the lackluster and depressed parent-figures of Joe’s own childhood in order for us to divine something of the nature of the son’s attraction to the bond with a powerful paternal divinity that Jed Parry would impose on him. Indeed, in the stare of the Logan children in whose eyes Joe sees himself subsequently configured, as in the earlier gaze of Jed Parry at the site of the trauma, Joe identifies with the gaze as well as with its object. More broadly configured, McEwan seems here to represent the son’s longing for an ego ideal in a materialistic and cynical time, a longing that has led to the resurgence of-- or regression to-- quests for glory in the 21st century. The restoration and re-eroticization of the father-- a new homo-erotic version of courtly love?

Double or Nothing: Enduring Love

Between the extremes of pathology on the one hand and some cultural ideal of real love stands the Freudian conceptualization of transference love, a clinical phenomenon that is both symptomatic and yet also real. Speaking of love, “There is no
such state which does not reproduce infantile prototypes,” Freud had remarked in
discussing the problematics of transference love. “It is precisely from this infantile
determination that it receives its compulsive character, verging as it does on the
pathological.” (1915, 169). Indeed, Freud concluded that all love is in a sense
transference love; all love takes as its template the original love relation to the parents
and its particular structure of intimacy within any one individual. But as Freud noted, that
relation is by its very nature ambivalent, love and hate intermixed in varying proportions,
eliciting both negative as well as positive transferences, primitive desires for merger with
the beloved that are feared and hated as well as desired. Indeed, since these early
infantile relations come to figure future love relations—“the finding of an object is a
refinding of it”—one cannot find an object that isn't tied to a memory of the earlier
drama, with its unresolved feelings and wishes.

Although the novel does not give us much of the past of any of the characters, we
know from its obsessional quality that Jed’s love has less to do with Joe than with his
own past internal object-relations—or lack of them, that the fixation on Joe repeats a wish
that he cannot let go of. Indeed, I would suggest that *Enduring Love* represents a kind of
transference love not uncommon in the consulting room between analyst and analysand,
with Joe the transferential figure who can’t escape the projection, and can’t contain it
either. Think of an analysand entering a psychoanalysis, feeling apprehension about the
space of intimacy over which the analyst seemingly has omnipotent power, lying on the
couch every day, opening himself up to the analyst who, unseen, listens to his most
intimate thoughts, and, from behind his ear, speaks to his desires, coming to know what
few others if any have been permitted to know. In this unique relation, is it any wonder
that the analysand falls for the seemingly powerful analyst? But given the dangers of
falling, is it surprising that he or she needs to feel with passionate conviction that the analyst also loves? “I know you must feel it,” Jed keeps insisting, the “it” a floating vehicle/signifier/container of his desire, of whatever feeling is being projected.

Indeed, as analysts have testified, the desire of the analysand can and often does provoke and in some cases overwhelm the analyst; the history of the analytic profession is replete with erotic boundary transgressions. Even when the analyst does not reciprocate by an acting out of the transference, the very words “I love you” is, as Glen Gabbard says, “a frightening message to receive.” What do you do with that love? At the very least, receiving the expression of love either as word or act leaves the beloved analyst ambivalent. Negative: Don’t fill me with your shit (recall the domestic drama that Joe feels positioned in even as he stands on “the turd-strewn pavement”!) But also positive: to be adored, magnified, seen as an embodiment of a divine will, as Jed sees Joe, who could totally resist such mirroring? Narcissus? Not Freud, as we know from the case of the Wolfman, with whom Freud was involved for too many years. And who was also young enough to be his son.

“As wolves love lambs so lovers love their loves”
Freud’s case of the Wolfman was his most strenuous attempt to prove the importance of infantile sexuality and his most elaborate unfolding of transference love, which entrapped both Freud as well as the Wolfman in a forty year relationship of presumed rescue. As you may recall, Freud builds his case of the Wolfman-- who could not give up analysis since it offered a continuation of the only love relation he could safely engage in--upon his having seen a childhood primal scene of parental sexuality a tergo. From that presumed perception, the Wolfman had construed love as a sadomasochistic,
cannibalistic affair, which was expressed in the Wolfman’s childhood dream of wolves outside his window, and his fear of fairy-tale pictures of wolves.

We all have learned to read such childlike representations as projected oral splits of the fantasy of a devouring mother, though in Kleinian theory the father is already inside the mother, part of her power. *Enduring Love* gives us a split of the son to match that split maternal projection, and displaces the mother from the erotic drama. Jed, the religious son wanting to be incorporated by the loving father, devoured by the gaze, unconditionally in love with Joe, experiencing his passionate homoerotic attachment as the demand of a divine paternal will speaking through him. Joe, the rationalist son, himself faithfully holding onto the ideal of the autonomous ego, drawn to Clarissa’s physical beauty but even more drawn to the absolute abstract beauty of mathematical formulations that are clear of the muddy waters of the body and its affect-loaded perceptions, or so he would think.

Jed, Joe: between the two the woman named Clarissa – the third Clarissa in literary history--hasn’t a chance. Her romantic attachment to Joe disordered by this new coupling, she becomes increasingly the outsider whose seemingly mistaken readings of Joe’s strange behavior reveal her increasing distance from his subjective experience, from his love. Estranged as lover, she moves into the room they had reserved for the visits of children before she learned she was unable to have them, herself now the excluded child.

Letters of Doubt and Certainty

Joe is sane and rational; Jed is insane and irrational. Joe is the reliable narrator of a realistic discourse about love and its breakdown through traumatizing contingencies. But McEwan breaks Joe’s control of the narration by giving us verbatim the letters of
Jed, the letters of a madman that are saturated with affect, with the power of his love, and which contain perceptive criticisms of Joe’s narcissism that can’t be readily dismissed by the reader. McEwan thus casts a particle of doubt on Joe’s subjectivity, or rather objectivity, even on his point of view as narrator, a doubt that is voiced within the novel by Clarissa, who has distanced herself from Joe’s love through her doubt of the truth of his story. Doubt is betrayal; certainty is fidelity; this perverse logic establishes Clarissa as the unfaithful lover, while Jed is the true believer, and thus the only one capable of enduring love.

In short, through narrative manipulations McEwan manages long before the novel is over to undermine the conventional valuation of romantic love; instead of an undying commitment to the loved object, “normal” romantic love is subject to contingency, which means subject to the body’s imperfections, to mortality and temporality, and is thus fragile; with the exception of the symbiotic love between mother and child, on which it is based, only psychotic love which excludes the real external world is enduring.

A perverse understanding?

McEwan ends his novel with two appendixes: one of an actual case history of de Clerambault’s syndrome, on which he has plotted his fictional relationship, and written in a medical discourse which grounds McEwan’s narrative in the history of science. But in a second appendix, McEwan gives us an ecstatic love letter from the lovesick Jed, now institutionalized, a birthday letter declaring his undying love, which now suffuses the external world with glory. Written in a powerfully poetic and seductive discourse, it enfold the reader in the beauty of an affect-saturated prose. While the two discourses stand as polar opposites of a relation to reality, McEwan gives the last word to the erotomaniac, the subject who transmits to the reader the visionary symbolic power that
derives from such enduring love.

A perverse ending?
Notes

Gabbard, 1996. 104.

2 The pentangle represents the endless knot. This sign was pictured on the shield carried by Sir Gawain when he left on his quest to meet the Green Knight, a figure often seen as the paternal embodiment of Nature. In his moments as imaginary rescuer, Joe becomes a kind of Gawain figure,

3 Ruth Stein (2002) discusses a certain state of mind, which well describes the state of mind of Jed Parry. “Hallmarks of this state are a sense of utter certainty, a feeling of being in the right, hermetic consistency, and highly rhetorical reiterations of Truths…..” Stein goes on to describe how it constitutes a "vertical" homoerotic quest for God's love" which derives from an eroticized preoedipal father-son relationship. In the case of the Wolfman, Freud develops a narrative to show the Wolfman’s homosexual love for his father; like Jed, the Wolf man also indulges in a Christ fantasy which reconfigures his love-submission to the father as one of Agape rather than Eros.

4 We might recall Clarissa Harlowe, first English novelistic object of desire who refuses that role, but is pursued to her death by the pathologically obsessed roué Lovelace, who is convinced he can force Clarissa to acknowledge her desire for him and become his lover. The more modern Clarissa Dalloway, virginal in spite of her marriage, has had as her only erotic experience her young homoerotic love for Sally Seton. Unlike the other two, this Clarissa is without a patronym in the novel, and freer to move out of the marriage plot.

Works Cited


