

'As Barbara Cartland says...'

Fiona Ellis

Flowers, heart-shaped chocolates and teddy bears decorated with the words 'I love you' have been filling shops for weeks in preparation for Valentine's Day, but do these romantic gestures carry any meaning as a declaration of real love, whatever that may be? Fiona Ellis asks whether those three little words can ever convey the reality of love in action.

It is the time of year to talk about love and to ask what it has to do with the gigantic pink hearts, teddy bears and roses which are blocking the aisles of Marks & Spencer and arriving in pictorial form in our inboxes: 'No other flowers can express feelings of romantic love as perfectly as red roses' (Moonpig).

Feelings of romantic love light up the world, and depending upon one's philosophical point of view, lead one to see everything in a false and distorted perspective (Nietzsche's description of those who have theologians' blood in their veins) or produce clear-sightedness (Roland Barthes: 'Love is blind: the proverb is false'). Such feelings *can* distort, for we may be carried away by their intensity, to such a degree that their maintenance becomes more important than what occasioned them in the first place. In such a scenario – and this is Barthes again – 'it is my desire that I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool'.

The desire for desire is understandable. After all, one is awakened from the slumbers of everyday existence – 'the birth day of life and love and wings' to quote a poet; or to use another familiar image, one is aflame. Denis De Rougemont uses this image when describing the predicament of Tristan and Isolde: 'their need of one another is in order to be aflame, and they do not need one another as they are'. We are left in no doubt that being aflame in this sense is on a level with the hit one gets from a drug, and that it has nothing to do with real love.



De Rougemont is probably wrong about Tristan and Isolde, but he is right to suppose that we have a desire to be aflame, and that the satisfaction of this desire can become more important than anything and anyone else. This is what it means to live a romantic dream (Levinas), or to live *the* dream to use the decidedly non-pejorative variant to which contemporary culture has laid claim. I quote from [The Urban Dictionary](#): 'living the dream may be

hooking up with a hot girl...making out with random girls at a party...making sure someone is sober enough to drive to Whataburger for taquitos...The dream is whatever the man who holds it chooses'.

Being aflame in this sense has nothing to do with being in love – except in so far as one is in love with being aflame – and this has led some to conclude that passion, desire and self-concern have no part to play in the real thing. According to this way of thinking, genuine love is dispassionate, it requires total self-abnegation and it involves giving rather than taking. Nietzsche was quite right to protest that its pursuit involves a desire to be without desire – and life and love and wings. Indeed, we are left with the other side of the coin we were seeking to avoid, for a wholly dispassionate lover likewise has no need of others as they are, and their role is similarly instrumental – in this case to guarantee one's status as a pure and isolated giver.

Let us grant that passion, desire and self-concern have a part to play in love, and that this is so whether we are concerned with romantic/erotic love or the love we have for our fellow men. (I am leaving on one side the difficult question of how these loves are to be distinguished and related once we have rejected the aforementioned either/or framework.) Let us grant also that romantic love is focused upon the beloved, that it involves communion with her as she is in herself, and that such communion involves a reciprocal giving and receiving. As one commentator has put it, it is about 'joyous giving of oneself, one's time, of one's very concerns in life, one's joys and sorrows, one's understanding, humour, failures and successes, sadness and disappointments, one's deepest concern for the other and of spontaneous, sensitive responses, of life's tenderness'. Receiving, we are told, takes care of itself: 'it is at its most poignant when what is received is utterly unexpected'. This giving and receiving also has an irreducibly sexual dimension which permeates and transforms the whole. It should go without saying that we are talking about something more than 'mere sex', as Iris Murdoch has put it. After all, there can be mere sex without the mutual desire of erotic love, and the expression of such desire does not require that the lovers are 'having sex'.

What of the red roses which are said to express the feelings of romantic love more perfectly than anything else? Red roses are supposed to provide the perfect way of saying 'I love you', and these words are emblazoned across the design of the aforementioned hearts and bears. They are also tagged on to most mobile phone conversations: witness a typical walk through M&S or [Sienna Miller's recent insistence that the end of her phone call to Daniel Craig](#) was not a declaration of love. All of which makes one wonder what it could be to make a genuine declaration of love, whether the words themselves can succeed in this regard, and whether the addition of something pink, red or fluffy could be of any assistance.

Most people are not in love with most of the people to whom they talk on the phone, and in any case, 'I love you' does not always mean 'I am in love with you'. However, people do make declarations of love without meaning it, either because they are out to deceive or because they just do not get the significance of these momentous words. Celebrity culture notwithstanding, they do not report a fleeting, fiery passion to

be transferred next week to a newly significant other. Rather, they give expression to a giving of the self which puts one at the mercy of the beloved – I desire your desire and without it I am nothing.

Umberto Eco questions whether a declaration of love can carry such weight. He takes as his focus a man who loves a very cultivated woman, and knows that he cannot say 'I love you madly' because he knows that she knows that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Are we to conclude that declarations of love are impossible? Or at least, that they are impossible between those who are suitably cultivated? Eco denies that this is so, claiming that there is a solution to this (postmodern) predicament: the man can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At this point, Eco continues, 'having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same'.

So cultivated lovers can profess their love provided that they use inverted commas ('the armour of the inverted' as a wise man once described this mode of ironic detachment), and we are to suppose that a similar quoting gesture can vindicate the giving of roses, hearts and balloons, perhaps even 'the look of love'. After all, this look has been looked so many times before, particularly in the novels of Barbara Cartland. One wonders whether these postmodern lovers are not in danger of succumbing to the narcissism which De Rougemont finds in Tristan and Isolde: their need of one another is in order to be clever and they do not need one another as they are. Yet there is surely a truth in what Eco is saying – one has only to think of the pink carriage of Katie Price's first wedding, unless, of course, it was ironically adorned (anything you can do, she can do meta).

Let us grant that we have feelings of romantic love and that we can give expression to them. These feelings are sometimes no more than infatuation, and in any case are not to be confused with the love itself – feelings come and go, and, as Wittgenstein said, you cannot love someone for a few seconds. However, we *feel* our love and express our feelings with words, particularly those momentous words 'I am in love

with you' which have been uttered so many times before. Repetition can compromise their meaning, when, for example, someone utters them to different beloveds from one week to the next. However, the fact that the words are misused does not imply that they cannot be sincerely meant, and they do seem to capture what one needs to convey in this context: 'I am in love with you and this/is what it is like or what it is like in words.' (Carol Ann Duffy).

What of the mad love of which Eco speaks? Does this not smack of narcissism or even psychosis? The idea that one loves madly does not mean that one is psychotic, although psychotic individuals can think they are in love when they are not, as can narcissists. Rather, the point of describing love in these terms is to give expression to the violent process which is involved when one falls in love. To cite Murdoch again: it is 'for many people the most extraordinary and revealing experience of their lives, whereby the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely different realm'. The lover is ecstatic or beside herself in this sense, and to one who has theologians' blood in her veins, it makes perfect sense to suppose that such a lover catches a glimpse of the divine.

Ecstasy notwithstanding, love is put to the test, and some will fail because love in action can be a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams. The self-generated dreams of the fantasist have nothing to do with love, and assuming that self-confinement is a form of hell, we have an equal if more deserving candidate for the harsh and the dreadful. Love in action takes us beyond the self, and it has the potential to merge with what seems to be an extreme form of self-effacement. Hence Lord Byron to his beloved: 'you know I would with pleasure give up all here and all beyond the grave for you'. This is not the self-effacement of the wholly dispassionate giver who, like the fantasist, remains closed off from anything remotely other. Rather, it involves a radical giving of the self – a giving which, at one level, seems appropriately described as a form of hell, yet which seems to share a knife-edge with something infinitely divine. Perhaps this is what it really means to talk of love in dreams, as Barbara Cartland would never have put it.

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