



Essay

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On Love

*NOT a lover?
Try spinning wool.*

*Still nothing?
Try a hundred jobs, a hundred crafts,
a hundred causes and paths.*

*If Love's wine hasn't seeped into your skull by then,
go to the kitchen in Love's house
and lick the plates lovers left behind.*

— Rumi, translated by Haleh Liza Gafori

I remember thinking, when I was little, that “Ode to Joy” was the dumbest name for a piece of music. Joy, I thought, does not need to be praised. Joy is an obvious good. But now that I have lived, I understand a little bit better why adults must be reeducated—re-initiated—into what every child knows.

I can't say I'm particularly inspired by the Schiller text Beethoven adapted for his Ninth Symphony—but I am fascinated by what verges on tautology: the celebration of that which is already obviously good.

I understand why, given what she has known, Gisele Pelicot chose to call her memoir *A Hymn to Life*, which also happens to be the title of a poem by James Schuyler that I adore:

*The wind rests its cheek upon the ground and feels the cool damp
And lifts its head with twigs and small dead blades of grass
Pressed into it as you might at the beach rise up and brush away
The sand...*

Here's what is magical about Schuyler's poem. It isn't obviously *about* love, but it is palpably *made* OF love. The wind becomes sensuous, a living body, resting its “cheek” on the ground—almost like an odalisque. Perception itself, the *quality* of Schuyler's attention, is what makes his hymn a hymn.

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity,” wrote Simone Weil, in one of her most popular and perhaps most prophetic insights. What is magical, even in these few opening lines of one of Schuyler's greatest poems, is that you can *feel* love in the *quality* of its attention. The wind has become a living body. Love is in the quality of Schuyler's attention. The way his poem is experiencing the world is through a state of adoration.

And this state of adoring perception is something exalted, mysterious, powerful, and medicinal, which human beings routinely forget about (and stop believing in), and of which we have depended on poets, since time immemorial, to remind us.

The Schiller poem Beethoven adapted for his Ode to Joy is bombastic and pompous—I don't get much from the words themselves, but the sonic exaltation that ends the Ninth Symphony, the bold, brave, triumph of brotherly love—I feel encouraged to bravery through that sound.

And of course to be encouraged means to be given heart—*cor*, *coeur*, *corazon*, or in German, *Herz*—which rhymes with how we measure electricity, vibration, frequency—a connective realm not exactly visible, a locus of resonance and rhythm by which we know ourselves and one another.

My heart beats—therefore I am.

If 24 art galleries in the city of Vienna, birthplace of psychoanalysis, city of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, need to recruit an American poet to write to them about love, it means we are really in trouble.

I can't say I know anything about love, except that when I clamor to its heights, to paraphrase Yeats, I see how stupidly, how wrongly, and how narrowly I've lived in light of it.

Love is an experience, not an object. I don't feel the need to redefine it: I am satisfied with its mystery and with everything the Greek philosophers and the mystics of the world have explained to us about it.

I will simply say that our problem, currently, is one of orientation. It may be that we are living through a period of such spiritual squalor, such moral depravity that people really do need to be reminded that love is, in fact, something good and praiseworthy—a viable subject or focus for art—but the real issue at hand is that love is no longer central, no longer foundational to the structure of our societies.

We are rotten at the core and we know it. This is why we transact socially in dreary terms like “attachment styles”, describe infatuation as secretions of dopamine and oxytocin, cite scientific studies on the benefits and dangers of the various dynamics in our family lives, replace psychoanalytic smalltalk with astrological palaver, and describe our art practices using pseudo-theory gobbledegook—either we're afraid of just coming out and saying what (or whom) we love, or things have gotten so lame on the planet that we don't even know anymore.

It's good, though, that the social fabric is fraying—and that platitudes about love no longer move us. Nothing can be taken for granted anymore. Not a parent's love for their children, not a politician's love of their country, not a sibling's love for their relative, not a spouse's love for the person they chose, of their own free will, to spend their days and nights with, and raise children, and bury the dead. We cannot assume that a person loves their chosen profession, we cannot even assume that a human being loves and cherishes their own life, much less their soul.

The only thing we can be sure of, perhaps, during these grisly and bathetic times, is that children come into this world seeking only to love and to be loved. And that this world continually sees them bombed, shot, trafficked, abused, numbed and deadened, screen-addled, neglected, and used.

“There is no ipso facto reality,” wrote Paul Celan, “reality must be sought and won.”

Rumi was right. If you don't know anything about love, try everything else, learn everything else that you can. You should find love enters your world naturally, organically—guiding and influencing what you do. But if you still don't feel it—and many of us are too demoralized these days to feel much of *anything*—then you can lick Love's plates by reading poetry.

An inherently epistolary artform, the lyric poem is practically made of friendship, of Eros, of Agape. It is made of the other—it is full to overflowing with everything it isn't. Intoxicated with these enormities, the substance of poetry's just a few words strung together. Hardly anything at all.

But it changes your heartbeat, reorients your soul, makes it possible to breathe when before you were suffocating, makes it possible to go on living in the face of unimaginable pain, gives you even the tiniest spark, all you need to overcome a feeling of deadness, the sensation of being widowed or abandoned in a reality that seems to be abdicating its every treasure to nonsense before even realizing what and why.

Why does poetry have this power? I don't know. You would think that the artform itself would be synonymous with Love, in the same way you might think Joy doesn't need to be praised, but poetry, like everything else these days, can be vapid and mealy-mouthed, conformist and pretentious, narcissistic and manipulative, etc etc.

And yet, even the worst poem in the world is a kind of surfer on a wave that began before writing existed, a wave that goes back to the very first song and before the first song, to the exclamations of

love, birth, and agony, to the sounds birds and insects make, and the voice of the wind and the rushing water.

I have a theory I've been playing around with that I'll never be able to prove. It goes like this: language would not exist if not for an innocent, impetuous generosity at the heart of the human being to give of itself—to give its experience—to another. For language to exist—for it was never just counting heads of Sumerian cattle—a body would have to yearn to give another body what it knows.

Is that not love?

I say throw yourself into it.

Don't turn love into "a practice".

Make a mess of it.

Let it take over.

See what happens when you refuse to go anywhere Love won't go, or create in any mode or medium that fails to make your heart sing...