

Love as Nonsense: A Counter-Point

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In the following articles, Sherry Ackerman and Sadi Ranson-Polizzotti orated in point and counter-point regarding Lewis Carroll's perspectives on Love. The articles represent a kind of dialectic that Lewis Carroll himself would have, undoubtedly, enjoyed. Good naturedly providing two distinctively different, yet interactive, interpretations of Carroll's views on love, Ackerman and Ranson-Polizzotti throw open the door for questioning certain aspects of Carroll's life that have, hitherto, been inconclusively addressed.

Ackerman, author of Behind the Looking Glass and Ranson-Polizzotti, author of A Bath, Bedside, & Armchair Companion to Lewis Carroll are currently collaborating on a Carrollian work-in-progress which examines the links between epilepsy and mysticism.

If the attempt to de-mythologize Carroll requires historical re-contextualization, it is, likewise, critical that new scholarship recognize contemporary cultural influences on its conceptual understanding and interpretations, as well. From a twenty-first century perspective, the concept of "love" is so infused with the conditioned assumption of romance that it is almost impossible to remember that this idea had a relatively recent inception. Although the oldest roots of the cultural tradition of romantic love reach back to the Greek god Eros and the Roman god Cupid, the concept only became a wide-spread fashion in the Middle Ages, bursting into Western literature with the myth of Tristan and Iseult. Certainly 'falling in love' has always been an emotional possibility, and prior to the Middle Ages some people probably experienced exaggerated, fantastical feelings close to what we now call "romantic love", as suggested through the literature of ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, ancient Persia and feudal Japan. Such accidental eruptions of personal feelings, however, did not become the passion of the masses until the French troubadours refined and spread the emotional game of love.

The actual term amour courtois, translated as "courtly love", referred to the relational phenomenon that eventually evolved into the concept of "romantic love", and was first popularized by Gaston Paris in 1883 in an article entitled "Études sur les romans de la Table Ronde: Lancelot du Lac, II: Le conte de la charrette". During the Victorian era (1837-1901), romantic love became viewed as the primary requirement for marriage. This was a radical departure from previous marital models and expectations, in which marriage had been seen in a more utilitarian way. As arranged marriages declined, and the ability of individuals able to make their own decisions concerning a marriage partner increased, romantic love was increasingly seen as the basis for marriage. The work of English nineteenth-century novelists such as John Galsworthy (1867-1933) and the real-life experience of George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1819-1880), however, demonstrate that despite romantic love's strong pull, reality often intervened. Popularized by Stendhal (Henri Beyle, 1783-1842) in *On Love*, romantic love was celebrated as "passion love" or a love that was more based on the imagination and illusion than on realistic relationship. Stendahl described a process that he called "crystallization" whereby a mental metamorphosis took place in which the unattractive characteristics of a new love were transformed into "perceptual diamonds of shimmering beauty". In other words, love was blind! Even though the interpretation, origins and influences of romantic love continued to be a matter of continued critical debate, the ideal, however, persisted.

In 1940, the controversy about romantic love culminated in Denis de Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'Occident*, translated as *Love in the Western World*. This book created quite a stir when it was published, since de Rougemont's central thesis, supported by many pages of still debated scholarly and literary researches, was that romantic love was a kind of pathology. Returning to the pre-Victorian distinction, de Rougemont contrasted

eros, or erotic love, with agape, or divinely inspired conjugal love. Taking the Tristan myth as his jumping-off point, de Rougemont purports in Book I, Chapter 8, that romantic love has nothing, really, to do with love---that it is, instead, "the love of love". Rather than loving one another, Tristan and Iseult instead, loved being in love. "Their need of one another is in order to be aflame, and they do not need one another as they are." Myths are the collective dreams of entire peoples at a certain point in their history and the myth of Tristan is a profound expression of the modern Western psyche.

In exploring Carroll's views on love, Ranson-Polizzotti has referenced Carroll's satirical "Novelty and Romancement" (The Train, 1856). She recounts that the story's protagonist, Stubbs, is "a young lover in love with love itself". Interestingly, here we find, almost verbatim, a concept from de Rougemont. Clue #1. The story continues that Stubbs, walking down the street, sees a sign in a shop window that seems to read: "Simon Lubkin: Dealer in Romancement"...except that Stubbs hasn't noticed the gap between the "N" and the "C" in the word, making the sign really read: "Simon Lubkin: Dealer in Roman Cement". Ranson-Polizzotti correctly asserts that "Carroll had or was forming his views about the impossibilities of love long before he wrote the Alice books", but she fails to identify the deeper significance of the story. Interestingly, she states that "it is hardly unusual for any fairytale to be dark, even grim" and then goes on to recount numerous Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, coming precariously close to...but not quite apprehending...Carroll's hidden allegory on love.

"As a mass phenomenon, romantic love is peculiar to the West. We are so accustomed to living with the beliefs and assumptions of romantic love that we think it is the only form of "love" on which marriage or love relationships can be based. We think it is the only "true love". But there is much that we can learn from the East about this. In Eastern cultures, like those of India or Japan, we find that married couples love each other with great warmth, often with a stability and devotion that puts us to shame. But their love is not "romantic love" as we know it."

When a person is "in love with love", they believe that they have uncovered the ultimate meaning of life, revealed in another human being. They feel completed and life seems whole. There is, however, an aspect to romantic love that becomes a cycle of illusion. de Rougemont went so far as to say, in his seminal work, that the lure of romantic love was the will to death and self-destruction, or Roman Cement...a view from which Carroll was not far removed. Although de Rougemont's work was produced after Carroll's death, it represents the culmination of sentiments and arguments that were afoot among intellectual circles of Carroll's time. Ranson-Polizzotti is correct in claiming that "Carroll has not followed the fairytale template". His heroine, indeed, is no damsel in distress. But why? The archetypal helpless mistress, modeled after the Myth of the Handless Maiden, served to illustrate the perfunctory view of women in all of the predominant romantic literature of the nineteenth-century. Ranson-Polizzotti goes on to remark that "Carroll did not write in any savior, there is no Prince Charming". Clue #2. For, Prince Charming--the knight on the white horse--would be the standardized view of men in the romantic literature from the same period. By contrast, Carroll's knight on a horse, rather than being a hero, is a bumbler, a fool. It could be suggested that he is Parsifal, which, by a strange turn of events, makes him--albeit circuitously--a hero, but this is the subject of another essay. For now, it suffices to say that the symbols of the Romantic Myth--the helpless maiden and the rescuing knight--are conspicuously missing in Carroll's story.

So, what does Carroll mean when his correspondences, diaries and Sylvie and Bruno books extol the virtues of love? Is it, as Ranson-Polizzotti suggests, that love is nonsense? I think not. I think that it is fair to conclude that Carroll was well aware of the debate regarding the growing popularity of romantic love and that he, as did many Victorian intellectuals, discounted it as a poorly informed fad or social trend. His view on love, I feel, had much deeper, spiritual roots that he revealed, very blatantly, in his Sylvie and Bruno books. A key to unlocking many of the mysteries of the Sylvie and Bruno books lies in the fairy duet sung by Sylvie and Bruno:

Say, what is the spell, when her fledglings are cheeping,
That lures the bird home to her nest?

Or wakes the tired mother, whose infant is weeping,
To cuddle and crone it to rest?

What's the magic that charms the glad babe in her arms,
`Till it coos with the voice of the dove?
T'is a secret, and so let us whisper it low-
And the name of the secret is Love!

Say, whence is the voice that, when anger is burning,
Bids the whirl of the tempest to cease?
That stirs the vexed soul with an aching-a yearning
For the brotherly hand-grip of peace?
Whence the music that fills all our being-that thrills
Around us, beneath us, and above?

T'is a secret: none knows how it comes, how it goes:
But the name of the secret is Love!

Say whose is the skill that paints valley and hill,
Like a picture so fair to the sight?
That flecks the green meadow with sunshine and shadow,
Till the little lambs leap with delight?

T'is a secret untold to hearts cruel and cold,
Though, t'is sung, by the angels above,
In notes that ring clear for the ears that can hear-
And the name of the secret is Love!

For I think it is Love,
For I feel it is Love,
For I'm sure it is nothing but Love!

This is the quintessence of Carroll's mature religious thinking. His vision of Love as the embodiment of the Spirit of God symbolized the origins and aims of life - strength, hope, faith and peace. In the Preface to *Sylvie and Bruno*, Carroll stated emphatically that "religion should be put before a child as the revelation of love." This is indicative of the nineteenth century theosophical intellectual hymn to Love, unique in its theological sophistication and esoteric qualities. The fundamental premise was that "of God's nature in Itself we can and do know one thing only - that it is transcendent Love." Thus, just as *Sylvie and Bruno* ends with the final words, "Look Eastward! Aye, look Eastward!", the final words in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, in answer to Bruno's question 'What makes the sky such a darling blue?' are 'It is Love'. Both books end on the same note from which they began - the vision of love as the embodiment of the Spirit of God. Both books leave the reader with the "theosophist's intellectual hymn to Love": "Of God's nature in Itself we can and do know one thing only - that it is transcendental Love." And, this is hardly nonsense!