Thinking about Love
(Or the Experience of Writing on Sand)

MANUEL CRUZ

Abstract: Has philosophy paid sufficient attention to love? It is evident that the thinkers of the past expended a large part of their intellectual energies on talking about feelings, passions, emotions or affections, to mention just some of the terms under which, one way or another, love has tended to be subsumed. By doing so they undoubtedly granted it a philosophical importance, but not necessarily the kind that should be its due. Because love is much more than a philosophical subject with the same rank as the most important ones: in the end it is, to put it rather abruptly, what makes philosophy itself possible. Why not consider love as we traditionally consider the experience of astonishment, that is, as foundational, as prephilosophical, in the same sense that we commonly talk of the prepolitical? To dispute just for a moment with the authority which has held the monopoly of the prephilosophical for so long: if we are astonished it is because we love to know. Only someone who already loves wisdom is in a position to be astonished.

Has philosophy paid sufficient attention to love? Such a question may well strike more than one reader as a mere exercise in rhetoric: the countless pages that have been devoted to the question of love throughout history seem to provide the clearest and most conclusive answer. But note that the initial question included an adjective, sufficient – to which we might add another, suitable –, on which, to a large extent, its deepest meaning rests.

Indeed it is evident that the thinkers of the past expended a large part of their intellectual energies on talking about feelings, passions, emotions or affections, to mention just some of the terms under which, one way or another, love has tended to be subsumed. By doing so they undoubtedly granted it a philosophical importance, but not necessarily the kind that should be its due. Because love is much more than a philosophical subject with the same rank as the most important ones: in the end it is, to put it rather abruptly, what makes

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philosophy itself possible. Perhaps that statement may strike some as strange, crazy or simply absurd. Probably all those – and there are so many of them – who assumed, unquestioningly because it came from the most venerated classics, the idea that what is truly at the origin of thought is astonishment. Which, we should hasten to note, may deserve to be further developed rather than rejected.

1. Love as Primordial Experience

That development could follow the course traced by this question: why not consider love as we traditionally consider the experience of astonishment, that is, as foundational, as prephilosophical, in the same sense that we commonly talk of the prepolitical? The idea of not reducing the prephilosophical to a single experience (that of astonishment), broadening the catalogue of the ones that are in one way or another at the origin of thinking, has been proposed by several authors. In Spain Eugenio Trías has defended the same position, arguing in favor of including the experience of vertigo in the same catalogue and mustering pertinent arguments for the defense. For its part, the candidature of love can also present conclusive reasons for being part of a more heterogeneous and plural view of the birth of philosophical reflection. When all is said and done – to dispute just for a moment with the authority which has held the monopoly of the prephilosophical for so long – if we are astonished it is because we love to know. Only someone who already loves wisdom is in a position to be astonished. A dogmatist, for example, is someone who is incapable of being astonished, because his desire to know has been cauterized (“I don’t need to know any more!,” this person usually exclaims when he gets angry).

However, it is not enough to give love back its primordial place in the Big Bang of thought. Whilst that is important, it is still not sufficient: the relevant consequences must be drawn from this new location at the origin. Indeed, from the fact that love is a condition of possibility of thought itself it follows that it is also one of the person who thinks, that is, of his existence. Because love is always personal love (however broad the sense in which we can use the word person), love of someone for someone (or for something), love of a whom. And though it is true, as a Cartesian of strict observance might object,

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3 Specifically, the application of that idea to the question of love has been put forward by Jean-Luc Marion in his book The Erotic Phenomenon: Six Meditations, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
that love does not belong to the primary modes of thought and is therefore of no use to us for discovering the basic structures of the ego, it is no less true, as a Heideggerian would probably reply, that we are insofar as we discover ourselves in the tonality of a particular erotic disposition.

There is therefore a lax sense in which it would be perfectly legitimate to introduce a correction to the classic terms of Descartes’ *cogito*, rephrasing it as *I love, therefore I am*. I love before being, because I am not except insofar as I experience love. Love constitutes me and moreover it constitutes me as a human being. In the end, the statement is confined to observing the pluralist thesis mentioned before: if it is not astonishment alone that is the origin of thought, then neither is it reason, the *logos*, that exclusively defines the human being. It is possible (even probable) that we can say that in their way animals or computers think. On the other hand, it is only of human beings that we can say that they love. But nobody should think that this decided inscription of love at the heart of humanity (both of all beings and of each one of them), insofar as it means restoring that feeling to the privileged place that is its due, allows us to solve the problems posed by the question this text opened with (you may recall: has philosophy paid sufficient attention to love?).

Hence the parenthesis of our title *The Experience of Writing on Sand*, whose intention, amongst other things, was to emphasize that tackling the question of love is a devilish task. Not so much because of the manifest difficulty it might present at the outset, but exactly the opposite, because of its apparent easiness. It might be said that the experience of love is the supreme universal experience, the one to which everyone, almost without exception, feels entitled to refer to, regardless of their ability, knowledge or qualification. And if that can be said of people in general, what shall we not say of the universe of philosophers in particular. Love has been dealt with in philosophy from the beginning. We only have to mention Plato’s *Symposium* or *Phaedrus* to show the presence that love has had in philosophical discourse since its very origins. And so in all probability it would be a serious mistake to attribute that persistent interest solely to the fact that the passion of love is, beyond any shadow of a doubt, one of the most important, most constituent, most sweeping intensities the human being can experience. Moreover, the fascination with this passion is also inseparable from its lability, its ambiguous and often volatile character.

The fact is that writing at the dictate of one’s own passion is in fact like writing on sand. Unlike other intensities, such as thought itself, for example, of which it can be said that they leave a kind of mark or trace that allows them to

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5 I have used that rephrasing as the title of my book: Manuel Cruz, *Amo, luego existo*, Madrid: Espasa, 2011.
be reconstructed at any later moment with no special difficulty so that, to para-
phrase Marx, if we hit on the right expression, it seems that we are describing
our object directly, with no mediation; in simpler terms: that we are thinking
aloud, of the ones related to love we could well say that they disappear leaving
no trace or vestige behind. They do leave, on the screen of our past, an icon
that seems to refer to a real experience. But it is a peculiar experience, which
resists being summoned, which does not respond to our call however many
times we click on the drawing. And when on rare occasions, after much insist-
ence on our part, the required experience comes, we can never be entirely sure
whether it does so in the shape and with the content it had at the time – when
it was present – or whether it just condescendingly shows us the trait which, at
the moment it is conjured up, we are in a fit state to bear.

Together with that, we should also point out, as we began to do, the ele-
ment of ambiguity, which is consubstantial with the feeling of love itself. So
consubstantial is it that we could even argue that one of its main characteristics
is precisely the impossibility of defining it with an exclusive feature or under a
single nature. Only in this way can we explain the different – even contradic-
tory – appraisals of love that have never ceased to be made. And so, whilst for
some it is a dissolving passion,6 for others resorting to love has often fulfilled
an alienating, derationalizing function, which sanctions the existing order.
Neither side lacks sound arguments in favor of its appraisals. The ones who are
suspicious have no trouble finding abundant reasons in the present and the past
that seem to prove them right. How often have we heard the phrase “I was in
love” to try to justify some unjustifiable behavior, as if love were the ultimate
extenuating circumstance, the equivalent to a formidable mental disorder in
the face of which any imputation fades away? And what can we say at this stage
about the happy ending expressed in the recurrent phrase that rounded off the
stories of our childhood: the unspeakable “and they lived happily ever after”?

But, on the other hand, it is no less true that on many other occasions
love provides the energy for initiatives that impugn the existing order, which
otherwise individuals would hardly dare to undertake. Denis de Rougemont
wrote in Love in the Western World7 that falling in love in the West has always
been depicted as forbidden, star-crossed love.8 What orderly people call acts
of madness, performed in the name of love, can reach a critical intensity and

7 Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World, translated by Montgomery Belgion, Princeton,
NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940 (and following editions). See, along the same lines, Luc
8 See Irving Singer, The Nature of Love 2: Courtly and Romantic, Chicago: University of Chicago
Thinking about Love (Or the Experience of Writing on Sand)

magnitude which are inconceivable from the wakefulness of reason (they can make a king abdicate his throne, to turn once again to the terminology of the old stories). In this sense the lover, the child and the madman are aligned in their capacity to tell the truth without fear.

From a realisation of both dimensions – the volatility and the ambiguity – we should not draw any defeatist or sceptical consideration, at least concerning the possibility of writing something with meaning about love. Quite the opposite, it may well be providing us with an indication of the procedure most appropriate to the nature of the enterprise. The fact is that the description of the experience of love by no means ends with the traits we have mentioned. That it is, let us not forget, an intersubjective experience or, shifting the terms slightly, a kind of interaction. The reminder is important because, as such, that interaction is governed by – or obeys – rules which are expressed and revealed in different ways.

For the time being, the very fact that throughout history writers have been able to give an account of the different avatars of that passion impugns the cliché that it cannot be communicated or even that its nature cannot be described. But the realization has farther to go. For it also shows that just because there is no such thing (it is a conceptual impossibility) as an absolutely private language, the fact that over a good part of the history of the literature of love we can find the same (or similar) expressions or formulations repeated proves that such an interaction must be understood as a social interaction subject to an underlying logic.

The problem is that that logic often seems not to be logical (remember that frequent identification between passion and madness) or does not show its nature with clarity. To try to shed a little light on this presumed problem is, we might say in a certain sense, the intention of this text. From the conviction that, by providing keys to its solution, we would be moving forward in our knowledge of the thing. A knowledge which is not available automatically or naturally from the mere occurrence of something to be known. It would be difficult to argue that someone who has never had an experience of it knows love, but neither can we claim that the experience alone is identified with knowledge of it (it is a fact that very often we do not understand what is happening to us).


“There are […] more than enough reasons why the questions which everyone presumes to understand – love and politics – are the ones that have made the least progress” (Ortega y Gasset,
With which we return to the starting point, let us hope in better conditions. Writing about love, as we said before, is a devilish task. Comparable, we might add, to entering a minefield. The most universal experience has given rise to a language which is also universal to the utmost, but not therefore transparent to the utmost. The urge to recount one’s own passion has turned time and again to paradoxical, if not simply enigmatic, expressive formulae.

In a sense, all those expressions contain a treasure. Each of them houses an aspect, a dimension, of what has been thought about love in the past. When we examine them close up, we find out to what extent they are a particular and valuable distillation of thought, the product of convictions and arguments transmitted throughout history whose origin we had forgotten. It is not a matter of claiming, presumptuously, that this has been the great forgotten dimension of love, as if all the great philosophers who have been so far did not realize — owing to distraction or incompetence — that as far as love is concerned there was something left to think, and that something was, like Wittgenstein’s fly, before their very eyes, in the very language they used daily. That is not the point.

If it is important to go back over what has been said and thought about love it is because, far from being a mere archaeological or simply illustrative question of the imaginary places we come from, it is pointing, against the light, to a specific feature of the phenomenon of love today. The specific contradictions of the world we have had the (bad) luck to live in have ended up questioning many of the ideas about love which the past bequeathed us, without the emergence of an alternative concept (that love à reinventer already desired by Rimbaud), which is not only adapted to the new circumstances but, most of all, is equal to what it should give shape to. And what it should give shape to is the energy of love, the impulse towards the other, the desperate need with which, at a particular moment in our lives, someone claims (and appropriates) our heart with superhuman strength, offering us in exchange the miracle of the most absolute happiness in their mere presence. For on that love is substantiated in the end. And that, in short, is what we urgently need to realize. Does that not seem important enough to you? So let us keep talking about it.

2. Love is a Great Invention

The mere fact that in the preceding part we have made some allusion to the

“Para una psicología del hombre interesante,” p. 469).

12 A stimulating exercise in analysis of the most important figures, arguments and commonplaces of the discourse of love is to be found in Roland Barthes’ book, A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments, translated by Richard Howard, Canada: Harper Collins Canada, 1978.
fact of the presence of love in the history of thought could seem to propitiate the idea that we are looking at a phenomenon that runs through time and societies, cultures and any other contextual differences, remaining in essence always the same, as if it expressed or revealed an essential dimension of the human being, who in turn is always the same in the end, with a deep nature resistant to the *exterior* variations that might occur in the world.

Whoever made such an interpretation would certainly not feel alone: there is an abundance of speeches, statements, literary and artistic products in general that delight in that image of love as something eternal, which *has never ceased to be there* since the world began and since *man has been man*. And at first glance we might even accept that the antiquity of certain declarations endorses an interpretation of that kind. We might think, for example, of the words spoken by Agathon in the Platonic dialogue *The Symposium* to describe love:

> It is Love who creates peace among men, and calm upon the sea, rest for the winds from strife, and sleep in sorrow. It is Love who empties us of the spirit of estrangement and fills us with the spirit of kinship; who makes possible such mutual intercourse as this; who presides over festivals, dances, sacrifices; who bestows good-humor and banishes surliness; whose gift is the gift of good-will and never of ill-will. He is easily entreated and of great kindness; contemplated by the wise, admired by the gods; coveted by men who possess him not; the treasure of those who are blessed by his possession; father of Daintiness, Delicacy, Voluptuousness, all Graces, Longing and Desire; careful of the happiness of good men, careless of the fate of the bad; in toil, in fear, in desire, in speech the best pilot, soldier, comrade, savior.  

But without entering into any detailed analysis of the fragment – which should begin by being aware of everything that *is lacking* in it as regards what we would emphasize about love today – it seems clear that it can be used to reinforce an interpretation of the history of the ideas that are fundamentally idealistic, which characteristically understands that there are some we never cease to find, even in the most varied authors, and whose near omnipresence is linked to their capacity to accede to some invariable – not to say eternal – dimension of the human being. A different interpretation is presented by hermeneutics, which argues that the fact that some ideas *last longer* than others – or expire at a different speed from others, as you prefer – must be analyzed from another standpoint, that ideas, and especially the linguistic-textual materialization of good ideas, is a constant source of surprises from whose (linguistic) interior successive generations of readers extract contents of meaning which had been hidden until then (though nonetheless real for that),

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which had not been perceived by the preceding generations.

Well, given these two interpretations we should perhaps oppose a third, inspired by our reality as a species. In this regard it has been pointed out on numerous occasions that the reason for the success (that is, the survival) of the human race is derived not so much from its perfection (species that had adapted to their environment like a second skin disappeared when it underwent abrupt transformations) as from its ostentatious imperfection, which has allowed it not only to settle in the most varied regions of the planet but also to survive the most radical climatic changes in the natural environment. And so, similarly, what the apparent survival of an idea – in this case, the idea of love – is showing is precisely its capacity for adaptation to different historical, social and cultural contexts.

Probably the fundamental difference between the two previous interpretations and this third one has to do with its different way of looking at the nature of ideas which, it could be said (especially for the purposes of exposition), come to be compared with objects. Which may perhaps be clearer if we specify that the comparison is most of all with these new (and produced) objects which are inventions.14 When in certain contexts (related fundamentally to design, though concerning technics in general) statements are made about perfect objects, ultimately a similar reasoning to this one is being used. How is it, in short, that an object like a book15 has so successfully survived the tremendous upheavals that have taken place over the centuries of its existence that it has been regarded as the supreme perfect object? Undoubtedly, its capacity to adapt to new circumstances. With an important nuance: the condition of possibility of that adaptation may well be a belief that the function of the object cannot be conceived in terms of an essential nucleus that would have to be safeguarded at all cost, as if it were its unchangeable heart. Quite the opposite: the availability to review that function has turned out to be quite indispensable throughout history for the survival of any object.16

It is in this sense that this paragraph bears the subtitle love is a great inven-

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15 It is not, of course, the only case. Some would add that about the radio, for example, similar things could be said, and they may well be right, but for the purposes of this exposition its smaller time spectrum of application means that it is not conclusive enough to illustrate what we are arguing here.

16 For plasticity as one of the features of the technical object, see Simondon, Du mode d’existence des objets techniques.
tion, a subtitle whose first point would be that that idea has indeed managed
to survive insofar as it has gradually incorporated (and dispensed with) traits
and determinations at the pace of the transformations of reality. Now in no
way should this final approach to love in terms of invention leave the reader
with a bittersweet instrumental aftertaste, as if the appraisal of the feeling of
love would only admit – or would be primordially suited to – a utilitarian
or pragmatic criterion, when it is the concept, and not the feeling itself, we
are referring to when we speak of invention. We shall be returning to that
soon. Neither would it be appropriate to add to the concept of invention
that of dispositif, proposed by a certain sector of contemporary philosophy
(with Michel Foucault at the head, though not forgetting Gilles Deleuze\textsuperscript{17} or
Giorgio Agamben\textsuperscript{18}). To put it in an extremely summary way, the character-
istic of this last category would be its strongly teleological-applied character,\textsuperscript{19}
in which an outstanding fact would be that it responds to a design, a plan, an
intention, without partaking of the open and adaptive character which, as we
have seen, the invention effectively possesses.

A character which, as regards the invention of love specifically, has never
ceased to show itself through what has gone before, but which would also
have been visible (perhaps even more so) if instead of opting as we have
here for the path of biographical-conceptual analysis, examining the personal
wanderings and conceptions of love maintained by eminent figures in the his-
tory of thought, we had chosen to examine the different sociological-institu-
tional configurations the experience of love has given rise to. Think, looking
no farther, of the flexibility demonstrated by institutions such as the family
which, according to the analyses of Ulrich Beck and others,\textsuperscript{20} has accredited

\textsuperscript{17} Gilles Deleuze, “What is a Dispositif?,” in Id., Michel Foucault, Philosopher, translated by Timothy

\textsuperscript{18} Giorgio Agamben, What is a Dispositor?, available online at <www.zoepolitics.com>. Though
it must be said that Agamben’s review of Foucault’s term (“I will call disposer or dispositif,
literally everything that has in some way, the capacity of capturing, determining, orienting,
intercepting, shaping, guiding, securing or controlling, the behaviors, the gestures, the opinions,
the discourses of living beings”) broadens it so much that he ends up rendering it useless by
exaggeration since, in its new definition, it would come to include even things such as a pen or
a cigarette.

\textsuperscript{19} Something that is made particularly clear in the military meaning of dispositif, which can be
summarized as “the set of resources disposed according to a plan.” For his part, in the interview
entitled “El juego de Michel Foucault” (in Michel Foucault, Saber y verdad, Madrid: La piqueta,
1991, pp. 127–162) the author of The Order of Things emphasizes that the dispositif is a formation
which, at a given historical moment, corresponds to the dominant strategic function.

\textsuperscript{20} See Ulrich Beck, Risk Society, London: Sage, 1992 (especially chapter 4, entitled “I am I:
Gendered Space and Conflict Inside and Outside the Family,” pp. 103 ff); Ulrich Beck and
Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, The Normal Chaos of Love, translated by Mark Ritter and Jane
a formidable capacity for adaptation to the new socio-cultural circumstances (especially in developed Western societies), a capacity which has dynamited all the oracular predictions of its disappearance, so frequent since May 1968.

However, someone who observed that the term invention, which we are proposing here to define love, has an inescapable relational dimension would be right. For all it may be variable over time, the fact is that at each of its moments the invention fulfils a function, which is to say that it is useful to someone for something, and it is particularly important for the purposes of our exposition to clarify the nature of that relation. Does such a formulation provide arguments to justify that bittersweet instrumental aftertaste we referred to a couple of paragraphs ago? Not necessarily. It may well be that the origin of the misunderstanding has to do with that confusion between object of knowledge and real object – or, if you prefer, between concept and experience – about which contemporary French epistemology has repeatedly warned us.

Indeed, as I was saying, one thing is in theory the experience of love as such and another the idea of love each period may have. It may sound more acceptable to us (and not generate the slightest inner conflict) that the idea of love fulfils a function, even that it may be useful for something, but we shift uneasily in our seats if we are given identical terms to talk about what we feel. Nevertheless, history tells us, with no room for doubt, that whilst it is useful to distinguish between the two planes, we must not forget the intimate relation between them. Far from being alien to socio-cultural constructs, our feelings express them with notable fidelity, for all individuals themselves tend to live them spontaneously as if they were a natural determination, previous or alien to any conditioning by culture or society.

To put it with a certain verticality: the individual whose eyes become bloodshot and who loses control in a fit of jealousy is not someone who reacts aside from the determinations of his environment, as opposed to the one who, seized by an identical fit, reacts calmly with the exhortation that “we must settle this in a civilized manner:” both of them carry and reproduce parameters of behavior interiorized in their process of socialization, as indeed it could not be otherwise. On the understanding that what is interiorized must be interpreted in historical and not merely circumstantial terms. What we know about love springs to a large extent from the efficacy of a monumental cultural superego; it is the sum of everything we have seen (and of many more things, obviously): of love as a source of energy, proposed by Plato; of love as need, proposed by Spinoza; as love as an indirect expression of our hidden zones, as suggested by Freud; of love as effect of the will to live, defended by Ortega; of love as that passionate fusion without mediations thought by Arendt; or of

love as the result of social practices, indicated by Foucault… We live with all of that, we have accumulated it all throughout history and it constitutes us even though we have never read a single line of any of those authors because it has materialized – has become real – in the world, in social attitudes, in the fundamental expectations we relate to…

3. What Became of That Love etc.

Having reached this point we should now wonder: and what function, apart from what we have been considering, can we say love fulfils today? Or, if you prefer to put it slightly differently: what is involved in the bond of love? For the time being we can deduce from what has gone before that, although many elements remain, what is involved today cannot be the same as what was involved in the past, fundamentally because the terms used have varied. The modern world – the world created by Modernity, I mean – was built on specific bases or conditions of possibility, both social and ideological, without reference to which it is impossible to understand the drift love has taken in this postmodern era of our sorrows.

But one question invites another, and therefore it is impossible not to ask: so where is the specificity of our present in the matter of love? What has varied with regard to the past we come from? Let us answer right away: the nature attributed to the protagonists and expectations of the bond in question, while both dimensions retain a deep inner connection. As far as the expectations of the bond are concerned, the best way to define the nature of the transformation it has undergone may well be to refer to the irruption of contingency into the heart of love. One simple example will serve to show that the content of this perhaps somewhat abstract formulation is quite easy to identify. Faced with the idea, with which our culture flirted for some time, that there are inevitable, necessary, predestined loves, today everyone seems to have completely assumed the conviction that that specific person with whom at a certain moment they established a love relation is a particular contingency in their lives (to raise the tone just a little: that instead of that person there could have been another and nothing would be substantially different). So much so that expressions such as “love of my life,” “better half” and the like have been completely banished from our imaginary, unequivocal proof that the idea they expressed has come to be perceived as completely counterintuitive.

Although we do not have to backstitch every statement introduced with its corresponding commentary, we should bring in some clarifications lest unintentionally the language itself should pull us towards a proposition that gave the impression that the proposed way of thinking about our present is one of
a general impoverishment when compared with the past. We cannot discard the possibility that certain desertions must be appraised positively, just as we have no doubt that there are losses that are worth celebrating. And so, insofar as a phantasmagorically fatalistic idea of necessity, of predestination, regarding a person (as if there were one, and only one, awaiting us since eternity)

is quite untenable, its obsolescence could only be received with satisfaction.

What should perhaps worry us is that the desertion of a particular way of understanding an idea would entail the simultaneous desertion of all other ways of understanding it, without even going into an analysis of whether some variant of them might be acceptable or valid. And so there might be many ways of saying necessity and one of them might be applicable to love, so that it would make sense to oppose to the image of the replacement of necessity (the love of my life) by contingency (it could be anyone else, provided he or she met certain requisites), the image of the succession or mutation of contingency (real) by necessity (lived), that is by the necessity expressed in the idea that someone could have become necessary for someone, or that someone could need someone (even desperately).

We are trying to argue a suspicion: that, despite cultural changes, the feeling people sometimes have that a particular person – and only that person, as we emphasized a moment ago – is their inevitable, necessary partner may have some meaning (which does not exclude ideological uses, of course). Let us for a moment introduce an example of a different nature and then return to the matter in hand. A minimally lucid backward look confirms the distance that separates us from certain youthful decisions which are apparently still with us or, to put it another way, which were successful. When, for instance, we truly reconstruct the reasons why we decided to study some particular subjects, we realize that our distant initial expectations had almost nothing to do with what we think of them and the professional activity they led to now, and yet we do not abandon the profession or the knowledge that corresponds to it because of that.

The explanation that that distance is not tantamount to a conflict or a contradiction lies in the fact that what actually happens is that with the passage of time we gather reasons, accumulating new arguments and discarding old ones, in a similar process to the one we followed in our relation with a person, supposing that such a relation turns out to be a lasting one. In this other case too neither the person we knew years ago nor the motives that

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21 A nuance within the nuance: so as not to give an exaggeratedly simplistic image of the reasons why the idea is so deeply rooted, we should add that they are not only found in the ideological superstructure of a particular type of society, but also in the innermost part of the individual who dreams, to put in Lacanian terms, of finding the other who would make up for his lack once and for all.
made us feel attracted to them remain the same, but do not leave their side because of that. Why? Because we keep finding new reasons for continuing there, because we adapt our convictions to what reality shows us. It is not, as a superficial interpretation might lead us to think, because once certain precedents are set contingently, their persistence (in this case the inertia of life together) becomes an almost irreversible factor. Such an interpretation would condemn us to a secondary, adjectival role in the course of events, with no possibility whatever of intervening in the process and still less of taking the reins. But it is the case that the most trodden paths are abandoned (just as the most apparently stable couples come to an end), which may well be a piece of good news from the point of view of that thing called freedom. (However hailing freedom, even enthusiastically, should not be done at the price of forgetting something, enigmatic in a way, which is also struggling to reach its truth. The fact is that at times human relations demand something more than an honorable dismissal: they demand something like their fulfillment). Let us take up the thread of the discourse again. These new expectations of the bond of love defined by the irruption of contingency into its heart also dynamite the other element we referred to when introducing the question of what has varied with regard to the past from which we come, to wit, the inherited image of its protagonists. Just as the figure of the bourgeois which, according to the masterly sketch done by Werner Sombart, combined the honorable paterfamilias, the loving husband, the exemplary citizen concerned with the problems of his community, the pious believer, the convinced conservative etc. was blown to smithereens as a consequence of a whole set of transformations of quite different kinds in the very society that had made that figure possible, so at a particular moment that other impossible regulatory ideal in which an attempt was made to persuade us that everything could coincide, everything could be personified (in the case of women: lover, mother, friend, confidante etc.) finally burst. It was a tutelary disproportion, an almost normative pretension (that there was room for everything, that everything could be squeezed into a single person) which was extremely difficult to fulfill. Perhaps there, in that foundational excess, is the key to a large part of what is happening to us now.

It was a dated construct, no doubt of that. Indissolubly linked to a period, a moment of development of modern thought, when categories such as identity or subject reached an almost absolute centrality in all orders. Love in that sense was a

22 “Mallarmé saw the poem as ‘chance conquered word by word.’ In love fidelity designates that long victory: the chance of the encounter conquered day by day in the invention of a duration, in the birth of a world,” argues Alain Badiou in his dialogue with Nicolas Truong, Éloge de l’amour, Paris: Flammarion, 2009. For this same question see Michela Marzano, La Fidélité ou l’amour à vif, Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 2005.

23 Werner Sombart, Der Bourgeois, München-Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1913.
privileged setting, an exceptional testing ground, a unique opportunity to visualize those categories. For if identity is none other than the representation we make of ourselves (also on a collective scale, but that is not relevant here) it is not rash to affirm that, in general, in the different modulations of love different features of human identity are expressed (throughout this text we have seen how in the different conceptions of love in Modernity specific conceptions of subjectivity were expressed) and that in that particular intersubjective relation which is love the lovers believed they had a golden opportunity to model their own identity.

Indeed, one of the most powerful reasons why people like to be in love – to use an expression as frequent as it is ridiculous – has to do with the fact that love feeds the fantasy of being able to be another… without ceasing to be oneself. The loved one supplies us with fuel for the fantasy that we are different from (and better than) the people we thought we were. We do not entirely believe it, true, but we show our gratitude for the gift by returning to the other person an equally exaggerated image of their qualities (and of themselves in general), an image for which they were also fighting, tacitly or explicitly (through exhortations such as “tell me I’m special,” “you’ve never met anyone like me, have you?” and the like). Love, we might say, distorts to the point of exasperation that basic mechanism of social construction of identity which is recognition, authorizing what we might call a recognition à la carte (or a recognition agreed between the parties).

In a way, it is as if love managed to make more bearable what, outside himself, the individual would tend to live as a genuine syndrome, the syndrome of the imposter. Or, to put it another way, love makes the individual live without (too much) guilt that maxim of Groucho Marx, who said that he would not care to belong to a club that let in people like him, a maxim which, applied to the love relation, would be worded more or less like this: I would never love a person who was capable of loving somebody like me. Love is a form of socially accepted self-deceit. The proof a contrario of that is that it has become a widely accepted commonplace that a relationship in which the self-esteem of one of the members is damaged is, for that reason alone, unacceptable (however much, if we can put it this way, the damage may be deserved). Oddly enough, there is no contrary commonplace which decrees the toxicity of those relations in which the members convince one another that they are infinitely better than they really are.

This is no minor matter, nor is it an element of some banal recreative phenomenology of love. On the contrary, to some extent it allows us to point out one of the aspects in which Modernity has tackled the issue specifically and in

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Thinking about Love (Or the Experience of Writing on Sand)

its own particular way. For we may recall the reproach which was formulated at the time to the Platonic statement. In short, it was this: if love is like a ladder on which the qualities we find on the plane of the most particular are the equivalent of the rungs that allow us to ascend towards the good, until at the highest level (which is the most abstract one) we reach the ideal of beauty, what is to be done with the inadequacies, the weaknesses, the defects of the loved one? Does Plato mean to tell us that it is not him or her we love but the positive things they have, their negative dimensions being an imponderable to be avoided (or borne)?

As the point is not to caricature (at least not excessively) the Platonic approach, it must be said that from its coordinates there is room for a plausible answer. An answer that would entail impugning the unquestionable character of those negative dimensions we have referred to. The answer is not without consistency: it is true that very often what to an impartial outside observer might seem negative, the interested person may perceive as positive and thus it is common for the lover to see the beloved as beautiful, however unprepossessing he or she may be in reality. At all events, and although the argument may be acceptable, the truth is that it cannot be considered conclusive. The classical perspective started from a definition of love that prevented it from thinking the negativity to its ultimate consequences. In the end, that very Platonic definition of love already presupposed positivity. Loving ugliness or imperfection was as self-contradictory as the knowingly wishing evil of which we suppose Socrates was talking.

We, on the other hand, are in a position to think of individuals in terms of their real complexity, assuming all those dimensions that were unthinkable for Plato. Today the idea that we have shadow zones, dark dimensions, ambiguities and deep contradictions is something which (perhaps since Spinoza, but most of all since Freud25) does not repel us at all, just as (perhaps since Sade) the idea of knowingly wishing evil does not seem an oxymoron. And so it could be said that the difference between our way of understanding the bond with the object of desire and the Platonic way has to do with acceptance of its true complexity. A complexity which, moreover, we may be in a position to accept in the object as such, in the loved one. Of their imperfec-

25 Though not forgetting, in the field of psychoanalysis, Carl Gustav Jung, who has made interesting contributions on what he calls the Shadow. The Shadow is an archetype, that is, it operates as an autonomous psychic system that marks out what is the ego and what is not. The shadow is the set of all those repressed features which we do not acknowledge as our own and often project onto others. It is, in Jung’s words, “the dark brother,” with whom the ego has to engage in order to integrate him, since his nature is not always negative, but has a creative potential necessary to complete a harmonious development of the individual. See in this respect Carl Gustav Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious in Id., Collected Works, translated by R. F C. Hull, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969 and Id., The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious, Ibid.
tions we must take charge from other registers. For example, from tenderness which, in this context, could be understood as the form of love in which we accept certain imperfect (not to say negative) dimensions of the other.

But note how it is important for the purposes of this exposition: we can only really love that other as a complex, heterogeneous totality. It would be absurd to claim that we only accept their positive dimensions and reject the negative ones. Although in the analysis nobody is of a piece, when it comes to dealing with them (in love too) we can only treat them as one, as if they were. When we say to someone “I’m glad to see you” we are declaring that acceptance of their totality as something indissoluble. And while it may be true that the reality we make cohesive can also be disintegrated by us (it may happen that – e.g. in everyday life – a particular dimension of a person is separated from the rest, is placed in the foreground and becomes insufferable), it is no less true that we do not cease to think of the other in terms of totality because of that, basically because it is the only way we can think of him as another.

This second clarification (the first, remember, was the one connected with an alternative explanation to the usual expectation of a necessary love) fully affects the very heart of the matter, points out the contradiction, the constituent rending that probably characterizes the feeling of love in the contemporary world. To recover the Nietzschean categories for a moment: it seems almost obviously intuitive to reclaim the Dionysian, the dissolution of the ego itself etc., to realize the experience of one’s own passion. But when that passion is placed on someone, rests on a specific person, we need to think of that person in Apollonian terms, that is, as an individual, not a dissolution. One does not fall in love with a dissolution. We are skeptical about subjectivity but we only know how to love subjects. We know that any identity is a mirage, but it is an identity we fall for. We know that any ego is a product, the result of the efficacy of a series of social practices, but there is one to whose charms we succumb helplessly.27 And so on and so on.

Manuel Cruz
University of Barcelona
manuelcruzr@gmail.com

26 For the ambiguity of the concept of the Dionysian and its presence in the contemporary debate see the third part of Diego Sánchez Meca’s book La experiencia dionisiaca del mundo, Madrid: Tecnos, 2005, in which he analyses the presence of the concept in the works of Habermas, Heidegger and Deleuze.

27 So writes Harry Frankfurt in Necessity, Volition and Love, p. 135: “The lover cannot help being selflessly devoted to his beloved. In this respect, he is not free. On the contrary, he is in the very nature of the case captivated by his beloved, and by his love. The will of the lover is rigorously constrained. Love is not a matter of choice” (italics in the original).