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SEX AND LOVE

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem
if you find my lover—
What shall you tell him?—
that I am faint with love.

Song of Songs 5,8

CHAPTER ONE

THE COMPLEX NATURE OF EROTICISM

1. Sexuality and love

Think of all the contrasting inner impulses we have, how they generate doubts, create dilemmas, and lead us to act in contradictory ways. Now think of the two which clash and merge most dramatically over the course of most of our lives: the sex urge and the love urge. Probably it happens to most of us to forget, or simply not to understand, that sexuality and love are really two separate strands of experience. We get confused because in our personal case sexuality and love seem utterly fused together, or—as often happens—because sex leads so smoothly and effortlessly to love that we don't notice any boundary being crossed. But there's yet another major factor accounting for our confusion, and that is simply the modern discipline of psychoanalysis and its obsessive concern with pleasure, love, and sex.

The pleasure an infant takes in sucking at the breast is sexual; the pleasure taken in defecation is likewise sexual. (Later, in adult life, though genital sexuality dominates, these pre-genital forms remain.) What's more, according to Freud, the very feelings that an infant has for his mother are sexual by nature. The joy and happiness a child experiences when after a long wait his mother reappears and he runs into her arms, where he feels such bliss as to little by little doze off at her breast—all this is sexual.

And so, what's wrong with that?

The problem lies in this: as a person goes through life, so many *other* sensations get labelled as sexual, too. The desire I feel as I watch a dancer, the arousal generated by a prostitute, the passion I feel for my beloved, the pangs of desire for her when I am away on a trip, the joy of hearing her say "I love you"—*everything* is sexual! Too many things tossed together. While we must give Freud credit for his landmark understanding of the importance of sexuality to human existence, the time has come—after a century of nearly unanimous acceptance of Freudian theory—to re-establish a few basic distinctions. Even if we limit ourselves to a consideration of what Freud

terms “genital sexuality” in adults, there is nevertheless a difference between a having a quick lay, going from bed to bed out of curiosity’s sake, being overwhelmed with desperate desire for the man or woman we love, and feeling sweet tenderness for our son or daughter.

There is one sort of sexuality infused with love and another sort that has nothing to do with love at all—and may even be completely antithetical to it, such as is the case with rape, especially mass rape in time of war. During ancient times, conquered cities were sacked, the children and men of the population killed, and the women raped. Similarly, as recently as last century, Nazi SS guards in concentration camps in Germany made their female Jewish prisoners into prostitutes before killing them, and the Russian soldiers advancing on Berlin raped hundreds of thousands of fleeing German women. Naturally, however, there are also non-violent forms of sexuality completely separate from love. There’s the impersonal variety of copulation with numerous partners, commonly termed “an orgy,” but also the sort of non-violent sexuality that arises as a problem inside a couple where one partner’s innate sexual desire far exceeds that of the other.

As Georges Bataille¹ reminds us, sexuality means wild abandon, means the violation of rules and taboos. It exists in the present. It means capriciousness, dissipation, the shrugging off of responsibilities and worries. For an adult, it is the ultimate form of play, requiring all-out strenuous effort. Sport is a different thing entirely; it requires discipline and rules. The only form of activity that is sometimes as spontaneous as sex is dance—but the wildest dance can’t match the excesses of eroticism. Though sex may be more likely to rupture ties rather than create or enhance them, it is precisely the total, passionate love of a man or woman who is falling in love, the sort of love which establishes immensely strong emotional ties and new rules for living, that regularly evolves from the sexual and is in a sense its crowning achievement.

In my book, *I Love You*², I distinguish between weak, average, and strong emotional ties. We have *weak ties* not only with colleagues, acquaintances, and neighbours, but also with the casual partner or prostitute we chose to have sex with. (The sex act in itself does not create a strong emotional tie between two people.) Principal among our *average emotional ties* is the one we forge with friends. We are happy to have them there; we confide in them, trust them, and rely on them in time of need. However, differently from a mother who continues to love her wayward son, we are liable to break off relations with a friend who lies to us or betrays us. A further example of an average emotional tie is the sort of erotic relationship that lasts as long as the pleasure lasts and vanishes at the first sign of difficulty.

Strong emotional ties are, in the first place, those between parents and children—bonds that are resilient to pain, bitterness, and disappointment—followed by those created by the eruptive

process of falling in love, whereby we will continue to feel love even when the other makes us suffer. Last but not least, there is the strong bond created by a consolidated love relationship spanning a lifetime, in which each person has become indispensable for the other—so much so that the death of one is often followed shortly by the death of the other.

Given this range of emotional ties, we can say that human beings demonstrate two tendencies—two basic, ever-present and conflicting desires for, on the one hand, *exclusive* and, on the other, *exploratory* relationships. Countless anthropological studies of the sexual and marriage practices of hundreds of societies and cultures testify to this. There is a strong tendency in our species towards monogamy, towards sexual and emotive exclusivity, *at the same time that* there is in all societies a certain degree of martial infidelity among men as among women. In short, we are driven both by a need to establish a lasting love relationship with one special person (whom we are jealously possessive of), and by the powerful explorative urge which causes us all, men and women, to seek erotic adventures with new and various people.

These two drives coincide during the phase of our falling in love in that this is *the only time in life* when we are simultaneously reaching out towards a new person and cementing a strong exclusive bond. This intriguing singularity has caused me to study this phase closely for many years.³ After Stendhal⁴, in fact, all interest in these dynamics declined, and this lack of concern continues to be the case. The field of psychoanalysis has failed to provide an explanation of the process of falling in love, and the dominant Anglo-Saxon school of scientific thought has actually ignored the subject, treating it as a temporary cultural phenomenon. This is so much the case that there is no scientific term for it and it is necessary to make do with the nineteenth-century category of “romantic love,” as if the experience became a social fact only in the 1800s and not already in ancient times, as any reading of the Bible indicates.

The process of falling in love exults—only to then blur all differences between—the ultimate sexual experience and the most powerful love bond. And while there is breathtaking wild abandonment going on, this ignition stage of falling in love never reduces down to a mere bit of great sex. Rather, it spells rebirth, youth, excess, ecstasy. It destroys previous ties, suspends the laws of everyday existence, and imposes its own sovereign rule. The world is transfigured, and we feel suddenly connected to the most profound sources of wellbeing. The bond that is created is strong, lasting, and challenging. A woman in love, for instance, puts her beloved ahead of her mother, father, and the favourite male star of her fantasy life. A man in love sees in his beloved the most seductive of all hetaerae, the most erotic of all courtesans.

If we put too much stress on this falling-in-love process, however, we risk underrating the importance of other erotic experiences and of our sexuality in general. Those two impulses that I

mentioned previously, which is to say our need to bond exclusively with one lover versus our desire to do the opposite, never disappear; the duality is eternal. And though for a while the first may prevail, the second may come to prevail in turn, or, for that matter, both impulses may manifest themselves at once.

It is on the basis of these considerations that I have come to feel that the time is ripe for examining and systematically analysing the great variety of links between sexuality and love.

I'm going to begin with a look at violent forms of sexuality, followed by the impersonal sort that refuses to acknowledge the other wholly as a person. Then I'll look at sexuality where the other is present as a full and unique individual but where there is no love. After this will come those sexual relationships where there are more or less lasting ties, then the ignition stage of falling in love, and the lasting love relationship itself. Finally, I'll address the issue of how and why a relationship which developed out of the falling-in-love process becomes de-eroticized. It's enough to say here that it has everything to do with the fact that after some time has passed, the fusion between love and sexuality weakens or is destroyed. The two eternal but now-separated impulses tend to enter into conflict once again, the result being that even husbands who still love their wives will be easily attracted sexually to other women. And the wives who continue to love their husbands will be similarly tempted to indulge in their own extra-martial adventure.

2. Vulgar versus scientific language

In his book *Smut: Erotic reality/obscene ideology*, American sociologist Murray S. Davis⁵ underscores how two completely different sorts of language exist for naming sexual organs and activities. On the one hand, there is popular slang, almost always crude and obscene, while on the other, there is the roster of official terms, all very educated, and refined. There is an immense gulf between the two, and either you speak one language or you speak the other—there's no mixing. Granted, ever so often a slang term or two gets absorbed into standard language, and there are even official terms that creep into slang; that said, once this transfer takes place, it is permanent. It doesn't allow for indiscriminate code-switching. Any attempt to go back and forth from one register to the other always seems comic or grotesque.

Davis observes that although in the Middle Ages the Church strongly condemned sex, it nevertheless referred to sexual acts and organs in the common language of the time. It was only

later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that these common expressions came to be considered as obscene and unutterable; they even disappeared from the dictionary.

This drastic change was the result of two cultural processes that took place in the 1700s and 1800s. The first was initiated by the libertines and their sympathizers, who in order to give free rein to eroticism and erotic literature eliminated all references to vulgar slang, thus avoiding censure. In their place, they introduced images and metaphors which evoked the erotic experience in a new way. Later, during the Victorian Age, this libertine tradition gave way to a concerted societal effort to eliminate all references to sex in any conceivable form. Even indirectly related subjects were avoided or else alluded to with increasingly remote metaphors. One said, for instance, not that a woman was pregnant but rather that she was “in the family way.”

The second cultural process in question, which also took place in the nineteenth century, involved the “medicalization”—or, if you like, the doctoring up—of sex. Whereas in popular slang the genitals were referred to in broad terms, anatomy gave a very precise name to sex organs and their specific parts. In the case of women, a distinction could now be made between the mons veneris, the vulva with its labia, mons pubis, clitoris, and the vaginal orifice, the vagina, the cervix, and so on. As for men, terms like the scrotum, the testicles, the prostate, the seminal vesicles, the penis, the glans, the fraenum, and sperm, came into use. At the same time, sexology developed into a distinct scientific discipline, and careful accurate descriptions were made of various sexual practices including those labelled as “perversions.” Dating from this era are such terms as coitus, cunnilingus, fellatio, voyeurism, coprophilia, onanism, sadism, masochism, fetishism, urophilia, asphyxiophilia, etc. From ethnologists came studies highlighting the differences in sexual customs and sexual morality among the populations of the world. All of this contributed to the establishment of an internationally recognized scientific language which makes it possible to name, describe, and analyse sexual behaviour in a totally ascetic way, without churning up the intense emotions that are always aroused by crude explicit language, be it excitement, disgust, or revulsion.

Why exactly does this radical dichotomy exist? How can vulgar popular slang, which sounds so obscene, nevertheless arouse the sort of sexual excitement normally associated with pornography, while, conversely, the official medical terminology which is so precise and detailed unfailingly has no impact on Eros?

As psychiatrist Eric Berne explains in his famous work, *Sex in Human Loving*, classical psychoanalytic theory holds that foul language is rooted in childhood and in the disgusting sensations that have either been experienced directly or else verbally engrained by parents. “A word becomes obscene when the image accompanying it is primary (from earliest childhood) and repugnant.”⁶ And since each new generation undergoes revolting childhood experiences that are

uniquely its own, “even if adults were to rid their speech of all foul terms, they would still crop up again with the next generation.”

In response to this observation by Berne, I would like to begin by pointing out that if children learn foul language from older girls and boys and from adults themselves it is because it refers to the parts of the body and sex acts that adults refuse to hear mentioned. Having understood that these words and things are prohibited, they use them to break the taboo and rebel against adult rules, first in secret and then openly. In a parallel way, during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s, the young people who explicitly adopted this crude language were aiming at making their rebellion as offensive as possible; likewise they made ample use of swear words, curses, and religious blasphemy. I remember how during my two years as Chancellor at the University of Trent, at the time a hotbed of Italian student unrest, many students (but not their leaders, who stuck to Marxist jargon) were simply unable to say three words without interjecting an obscenity. The obscene sexual language being used in this case had nothing to do with the erotic but only with pure and simple transgression, together with an attack on religion, the State, and institutional order.

Differently from Berne, Bataille maintains that obscenity is an integral part of eroticism, which in its essence involves transgression, excess, and the break-up of both the social order and the dictates of the work world. The socialized self evaporates; one’s conscience likewise dissolves. The body is left free and at the mercy of its own convulsive excitement. A person overtaken by erotic frenzy is no longer human; he or she gives blind free rein to excess, like an animal. This is why, Bataille explains, even those lovers who respect taboos, will, in order to live their erotic passion fully, use obscene language between them, in violation of their own respectability. In short, eroticism is always a lashing out against and shattering of taboos, customs, and the constraints of language. It follows that the language of eroticism—of erotic arousal—will be inevitably vulgar and obscene.

Citing statistics from the Kinsey Report ⁷, Bataille observes that a minimum amount of sexual activity is engaged in by individuals with regular jobs, whereas the maximum amount is indulged in by members of the underworld who control the nightclub circuit, organized gambling, and prostitution—in other words, by those who have little to do with monotonous, daily routine or the discipline of a real job and instead are quite familiar with violence and chance-taking. In this world of crime and prostitution, obscenities are commonplace—a way to express hatred and desecration.

It is clear beyond doubt that obscene language incorporates and accommodates the transgressive violence of youthful rebellion, the murderous violence of the underworld, and the

revolutionary violence of mass movements and uprisings. A famous example of the latter comes immediately to mind: how after the Battle of Carberry Hill, Mary Stuart, who was taken prisoner by the Scottish Lords and led off to Edinburgh, was incessantly taunted by the crowd yelling obscene insults, the mildest of which was “Catholic whore.”⁸ Similarly, the trials, sentencing, and trips to the guillotine during the French Revolution were always accompanied by horrible choruses of obscenities. And the scenario doesn’t change by much when members of respectable society are the ones doing the attacking. Over the centuries, many a fanatically religious and chaste old biddy has displayed extraordinary knowledge about the possibilities of obscene language when writing an anonymous derogatory letter to a woman whose name they’ve wanted to blacken.

While obscene language and violence are undeniably linked, it is at the same time as certain that eroticism doesn’t usually have to do with violence. The works by Sade are an exception, as are some novels by Bataille himself—but normally the rule holds true. If violence were inherent to all eroticism, what need would we have of the word “sadism”?

To put it another way, if in the case of crime or revolution, an obscenity signifies hatred, insult, and vented aggression, an obscenity uttered in most erotic relationships does not express any sort of hatred or violence; it is merely used to heighten arousal between two lovers. Neither is there any violence or harm meant in the crude language used in pornography. At the same time, this vulgarity is admittedly transgressive, because it moves us away from normal life, with its rigid rules of propriety as regards the body and ways of dressing, and transports us into a separate sphere devoid of duties and responsibilities, where bodies come together and there is no limit to sensations, shudders, spasms, cries, or secret pleasures.

It’s clear, then, that the same obscene word or foul expression can be used to two very different ends in the two completely different contexts of aggression and eroticism. The first expresses and incites anger and hatred, as well as the desire to do someone harm, and, socially- and morally-speaking, to eliminate that person. The purpose of this aggression is to expel one’s enemy from society and to condemn him or her—figuratively or oftentimes literally—to death. The second type of erotic context, on the other hand, never expels nor eliminates the other. Rather it fosters in the two people involved the desire to isolate themselves off from society and indulge in their frenzied play. This second situation is a vacation from daily life---consented time off to do freely as we like. We forget all about civilization and its rules in our stark naked state, enjoying every minute of our re-found animal nature, knowing that this same civilized society doesn’t prohibit or condemn our attitude or experience; it just asks us to do it discretely in private and not in public where there are rules about communal living.

There is one form of sexuality that has nothing to do with what I've just said. It is the intrinsically violent and brutal variety. The "eroticism" of the rapist, of men who find their sexual fulfilment in acts that make another suffer and who vomit up obscenities; it is the perverse enjoyment of the ring leaders of organized crime, who not only rob, torture, and kill, but also control the officially non-existent sex of the world of prostitution and pornography; this controlled array of sexual activity exists for the enjoyment of the underworld itself and as a way of making money off normal types "playing hooky" from their job and family. Those exercising power in this criminal world have the most violent conception of sexuality; they treat their women—oftentimes brutally—as a mere means to an end, and they despise the customers that they are exploiting as well.

3. The erotic world

Basing his work on Alfred Schutz's exploration of the "phenomenological psychology" of "inner experience,"⁹ Murray Davis has formulated the concept of *vital reality*, distinguishing between the usual reality of daily life and the erotic reality which we necessarily enter into when we live our eroticism. And even though it takes very little to slip from one world (that of work or sports or absorbing labour in general) into the other (when we read an erotic book, watch an erotic film, initiate erotic relations), it is a radical shift phenomenologically-speaking.

There is a special language and set of sensations specific to the erotic world; not only, but everything in it takes on a different meaning and tonality. Our attention is limited to the body, or to certain erotic aspects of the body, in which we are so engrossed that we become oblivious to our cares, pains or ailments. Murray Davis mentions how prisoners oftentimes try to remain immersed in their sexual fantasies as long as possible, finding that this helps reduce their anguish at being behind bars and having to suffer the slow passing of time.

While Bataille's account of eroticism is one of an aggressive, brutal explosion beyond the limits of everyday existence in violation of a taboo,¹⁰ Murray Davis maintains that it is merely a shift from one phenomenological state to another—and a peaceful one at that. Probably they are both right. There are some cases where the shift is brusque and traumatic. Think of the impact of seeing a hard-core porn film for the first time and feeling tremendously aroused and shaken by the experience. Think of a man who gets taken to his first brothel. Now contrast that to the everyday experience of a husband and wife, or of two lovers, who pass from a non-erotic activity to an erotic one and back again as if it were the most natural thing in the world. One minute they're conversing

with friends and a few minutes later they're in bed headed towards sexual ecstasy. There is, however, also a third possibility, a sort of middle-ground scenario---which is to say, situations where the entrance into the erotic world is less a violation of a taboo and more a departure from everyday life, not brutal or traumatic but always a bit drastic and transgressive. Perhaps it is this intrinsic characteristic that explains why erotic literature, though recognized and critiqued in studies and at conferences, remains a genre onto itself. What a strange effect it makes to hear passages read aloud in erotic language at a conference, only then to be commented on in scientific or literary terms. Yet it can't be otherwise; erotic literature makes no attempt to explain or analyze the erotic world but simply immerses the reader in the experience. The reader feels excitement, yearning, vibrancy inside this other reality which transgresses the rules of aseptic everyday life. The time spent in this separate universe is never long, however; all too soon we return to normal reality, from where we analyze and talk about where we have been—perhaps in ecstatic terms.

There is simply no way around this, no way of fusing the two realities and their languages. Murray Davis, who uses both languages in his book, goes so far as to apologize to the reader on the first page for having to “jump from one register to the other.” He acknowledges the grating and unpleasant impact this is bound to have on the reader, and confesses that this shifting makes him feel like an adolescent whose voice is changing and who sounds like a tenor one minute, then suddenly like a bass, and then again like a boy soprano.¹¹

Berne the psychologist¹² is more embarrassed and a conformist than Murray Davis. Finding sexual obscenities infantile, he replaces them in his writings on sexuality with respectable, adult terms. To avoid sounding unscientific, furthermore, he stays away from all and any figurative expressions. As a result, his work is very accurate but also flat and boring. His prose doesn't set into motion the emotions and desires that it is supposedly analyzing and explaining.

The fact is this: anyone writing about eroticism must decide ahead of time whether he or she is going to evoke erotic emotions in the reader or do everything possible to avoid this (by using scientific or respectable language). The decision to evoke them, in order to make a phenomenological study of their range and variety, means that the writer must necessarily at some point stop using scientific or medical terms and make use of the most common and vulgar words that make the erotic experience recountable.

I found myself faced with a similar language dilemma while I was writing my books, *Falling in Love and Loving*¹³ and *Friendship*.¹⁴

In the first case, I decided on an approach that ended up being decidedly different from that of my friend Roland Barthes, who was at around the same time also writing a book about love.

Realizing that he wouldn't be communicating much if he used sterile language, Barthes grouped together citations by poets, writers, and artists to address various themes in his work, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*.¹⁵ By contrast, I first constructed a scientific theory about the process of falling in love, only to explain it then in the language that lovers use. The theoretical framework or "skeleton" remained the same as the one I'd first developed in *Movement and Institution*¹⁶, only the muscles, nerves, meat, and blood were provided by this language of love. The book's success spurred me to use the same procedure in *Friendship*.¹⁷ In fact, there is similarly a profound, unchanging structure to all friendships, and the language of friendship is likewise a constant, the same in Cicero as in Montaigne or Voltaire.

Many people have assumed that my decision to use what might be termed "vivid language" must have to do with wanting to write a popular book with mass-appeal. Actually, that wasn't the case at all. The real reason is that this choice alone allowed me to formulate a phenomenology of feelings with a scientific basis to it; in other words, the theoretical blueprint had to incorporate the language that is specific to friendship and to the experience of falling in love.

The problem represented itself on a larger scale, however, when I began studying the ins and outs of eroticism (in *Eroticism*). If the language of falling in love and of friendship can be said to be unified and coherent, that of eroticism is structurally-speaking duplicitous. It can even be termed "bipolar", for it is forever swinging back and forth between obscene language and that of love and poetry. I was able to keep things under control in the book by avoiding explicit sexual references and by making ample use of love images and metaphors. The book's subject, the differences in sensibility between men and women, was conducive to this. And seeing that sex and love are much more closely connected for women, I was able to give the book a certain tone simply by focussing more on them than on men.

In this new work of mine, however, there is no longer any way around the problem of language. It's time to take on the entire vast range of erotic words and try to find in them some ordering principle.

4. The principle of obscene-sublime polarity

What is the ordering principle that I just mentioned? Is there really some criterion that can help us to understand when obscene and vulgar language is used in erotic relationships and when it is not?

The hypothesis that I want to advance is that all erotic experiences vacillate between two opposite poles: at one extreme there is the violent, loveless sort of sexuality that gets described in obscene language, while at the other extreme there is the sort of overpowering erotic love which gives rise to a wealth of poetic metaphors and imagines. Of course, we have to be careful not to think that this polarity exists between sex and love. It is essential to keep straight the fact that sex is *always* present, as is Eros. It is just that at one extreme there is violence or the absence of love in this sex, while at the other extreme there is an abundance of love.

The neutral, medicalized language of science does not embrace this polarity. After all, its aim is not to evoke feelings and emotions but to keep them out of the picture. As a third language, it is completely extraneous to the true polarity of eroticism. This explains why psychology and sociology have as disciplines given up on interpreting erotic and love experiences. They have left it to art, which however doesn't by nature try to analyze or classify experiences according to any conceptual system. The challenge we are facing here, therefore, is how to bridge these two separate continents—and how to produce a scientific work that transmits the experiences and emotions that it is examining.

Let's go back to our two opposite poles of violent and brutal (or impersonal) sexuality versus that which is present in loving personal relationships. Let's begin by considering the first more in depth. Where there is hatred, aggression, rape, or evilness of another sort, the sexual language used is exclusively obscene. Clearly, a rapist who derives sexual pleasure from violation and harm uses only foul, aggressive words.

Turning from reality to pure fantasy, the eroticism of the Marquis de Sade¹⁸ comes to mind; in these books can be found a wide variety of sexual perversions, in which others are beaten, tortured or killed so that the protagonist can work himself into a state of sexual arousal, such that he reaches what would be called today a sadistic form of orgasm. Since the 1800s Sade's influence on the French conception of eroticism has been enormous, and accounts of violent fantasies can be found in the works of many French authors. Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Eleven Thousand Rods*¹⁹ clearly merits mention, as do the works by Georges Bataille, for whom eroticism (with its elements of transgression and violence) was the re-manifestation of animal cruelty in civilized humankind. Grasping what Bataille intends by transgression means reading not only his essays but also—especially—his novels. Take, for instance, *The Story of the Eye*, which Bataille wrote under the pseudonym Lord Auch, in 1928. At one point, the young couple, Simone and the narrator, are at a bullfight in Spain. We are told that “Simone preferred three moments during the bullfight: the first, when the animal came charging into the arena like an enormous rat; the second, when the bull's

horns sink completely into the mare's flank; the third, when the mare gallops sideways through the arena, with a glob of inner guts, ignobly obscene in colour, hanging between its legs." A bit later, the bullfighter Graniero makes his entrance and kills the bull, presenting the animal's testicles to Simone. Tremendously aroused by this, the lusty Simone (in the words of the narrator) "took me by the hand without saying a word and led me out of the arena to a courtyard, where the smell of urine reigned supreme. We ducked into a foul-smelling latrine in which a disgusting cloud of gnats blotted out the little bit of sunlight. As I grabbed Simone by the ass, she pulled out my penis in a fury. [...] I sunk my hard barrel into her creaming-wet flesh, penetrating her orifice of love, while at the same time savagely kneading her anus..."²⁰. After having sex, they return to the arena, where the ever lusty Simone bites into one of the (raw) bull testicles that Graniero has given her. This time, however, the bull does the torero in, putting out his right eye and gorging his head with one of its horns. The enucleated eye hangs from the crushed skull. "Red in the face, almost with sexual excitement, Simone "inserts the other testicle into her open sex." Later on, the couple enters a church, where their sexual fantasies become more blasphemous. Simone masturbates in the confessional, after which the pair forces the priest to urinate into the chalice. In the end they strangle him, forcing sexual arousal on the priest and causing him, in his throes of agony, to ejaculate inside Simone. They gouge out one of his eyes, which Simone slips into her vagina.

So much for the violent fantasies of Sade, Apollinaire, and Bataille. Now let's take a look at the obscene language of current male-oriented pornography, which hypes the excitement of brutal sex, vulgar and loveless, as in this passage from a book published by Olympia Press: "Open your mouth! Open it!, he shouted, and as she parted her beautiful big lips, he stuck his prick in her mouth, then grabbed her by the hair, and started fucking her, squirting all his sperm immediately into her mouth and shouting, "You're mine! Mine! I'm coming in your mouth. Feel how much come! Feel it! You like it hard, you whore! [...] Drool, bitch, drool and lick my prick."²¹

Similarly, though without making rampant use of masculine expressions like "whore and bitch," Catherine Millet uses equally strong vulgar language in her frank account of her own sexual experiences. She especially resorts to this style in descriptions of impersonal, promiscuous, or orgiastic situations, as here: "My place was in one of the back rooms, sprawled out on a table [...]. I might stay there for two or even three hours. And there was always the same configuration: hands would be moving over my body, I would be grabbing penises and turning my head here and there to suck them, while other penises pushed against my belly. This meant that something like twenty men might participate in turn over the course of an evening. [...] I hardly ever sweat, but sometimes I was completely covered in the sweat of my partners. On top of that, there were always trickles of sperm drying on my upper inner thighs and at certain times even on my breasts and face and hair,

and what the men who were participating in these orgies really liked was pumping their sperm into a cunt that was already swimming with come.”²²

Moving away from this sort of impersonal and promiscuous sexuality and turning to a consideration of personalized, love-related sexuality, we immediately notice how much tamer and gentler the erotic language becomes. In place of vulgar expressions we find poetic metaphors. These, however, are not to be confused with the rhetoric of disguise and sublimation typical of the Victorian Age; rather, they constitute the natural and necessary form of expression for this sort of eroticism, thanks to which it takes on shape and substance. Here is an example in which Anaïs Nin describes the incestuous sexual relations between herself and her father: “That night [...] he climbed on top of me, and it was an orgy; he penetrated me three or four times without hesitation and without withdrawing—his new strength, his desire, his emissions that followed one upon another like waves. I sank into the darkness, dim joy without orgasm, into a haze of caresses and sighs, in a constant state of arousal, feeling in the end profound passion [...]. I was brimming over with love, adoration, full awareness.”²³

When the component of love becomes pre-dominant, the language of eroticism changes completely. By way of illustration, Murray Davis²⁴ compares two excerpts from D.H. Lawrence’s novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.²⁵ In the first, the woman is *making love* without yet *being in love*, and so not only not feeling anything but also finding comical the movements of the man’s loins and the immense effort he puts into what in the end concludes with a tiny spurt of sperm. In the second excerpt, on the other hand, she is making love as a woman in love, and as she watches and touches her lover’s buttocks, which are pulsing rhythmically as he penetrates her, she is suddenly overwhelmed by an impression of extraordinary beauty—of beauty in its pure state. There is nothing comical about his movements now; on the contrary, there is something of the sublime: “And now she touched him, and it was the sons of god with the daughters of men.” There is no passing from vulgarity to scientific asceticism in the language here; Lawrence is taking us into a different realm entirely. The first situation is simply not erotic. The second one is—but the eroticism is not of the impersonal type. Connie Chatterley is in love with Mellors, the keeper, and the sexual act described here transcends everyday reality and becomes something extraordinary and sacred. “The sons of god with the daughters of men” is a direct allusion to Plato’s “The Banquet”, in which Love is described as a god whose nature lies halfway between that of the mightiest gods on Mount Olympus and that of humanity on earth. Thanks to this dual nature, Love can be on one extreme pure sex and vulgarity and on the other extreme, “divine folly” (i.e. love).

The description of a beloved is often grounded in erotically poetic imagery. This famous passage from *Song of Songs*, 7 provides a splendid example: “How beautiful are your feet in

sandals,/ O prince's daughter!/ Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the handiwork of an artist./ Your navel is a round bowl that should never lack for mixed wine./ Your body is a heap of wheat encircled with lilies./ Your breasts are like twin fawns, the young of a gazelle./ Your neck is like a tower of ivory./ Your eyes are like the pools in Heshbon [...]" And the woman replies to the line, "And your mouth like an excellent wine" with "—that flows smoothly for my lover, spreading over the lips and the teeth."

In real life, when people who are deeply in love make mention of their lover's genitals they often use made-up, pet names or an assortment of poetic metaphors. The vulva becomes a flower about to bloom, a rose, a delicate orchid. The pubes is a soft hill; vaginal secretion is scented dew; and sperm figures as a sprinkling of pearls or a vital nutriment. Language transforms and fuses together the body with Nature and the soul. "Soft hills in green sunsets welcome the one I love. She who is the rose bearer now approaches. Take me into you, my darling, let me enter your house. You are the softest of dwellings. Your door opens for me. Rose petals show me the way. Walls of jasper, wet with dew, welcome me; their kiss carries the smell of spring. Your body is like a great river pulling me along. I don't want to get out, I want to stay inside you forever, be only one of its waves kissed by the sun." ²⁶

Even when love is madly and savagely sexual, an account of the experience tends to extend beyond bodily sensations. The language veers towards the spiritual in an explosion of transcending images. That is clearly the case in this poem by Neruda: "It's like a tide when she rivets her sad eyes on me,/ when I feel her body of white, mobile clay/ stretch and throb next to mine;/ it's like a tide, when she's by my side [...] It's something inside that sweeps me away and grows immensely close by, when she's by my side,/ it's like a tide breaking in her eyes/ and kissing her mouth, breasts, and hands./ Tenderness of pain and pain of the impossible,/ wing of tremendous desires, which moves in the night of my flesh and of hers/ with the soaring force of arrows in the sky." ²⁷

And then there are accounts of love where no reference to the body is made at all, as in Giovanni Pascoli's famous poem, "*Solon*": "To vanish! I want nothing else: I want/ as mine its spreading radiance./ Final obstacle to the great light,/ obstacle to the great wave,/ how sweet to descend from you to peace:/ the sun descends into the endless sea;/ trembling and fading follower, descends the radiance." ²⁸

But at this point we are starting to lose all sense of an erotic experience. Sublime love of this purity is no longer erotic. Eroticism necessarily operates *between* those two extremes that we've talked about: on the one hand, pure hate and a desire to destroy, and on the other hand, sublime love and sacredness.

5. Erotic language in the Far East

The dichotomy between the two forms of erotic language is especially marked in the West; it was already present in Ancient Greece as well as in the Judo-Christian times that followed. By contrast, it has been nearly non-existent in the East, especially in India and China, with their centuries-old tradition of learned and refined erotic literature. In India, the *Kamasutra*²⁹ has always been widely known and read, whereas in China there is a wide array of erotic classics. The official archives of the Han dynasty initially listed eight erotic manuals, to which numerous others were later added. There were quite a few literary works as well. And in all of these texts there aren't discernable distinctions between vulgar versus medical language, or vulgar versus poetic language, as in the West. Instead, eroticism has for centuries been expressed by means of delicate poetic metaphors. The penis is termed Jade Rod, Coral Rod, or Pillar of the Celestial Dragon. The female genitals are referred to as Cinnabar Gate, Peony Blossom, Golden Lotus, Enticing Amphora, etc. One Taoist priest advises, for instance, that "the Jade Rod [...] should gently caress the precious entrance to the Cinnabar Gate, while the man kisses the woman tenderly, his eyes taking in her body and contemplating the Golden Lotus [the vulva]. He should then run his hand over her torso and breasts and caress her Precious Terrace [the clitoris]. [After this] he should move his Steadfast Peak [erect penis] [toward] her Jade Veins [labia minora]." ³⁰

In the classic novel *Skin Prayer Rug* by Li Yü, the young male protagonist marries a beautiful girl whose strict upbringing has prevented her from knowing anything about the art of lovemaking. Her husband, therefore, gives her an illustrated book of all the various sexual positions and accompanying explanations on how to assume them and what they signify. The names of these positions are extremely poetic. The first is called "The Free Butterfly Flutters about in Search of a Flower Scent;" it is a position in which the woman sits with her thighs spread while the man comes toward her with his erect penis. The second is that of the "Bee Making its Hive." The explanation of how to assume this position is made in this poetic fashion: "She lies on her back on the cushions with her legs apart and raised upwards [...], her hands pressing on her offered *fruit* and guiding his *jade trunk* towards the entrance of the *flower calyx*, so that he stays on course and doesn't lose his way." In the fourth position described, which is to say "The Hungry Horse Gallops towards the Trough," the woman lies with her back flat against the cushions, with her arms wrapped around the man's body[...] He lifts her feet up on his shoulders and inserts his *yak tail* all the way into her *calyx*." ³¹

The first time the young couple has sex, the husband, not wanting to frighten his wife, doesn't move her from the armchair where they have been looking at the book, but simply and gently lifts her thighs up on his shoulders, without removing her clothes. Then he "carefully guided his forceful *herd-driver through the gate of the little pleasure palace* [...] and now his herd-driver was in, inside the *little pleasure palace*, was trying to grope and rub his way along the walls in order to get to the secret room containing *the heart of the flower, its pistil*."³² These are all poetic metaphors.

In this sort of literature, therefore, there is a clear distinction made between the crude language of sex and that of intense and exclusive love. Like Western culture, Eastern culture (especially in India) recognizes the passionate experience of falling in love, to the extent that Vatsyayana in the *Kamasutra*³³ says that those truly in love have no need of his sexual instructions, as they know it all by instinct. Yet, Vatsyayana and others such as Kālidāsa, who includes a marvellous account of falling in love in *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, do not treat the subject on its own. The reason stems from the observed practice of polygamy, which renders impossible the element of exclusivity (which, by contrast, is an integral part of the falling-in-love experience in Western culture). In *The Recognition of Śakuntalā*, the king is head-over-heels in love with Śakuntalā, yet conducts her to his harem (where, admittedly, she is first among many).

In China, even more so than in India, there is no separation between the emotional states expressed in "I like you and want you intensely" and in "I am in love with you." By consequence there is only one sort of language, one employing erotic metaphors, which shifts gradually (so as to be almost imperceptible) from sweet, affectionate words of passion—like *darling, love, my sweetheart, my soul mate, I want to die here in your arms*—to those which refer to sexual parts—*the two twin hills, the valley of pleasure, the moon's hill, the pleasure ditch, the secret cabinet*—and finally to those which allude to specifically sexual experiences, like *the cloudburst*, etc.

In the book by Li Yü mentioned previously, the young male protagonist goes to a temple of love to look for beautiful women. He jots down notes, and next to each listing makes an annotation. Here is an example: "Ah, how to describe her beauty in words? She is a jewel, yet scented; a flower, yet able to speak. Her mouth is a split cherry; the way she positions her small feet when she walks recalls the elegant gliding of airborne swallows and brings to mind the beautiful Hsi Shi mentioned in history books, who once during a royal banquet danced so gracefully around the gold plates on the prince's table as to enchant his soul and turn him into her puppet. [This was Prince Fu Chai of the State of Wu, in the fifth century B.C.] She always knits her eyebrows, like His Shi even in this, but not only when she is in a bad mood—even when she is gay and cheerful. She opens her eyes indolently, like a second Yang Kuei-fei [famous for being the favourite of Emperor T'ang Ming-

huang, eighth century A.D.]”³⁵ ... Overall, this resembles the sort of gushing that a Westerner in love would do today, with references not to the great lovers of the past but rather to famous movie stars.

Texts of this sort in China and India were written by the well-educated for a reading public of expert pleasure seekers who regarded eroticism positively. The *Kamasutra* was drawn up not by someone spying on the goings on in brothels but by a cultured observer of the sexual practices of his own social class. It was not a book to read in secret and in solitude but a learning manual about the pleasures of love intended both for well-to-do males and (especially) for young women who were about to marry or simply preparing to become the wife, concubine, or member of a harem kept by a rich man on whom they would depend all their lives. This book, which Vatsyayana probably wrote in the third century A.D., also instructs readers on 64 other subjects, ranging from music, literature, poetry, dance, singing, hygiene, cooking, architecture, and furniture to the art of pleasant conversation. Lest we forget, it was fundamentally considered a religious text—this, because erotic love, or Kama, was an essential part of Hindu religious practice. One might reasonably guess that during the era in which it was written, as well as in following centuries, it was popular also among the lower classes; the innumerable erotic figurations in temples all over India (and not just in the famous ones in Khajuraho) bear witness to this.

To understand just how great a gap there is between this conception of eroticism and those of Judo-Christianity and Islam, it's enough to consider the figure of Krišna, the incarnation of Visnù and the second figure of the Trimurti—hence the absolute deity, who lives a happy life, mating with hundreds of beautiful young shepherdesses, the Gopi. In all Tantric art, moreover, the state of ultimate bliss is represented either by the sexual coupling of Šiva with Parvati, or by the figure of a deity—be it Šiva or Buddha—who penetrates the small naked daykini who is sitting on his lap and embracing him tenderly.

This erotic component in the Hindu religion began to decline as of 1000 A.D., probably as a result of the spread of Islam, which allowed for eroticism only within marriage. This concept of marriage embraced, however, the founding of harems, where the man chose which wife to have sex with, in the presence of the concubines who assisted the couple with their promiscuous arts.

Nothing could be more extraneous to all this than what was going on in the Western world. Even though there was a goddess of love, Aphrodite-Venus, in the Greek-Roman pantheon of deities, the sexuality she inspired was always considered adulterous, for the underlying structure of all relationships couldn't be anything other than monogamous. Mighty Zeus-Jupiter copulates with many mortal women, yet it is sex-on-the-sly, which he hopes will elude the jealous eye of his wife Hera-Juno. With the advent of Christianity, eroticism was literally banded from religion. What came of this was the establishment of an alternating pattern of monogamy interrupted periodically

by adultery (and occasionally by the promiscuous chaos of orgies). Obviously within the confines of this tradition it occurred to no one to inform young men and women about the ways to give and receive sexual pleasure from each other. Sexuality, thoroughly condemned by religion, was placed on the same level as other vile animal needs, such as defecating. It bears repeating that this vision of sexuality as a form of guilt and transgression, as the violation of a taboo, is at the centre of Bataille's study of eroticism. The conclusion reached is that the degradation and debasing of women and of beauty comes with the re-emergence of the animal in man.

And yet because Western civilization has always been at the mercy of frenetic social dynamics of the sort which foster the formation of collective utopian movements aiming to redo and regenerate the world, some of this dynamism has also generated changes in the area of love and Eros. Over the course of the Middle Ages, the increase in personal liberty brought with it a shift from the *incipit vita nova* of Christianity to the *Vita nova* of Dante and then to the *dolce stil novo*. Eroticism began to command attention, especially the nascent state of falling in love; recognition was given not only to its powers of physical and spiritual reawakening but also its infraction of the most sacred rules of family and liege (extending even to one's allegiance to the king, as in the case of Tristram and Isolde, or Lancelot and Guinevere), which constituted proof of its subversive and revolutionary nature. That said, this experience also took the institutionalized form of courtly love, of knightly aspiration and endless devotion. Sex, filtered through the experience of falling in love, became a refined art and was rendered poetic and even sacred. The price paid, however, was that this refinement process dramatically separated the hitherto united extremes of the obscene and the sublime.

6. Erotic art forms in the West

As of the Renaissance, European **painting** began to make use of numerous settings and figures from the pagan Classical Era, in order to represent erotic scenes. We can take as an example Poussin's rendition of *Acis and Galatea*, one of numerous variations on the theme. In the foreground the two lovers are embracing, while in the background Polyphemus is playing a large flute, and over to the right there are tritons erotically at play with some nymphs. The erotic embrace of the couple in love takes place in public in front of others who, like them, are engrossed in making love. A decidedly promiscuous situation, in other words, but without anything vulgar or obscene about it. Likewise erotic but not vulgar is *Diana and Callisto* by Rubens, where the viewer is entranced by so many languid, nude, shapely woman with such sensual flesh. It is a literal rendering

of “the temptation of the flesh” as it is termed in ascetic Christian doctrine. Of course, the same goes for hundreds of paintings of this sort painted between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Granted, in Eastern painting, there were more explicitly sexual details, at times overtly pornographic and in any case often didactic—openly depicting genitals, penetration, and innumerable sexual positions. Yet there was none of the evocative splendour of Western painting, which did not show sexual organs or the act of copulation, but which exulted the human body in a way that was unimaginable in Eastern art.

In addition to painting, there are two other art forms in the West which have at times been profoundly erotic—**dance** and **singing**. Obviously both have always been present in Eastern civilizations as well. Girls preparing to become concubines or wives of important men once received instruction in music, dance, and singing. Moreover, the singers who performed at every banquet were concubines. There must have been a similar overlap of roles at the gatherings of wealthy Greeks and Romans. The figures of dancers on ancient Greek vases are tremendously erotic, for example. As regards ancient Rome, we know that after the civil wars the wealthy classes began to require female slaves and dancers at their dinners and celebrations. Later, in the long interval of the Christian Middle Ages, followed by the Reformation, and then the Counter Reformation, any public manifestation of this pagan spirit (which managed to make a brief re-emergence in Rome under Papal rule in the 1500s) was strictly forbidden. Erotic practices continued, but on the sly.

Dance went public again in the 1800s, and the first place it reappeared was in France, the country that had witnessed the most devastating, anti-Christian revolution less than a century before. In Paris there were the same wild dances and hybrid dancer-concubine figures of ancient times. The Moulin Rouge and the paintings by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec epitomized the atmosphere and ambiance. From that time onwards, Western dance has expressed the exaltation and jubilancy of female eroticism, raising the sexual appeal of women to a maximum level, at which it can not fail to arouse men. Dance does not reflect the nascent state of falling in love; dance is a sexual medium. Consider the tutu and leotard worn by any Classical ballerina. Whirling round, the short little shirt reveals her long legs, made all the longer-seeming because of her toe-shoes. Equally erotic is the way that the male ballet dancer, lifting his partner into the air, opens his legs wide, his stocking-covered groin area in plain view of the audience. *Still* more erotic is the high-kicking routine, followed by the bottom flashing, of a line of can-can dancers.

Italian writer Dino Buzzati puts it very well in his novel, *Un amore, (A Love)*. “Seeing them [the ballerinas at La Scala] so close-up and absorbed in their work, without makeup or peacock

feathers but simply their unadorned selves—more naked than if they had been naked, Dorigo suddenly understood their secret, the reason why for countless centuries ballerinas have been the very symbol of womanhood, the female body, and love. Dance—he understood—was a marvellous symbolic representation of the sex act. The rules and discipline, the rigid and often punitive positioning of limbs to execute difficult and painful movements, the forcing of those young virginal bodies to provide as many usually-hidden perspectives as possible in extremely stretched and open positions, the freeing of legs, the chest, and arms so that they might give their all—all of this was to satisfy the male.³⁷

In modern dance, the movements of the two dancers symbolize even more clearly a sexual coupling, in all its possible variations. In many dances on television, even those intended for families and children, beautiful female dancers appear dressed in little more than nipple-covers and G-strings which draw attention to their buttocks. They proceed to dance around and amidst people who are dressed normally, in a way that symbolizes an orgy.

The sight of a half-naked ballerina dancing with a male partner has an overpoweringly seductive effect on men, which is often even greater than that of the so-called model of erotic seduction—the strip tease, where the woman is alone and almost immobile. It takes a female body in movement to recount, in the very special artistic language of dance, the frenzy of the sex act and the process of inviting, exciting, and abandoning. No man could ever doubt that Herod Antipas went so far as to promise to Herodias' daughter, Salomé, “anything she wanted.” The effect of a man dancing on women is far less. And when it does arouse a woman, it is because she identifies with the woman who is dancing with him.

The art form which has by far the most erotic impact on woman is **singing**. Teen-aged girls today continue to go crazy for the singing idol of the moment, and millions of women, young or old, have over the years felt spasms and thrills while listening to a crooner like Frank Sinatra. The lyrics—the words—count a great deal in these songs, and since they are about love, they are perceived, from a feminine point of view, as a declaration of love—if not a genuine act of seduction.

Eroticism first appeared in the West in **written form** in medieval Europe; the works of Boccaccio and Chaucer, especially, are full of the simple crudity of everyday Eros. This changed in the eighteenth century with the advent in France of what for simplicity's sake we will term libertine literature. It was produced by a rich noble class which did no work and, having shrugged off all traditional moral and religious ethics, lived a dissolute life of luxury dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure in any form. Two prime examples are *No Tomorrow (Point de lendemain)* by Vivant

Denon³⁸, in which Madame de T. deceives both her husband and her lover by inviting a young inexperienced chevalier for a night of carefully arranged love-making, and *The Little House (La petite maison)* by Jean-François de Bastide³⁹, in which a libertine seduces a young woman by conducting her through his house of pleasure. In both small books, erotic tension and sexual vibrancy are maintained thanks to intimate settings, images, symbols, allusions, and the sort of register and language that lovers use.

It was left to Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin in the 1930s to break the taboo of sex in literature and describe erotic reality in frank terms. Henry Miller's descriptions are arid and hard. Albeit with a conscious desire to exaggerate, he expresses in his work the sort of male eroticism, which coolly if not aggressively separates sex from love and considers a sexual relationship to be an erotic process soon followed upon by indifference.

Anaïs Nin in her diaries, on the other hand, records her overflowing feminine sexuality—as it emerges during her love-making experiences, noting down even the indecencies or particulars considered taboo. Earlier in this chapter we took a look at an excerpt from her account of her incestuous sex with her father. Here is another passage: “‘We must avoid going all the way,’ my father said, ‘but let me kiss you.’ He caressed my breasts and my nipples hardened. When his hand caressed me—oh, what technique in that hand—I melted completely [...] His face went ecstatic, and I was suddenly overcome by a frenzied desire to join my body with his. His spasm was tremendous, throughout his entire being. He emptied all of himself inside me.... And my yielding was immense, throughout my entire being, except for that nucleus of fear that blocked in me the supreme spasm [...] That evening, more caresses. He asked me to undress and lie next to him. His accommodating caresses and mine, sensations running from head to foot, the vibration of all senses [...] A new uniting, matching delicateness, subtleties, exaltation, awareness, perceptions, hard grips. A joy that expanded in wide circles.⁴⁰

In *Little Birds*⁴¹ and *The Delta of Venus*⁴², however, Anaïs Nin no longer brings love into things; on the contrary, she seems to want to keep sexual desire completely separate from love. Never vulgar, she tells about a series of joyous sexual trysts with one or two partners, in language that is brimming with feeling and sensations. The same can be said of Emmanuelle Arsan, who in *Emmanuelle* gives us an outstanding description of feminine sexual sensations. In the opening chapter, Emmanuelle is on an airplane. Once the stewardess has helped her to her seat, she stretches out her legs and thoroughly relaxes. She begins to feel the vibrations made by the plane: “These seemed to adjust their frequency in relation to Emmanuelle, in harmony with her body's rhythm. A wave rose up her legs from her knees (chimerical epicentres of these broad quivering sensations), ending inevitably on the surface of her thighs, higher and higher, making Emmanuelle shudder all

over.” Then she gets engrossed in erotic fantasies, imagining “phalluses urgently trying to touch her, to find a way in between her knees, to force open her legs and part her sex [...]. Their motion was that of a continuous thrust forward [...]. Through that narrow passageway, they penetrated into the dark depths of Emmanuelle’s body.” Soon the man sitting next to her, to whom she’s attracted, places a hand on her leg, and her immediate response is to slip her own hand between her thighs. “With bated breath, Emmanuelle feels her muscles and nerves knot up as if a splash of ice water had struck her in the stomach.”⁴³

In recent years, in the aftermath of the sexual revolution, women too have begun to separate sex from love. During the 1960s and 1970s Lidia Ravera did so in her book, *Porci con le ali (Pigs with Wings: the sexual-political diary of two adolescents)*⁴⁴, followed by Erica Jong and her first novel, *Fear of Flying*⁴⁵, and then a few decades later by Catherine Millet, who published *The Sex Life of Catherine M.*⁴⁶ in 2000. (Incidentally, the same split between sex and love can be found in almost all modern novels, be them by men or women, which either deal directly with erotic experiences, such as *Platform* by Michel Houellebecq⁴⁷, or which attach much more importance to drugs or existential emptiness than to sex, as in the works of Irvine Welsh.) There is also a rising number of novels by women which are so full of obscene words as to blur the distinction between erotic and pornographic literature. One of the reasons for this choice is the desire to recreate the reality of everyday sex, where instead of the word “penis” people say *cock*; instead of “sperm”, *come*; instead of “vulva” and “vagina”, *cunt*; instead of “buttocks” or “anus”, *ass*; and instead of “mate”, *fuck*. This sends the message that everything goes today, and it’s all natural; there is no more transgression or illicit behaviour. When it comes down to it, isn’t this the way young people talk today? Isn’t this the language we hear on TV reality shows? The unfazed among us claim that it is absurd to try to distinguish anymore between vulgar and non-vulgar language. There is—or will be shortly—a standard and end-all way of referring to things by their common name, and the rest of us are well advised to take stock of the situation and get over our traditional inhibitions and hang-ups.

But does this really reflect reality? I don’t think so. In fact, I would argue that despite the advent of the sexual revolution, despite the fact that movies contain nude scenes of lovemaking, despite all the magazines full of nudes and the Internet with its numerous pornographic sites, and even though many modern novels are full of obscene language, in reality the distinction remains intact in art as well as in life. Equally intact is the genre of erotic literature, distinctive from other literary genres (adventure books, thrillers, romantic comedies, war stories, etc.) And undoubtedly unchanged is our steadfast norm of referring to the erotic in the neutral language of medicine and sexology when speaking in public.

7. Oscillations in the sexuality-love dichotomy throughout history

The dominance of sex over love and vice versa has varied from era to era. It is nevertheless possible to identify those historical periods that were prevalently sexually promiscuous and those which on the contrary attached great value to personal love.

Let's return for a moment to our "libertines of the 1700s." These men and women considered love, and the experience of falling in love, to be a form of slavery that they themselves did not want to be submitted to, yet found rather fun to impose on others. In his famous book, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Choderlos de Laclos⁴⁸ describes the competition between Madame Merteuil and her old friend Valmont to conquer and seek vengeance on those who still believe in love. The French Revolution did nothing to change this general picture, and if anything, Thermidor (the name imposed for the summer period that would spell the end of the Revolution) exploded with even more frenzied *joie de vivre* than before. Out on the streets of Paris, members of the *Jeunesse dorée* and the *merveilleuses* began to appear. The Directoire dictated fashions; promiscuity became rampant. Lovers went from bed to bed. In the salons where men of power met, M.me Tallien and Josephine Beauharnais circulated semi-nude and draped in veils.

This wild epoch ended when Napoleon married Josephine. What followed was a Romantic era which gave great importance to exclusive, monogamous relationships and to the experience of falling in love. We can say that this period began around the time of the publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe and of Stendhal's essay *On Love*.⁴⁹ and extended to the era of Tolstoy's epic love dramas and of novels by Emily Brontë and Gustave Flaubert.

The next promiscuous era began towards the end of the First World War, with the decline of aristocratic society and traditional mores. Just how dark and deprived this period seemed can be seen in Joseph Roth's novel *The Emperor's Tomb*.⁵⁰ The capital of all this wildness up to the 1930s was Berlin. Luchino Visconti's film, *The Fall of the Gods*, vividly re-evokes those times. In the rest of Europe and in America, the Roaring Twenties were in full swing. The promiscuous bent of American society was epitomized by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, an era that ended with the advent of Prohibition and the Great Depression. Young Americans flocked to Europe in groves, headed to London and above all to Paris. Outstanding representatives of this generation in Paris were Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, and Anaïs Nin. In London, meanwhile, high society was dominated by the carefree members of upper classes known as the Bright Young Things—superficial and out to enjoy themselves to the point of transgression. To give an idea of the times,

here is an excerpt from *Amori crudeli (Cruel Loves)* by Cinzia Tani. In her description of Elvira Barney, the protagonist of a notorious trial, she writes: “She began to sniff cocaine and frequent pubs and night clubs, becoming the mistress of a series of deadbeats and sexual perverts. [...] They invented absurdly perverse games and amused themselves with promiscuous sex.”⁵¹ Describing the way in which they lived, Tani adds, “Disorder was part of the interior decorating—clothes and shoes abandoned on the floor, lines of bottles and dirty dishes in the kitchen, candles that had been lit and extinguished innumerable times on the windowsills.⁵² [...] They partied through very long nights, during which first alcohol masked their fatigue, then stimulants erased it all together; nights where the dramas and comedies lasted till dawn, at which time the light began to bother eyes and minds.”⁵³

After the promiscuous phase of the Twenties and Thirties, the world crisis that led to the Second World War was accompanied by a return to romantic love, which pervaded the literature and film of the Forties and Fifties; movies like *Waterloo Bridge*, *Casablanca*, *Notorius*, and *Love is a Many Splendid Thing* come to mind. It was a time of high hopes for the future, and thanks to the reconstruction efforts in full swing in Europe, such values as marriage and family life with children took centre-stage once again; in demographic terms, of course, this resulted in the now infamous ‘Baby Boom.’

A new swing in the opposite direction was in the offing by the early 1960s; the rock music by Elvis (“the Pelvis”) Presley signalled the way, as did, in the book world, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan⁵⁴. The new generation launched the sexual revolution, and as a result personal freedom and sexual promiscuity became part of the ideology of the masses. Familiar figures and objects from this era included *Playboy* magazine, the research of Masters and Johnson⁵⁵, Alex Comfort and his book, *The Joy of Sex*⁵⁶, Phyllis and Eberhard Kronhausen and their Museum of Erotic Art, the erotic painter Betty Dodson, and the pornographer Marvin Miller. The times also spawned the first pornographic films and the use of drugs like marijuana and LSD, followed successively by heroin.

In Europe, the advocacy of sexual promiscuity among student groups took on Marxist overtones, whereas in the USA it was bound up with the radical feminist movement. Works by Erica Jong, for instance, was very much in vogue. By the end of the decade, however, such sexual freedom had taken on a more tantric form, with the immergence of Osho (Bhagwan Rajneesh) and his Orange People, followed by that of the New Age. The increasingly wide-scale use of drugs contributed greatly to the prevalence of sexual promiscuity. Which drug it was little mattered in the end, for there was always a shedding of one’s inhibitions, whether this in turn led to a state of indifference, a heightened sense of unlimited power, or the blurring of the confines of self-identity.

The curbing of drug use, thanks both to government efforts and to the increasing practice of self-control and self-limitation, began only towards the end of the 1970s, when the experiment of hippy communes was declared a failure and the decline of Marxist doctrine gave way once again to the values of individualism. Where the emphasis had once been on community, now the focus of attention became the couple and their love relationship. The publication of such works as *Fragments d'un discours amoureux (A Lover's Discourse: Fragments)* by Roland Barthes and my own *Innamoramento e amore (Falling in Love and Loving)* signalled the start of a phase which, in part due to the AIDS epidemic, would last throughout the 1980s and into the first part of the 1990s.

Today we are once again in a phase where eroticism is kept separate from love. This is clear from such TV reality shows as (in Italy) “*Il grande fratello*” (“*Big Brother*”). And then there are the countless books penned by prostitutes, porno-stars, laptop dances, models, and showgirls, full of impersonal or indifferent accounts of various sex acts. Or the same acts, this time presented as casual, passionless experiences had in a drugged state of stupor—and therefore anything but erotic, in books by Hanif Kureishi. Or else, as in the case of Irvine Welsh’s novels, sex for sex’s sake, which is meant to be representative of life’s lack of meaning and the collapse of values. An example: “Fuck it, last night I slept like shit. Fuck, I didn’t even feel like it. I just sat there with my eyes open, gazing at the walls and thinking, Tomorrow I’m going out, out of here, fuck. And no fucking conversation. I said to that fuck-head, Get your rocks off while you can, asshole... I tell him everything, damn it, the low-down on all the chicks I’m going to screw [...]”.⁵⁷

Lately there has been a considerable increase in comparable works by women. Again, the language tends to towards the vulgar, as is the case when eroticism and love are kept separate. In a novel by Florence Dugas we read: “The Black Man bent over her and abruptly parted her buttocks—his prick, dripping with saliva, penetrated her ass with ease, and she would never have imagined that it could go so deeply—literally impaled, she felt the unmerciful bar thrust upwards towards her heart—then retract and thrust again—she had never been butt-fucked in that way by a penis so hard, ivory stick, iron stick, pure hell.”⁵⁸ Also, in various essays by women, there has been a tendency to separate sexuality from love, at the expense of the latter (which is by consequence undervalued), as shown by the success of such books as *Against Love: a polemic* by Laura Kipnis.⁵⁹

8. Why the dichotomy?

Why is it that despite the fact that this sort of freely open, indifferent eroticism is becoming ever more wide-spread and that obscene language is now a constant in television and film, sex in real life continues to be regarded as a separate, private, fundamentally secret realm? By secret, I mean in the sense that even those individuals with the foulest of mouths, or who write about sex all the time, never recount their own sex or love life except to their lover, analyst, or select friends. There can only be one explanation for this, I believe, and that is that obscene language arouses the sort of sensations, emotions, and sexual excitement which alter, upset, or shake up social relationships, and so we carefully select who we are going to make privy to our use of it.

An obscenely-worded account of one's own sex/love life to a concrete individual constitutes (unless obviously a joke or a verbal attack) a blatantly sexual overture. If the other person is willing to listen to it, without getting indignant or laughing it off, he or she is in some way accepting an advance. Imagine, for instance, that a woman tells a man, whom she's just met, all about her sexual encounters with former lovers, and in particular about what exactly they did together and how it made her feel. The man is bound to read this as a sexual proposition. As she is bound to, too, if it is the man telling the story. Understandably, neither can help imagining the situation or actively reliving the story as a fantasy. If this dialogue continues, the two will find themselves automatically in a compromising situation of promiscuity, easily leading to the moment where the protective conventions of everyday life break down. At that point, a gesture, a furtive touch of hands, or an exchange of glances will be enough to spark the beginning of a sexual relationship. That such a consequence is so certain explains our reticence to talk too intimately with others and our eagerness to appear at all cost restrained and modest in public.

All told, this is an indication of how sex—whether effused with or devoid of love—constitutes a permanent mortal threat to the social order, precisely for its being based on primordial interactions which are millions of years older than any human economic or political system. Bataille believes that sexuality is always a form of transgression, and that it unleashes the innate pleasure found in violating rules and taboos, but in reality the transgressive power of sexuality and love is enormously greater, and does not depend at all on the conscious will to transgress nor on the pleasure taken in doing so. Civilized society is built on the division of labour and the separation of powers, on regulated family and blood ties, on recognized levels of hierarchy, and on precise rules of access and exclusion as well as of promotion and retribution. The rules for becoming a professor, magistrate, physician, or politician are all different, as are the standards of professional behaviour set by law or professional associations. Eroticism, however, takes no heed of such rules and tends to violate them. Let's take as an example a company where there are set career tracks. If the company owner falls in love with some lowly administrative assistant, the entire power structure of that

business begins to tremble. Because it is assumed that the woman can suggest all sorts of things to the man in bed—from praise or criticism of co-workers to ideas on which managers to promote or fire—most people working at that company have the sensation that the company has suddenly acquired a co-owner. It's actually worse than that in reality, in that this "new co-owner" (the owner's mistress) already knows the company inside out and has fixed likes, dislikes, and possibly grudges. The manager who used to take her to task for being late, or gave her a hard time for not giving in to his advances, had best lay low or change jobs. History reminds us over and over again of how much power may be wielded by a king's favourite mistress, and how she might make or destroy a minister or advisor. One stellar example is Cleopatra, whose influence on Caesar's thinking and his conception of the State aroused the hatred of the members of the Roman Senate.

In short, mutual sexual attraction does not respect the pre-constituted order and hierarchy of the world, violates the attitude of neutrality required in various social roles, and unites what should officially remain separate—this, in the most unforeseeable and capricious way possible. For this reason, sexuality has always been used as an arm in politics, counted on as a means for obtaining information by secret agents, and brought into play in scandals designed to eliminate troublesome opponents. At a more mundane level, sexual attraction may have an impact on relationships between bank clerk and customer, judge and defendant, teacher and student, investigator and investigated, master and servant, as well as between neighbours, friends, and even enemies. All this is augmented, furthermore, when sexual attraction leads to the experience of falling in love and to the passion of authentic love. The scenarios leading up to this are numerous today, and the relationships in question are not necessarily heterosexual ones—we shouldn't, in other words, assume that it is always the case of an older man with power and prestige who lets himself be seduced and guided by a much younger, beautiful woman. That both male and female homosexuality have become more commonplace means that certain situations and rituals of seduction, once rarely experienced, now occur far more regularly.

The power that sex has to dissolve the rigid boundaries of social hierarchy is not limited to the Western world. In India, for instance, the Tantric sects that attribute great religious importance to sex have always encountered strong opposition from the Brahmanic elite, which has tried to make the Tantra out to be only an ascetic practice. The importance of Kama, or erotic love, as the central focus of religious life, can be seen in the number of erotic sculptures scattered just about everywhere on the Indian continent. There has been, however, only one historical period when eroticism was completely integrated into religion and hence into the social structure, and that was in Nanda Pradesh under the Chandella dynasty towards 1000 A.D. This was the period when the famous temples of Khajuraho were built, and their construction marked the moment of greatest

synthesis between religion and eroticism ever achieved in human history. (Subsequently, however, certain hostile forces in Hinduism and Islam prevailed, and these marvellous temples were submersed by the jungle and utterly forgotten by humanity until their rediscovery by Sir Richard Burton.)

We must never forget that sexuality is the basis for reproduction and so for life. At any level of the animal or the plant kingdom, furthermore, there are regular cycles and set rituals, the violation of which will keep life from continuing. In her unsettling book (written with Dorion Sagan), *Mystery Dance: On the Evolution of Human Sexuality*, evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis⁶⁰ outlines the many extraordinary forms that sex takes in Nature, which constitutes proof of its uniqueness among all other activities. Think of the complicated mix of flower shapes, colours, and scents, the interaction of which with the instinctive behaviour of certain insects results in pollination. Or think of the complex courting rituals, first of the same insects, and then proceeding upwards along the evolutionary ladder, of all animals. There is no sex and no life if these rituals are not respected; to ignore them means certain death. The processes regulating sexuality are genetically encoded and firmly rooted in the nervous system; they are super-protected and utterly set. In human beings, the processes that we are conscious of include impulses, sensations of attraction and repulsion, desires, emotions, and passions---and all of these within a context of complex social structures. No human society has ever existed without a set of taboos, prohibitions, forms of courtship, marriage rituals, systems of kinship, and so on. The existence of these rules and practices has an effect on the simplest and most casual of sex acts. Sex is never neutral. Sex always has the deepest of implications.

I think that we can all agree that these implications stand to be erased by the exhibitionism and commercialization of the modern world, or by its ideological simplifications and lack of purpose or ideals, if not in the final analysis by the fear and sense of emptiness that so many experience today. We may have this impression, and yet in reality we shouldn't be so anxious and afraid. The cover-up and cancellation of the importance of eroticism will be shown to be purely cosmetic. There are titanic forces at work under the surface, as there have been since the start of time. It will re-emerge that there is something inevitably *violent* about the process of falling in love, which makes the other person seem so indispensable that we are ready to die for her or him. Just as there something violent about the immense love we feel for our children, or for that matter, about the pain and sense of laceration generated inside those going through a separation or divorce (not to mention the violence in the fierce conflicts and clashes that often arise). In addition to the violence of love, there are also the envy or resentment that may arise from sex. As for jealousy, it is not

supposed to exist, seeing that sex is abundantly available to all and that we are rational beings, and yet it explodes in murderous fashion every day.

There is something so profound and terrible about the power of sex that every human society is forced to keep it separate from all other spheres of existence. Sexuality is capricious, irreverent, and seemingly (and authentically) a game, yet it provokes reactions that range from all to nothing, from life to death. A simple glance is enough to unleash unrestrained desire, love, hate, or a thirst for revenge. All of classical European antiquity has at its heart, does it not?, the Trojan War, which took place on account of a woman. The slightest of things occurs, and suddenly the game turns into tragedy.

CHAPTER TWO

IMPERSONAL SEX

1. Violent sexuality in men

Rape committed by a violent male— bandit, pirate, or soldier—on a woman who has fallen into his hands, is the form of sexuality that has the absolute least to do with love. Back in antiquity, victorious conquerors would first destroy a city and then kill all the males (young and old) and rape the women, usually before killing them as well. This practice by victorious armies of raping women continued on into the Middle Ages and throughout the period of the Mongolian conquests. During the unstoppable sweep of Genghis Khan across Asia and part of Europe, his soldiers systematically killed the males and raped all the women of enemy peoples. Mass-scale rapes were also committed by Christian armies—for example during the Sack of Rome or during the Thirty Years' War, or then again just last century when the Russian Army advanced upon Berlin. Still more recently, during the Balkan War spanning the 1990s, Serbs regularly raped Croatian women in order to force them to have Serbian babies.

To concentrate for a moment on the infamous Sack of Rome in 1527, during which 20,000 mutinous Protestant Imperial troops entered the city, destroyed many artistic treasures, and raped all the nuns and novices, it is commonly thought that, given the fact that these men harboured immense hatred for the Catholic Church, the rape of the nuns was a manifestation of this hate for their religious enemy. They committed rape in order to see these Catholic women scream in terror and cry in despair. Moreover, although these Lutheran troops evidently took pleasure in harming and killing (ramming their swords into flesh and four-and-quartering bodies), the decision not to rape these women with the spear of their axe head (halberd) but rather to penetrate them with an erect penis followed by ejaculation, meant that there was erotic excitement, and so alongside the pleasure of doing harm there was also authentic sexual pleasure taken in the act.

Evidence of this sort demonstrates that there is a strong link between sexuality and violence in males. Very possibly, this link has a phylogenetic basis, since it is a rule of nature that the strongest male drives away or kills his rivals and then mounts their female mates, whether the latter like it or not. In this violent way, he imposes his genetic lineage on all the females, who will bear only *his* offspring; his enemies, thus prevented from breeding, are destined to be genetically eliminated.

It follows that a male who rapes the women, wives, and daughters of his defeated enemy feels pleasure which is simultaneously sexual and aggressive in nature. That the male sex act has undoubtedly a component of aggression and dominance is demonstrated by the fact that among many animal species the dominant male signals his predominance by symbolically mounting the other males as if they were females.

I am inclined to think that the violence of sexual child-abuse is also a consequence of the aggressive sexuality of males. By and large, it is in fact an almost exclusively male phenomenon. It is closely related to rape, if not a substitute form of the same. It especially recalls the rape or deflowering of a young virgin, ingenuous and frightened. The paedophile is attracted to the fragile body of the young boy whom he gets to masturbate him, just as he is aroused by the physical and also mental vulnerability of the young girl whom he penetrates with what is for her an enormous penis. He dominates them; he has them totally in his control, the way an omnipotent king has his young slaves.

This component of dominance and aggression is also present in an attenuated form during the act of making love. As he thrusts in his penis, the man has the impression of penetrating the woman's body with a sword, of piercing her; and he may utter obscenities at her, on the order of "take this, slut, I'm ramming it through you, I'm sticking it up your ass." If these are expressions that many women accept and at times desire, it is because there is a residual phylogenetic component at work in them too, which attracts them to a violent dominator. Pauline Réage in her *Histoire d'O* (*The Story of O*) narrates a series of violent acts performed by men on a woman who is a willing participant in these sadomasochistic games.¹

Hatred and violence in a man find direct expression in sex, whereas a woman's hate can at most be expressed as the refusal to have sex, or in any case as scorn, derision, or blatant indifference should he carry through with the act. Granted, she has the power to frustrate and humiliate him for his lack of virility, and she can always take advantage of the man's aroused desire and vulnerability during penetration if she wants to do him harm. But the female sex act is not in itself violent. A woman accepts, receives, takes in; she doesn't attack or penetrate.

From an evolutionary-genetic standpoint, the two forms of behaviour complement each other. Throngs of victorious males scatter their seed with violence wherever they can. And yet the female has a much more important selective role than might seem at first glance. She submits to being raped by the mob of soldiers only because she is unable to escape, and the genetic patrimony that has been thrust upon her is of no interest to her. Even in defeat she will seek out the best seed, the semen of the enemy leader, he who is the triumphant winner. As soon as she can, she procures

this with the art of seduction. Being put in the chief's harem and being sexually possessed by him is not experienced as rape but as victory. A woman's horror of rape is a direct consequence of her phylogenetic need not to be possessed by a genetically worthless partner but rather to be able to choose for herself a prized male. This is why a woman may accuse of rape a husband who no longer attracts her or fall in love with a kidnapper if he is a famous bandit.

2. Impersonal sexual behaviour

Over and above violent male sexual activity, there is also *non-violent* impersonal sex, the kind one engages in without recognizing one's partner, or without remembering him or her because one immediately passes to someone else. Both heterosexual and homosexual men practice this kind of sex. The heterosexual ones are often so taken by a (drug-enhanced) sexual frenzy that they go from one woman to the next with total indifference, whereas the gay men usually go in constant search of a partner in places known for being prime pick-up spots—like gay bars, saunas, or particular public sites. They recognize each other at a glance and have no need of any preliminaries, courting rituals, or introductory conversations. They copulate without even asking each other his name, and often never see each other again. Sometimes the place where they chose to have sex is so cramped (a toilet stall, sauna, or some secluded corner in public) that they hardly see the other's face at all, but only his body or body part—his penis, his mouth engaged in fellatio, or his buttocks. Afterwards they walk away, each in a different direction and without looking back.

Such behaviour is absent in gay women, who feel, on the contrary, a need for personal contact, both emotional and physical, as well as a need to recognize some special quality in the other—grace, sensitivity, or tenderness—that renders her desirable in a way that supersedes physical lust.

The choice of impersonal sex has nothing to do with a desire to escape from official forms of control or censure. Rather, it stems from an expressed desire to practice sex in a set way. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* Hanif Kureishi writes, “ Like many heterosexuals I was intrigued by the promiscuity of some of my gay male friends, who were capable of having hundreds or even thousands of partners. A gay actor that I knew once told me: ‘Anywhere I go in the world, all it takes is one glance for me to recognize sexual desire. I'm a man without a country—I live on Planet Fuck.’” Then Kureishi adds, “Naturally I envied all that sex without a human face that had the power to hurt you, and thanks to my new physical appearance I now had a large quantity of

ready and willing bodies forever close at hand. Over the course of a single day and night, I had sex with six—or was it seven?—people.”²

Impersonal sex is not, however, a prerogative of males or gays in general. That it also a choice for women is borne out in Catherine Millet’s countless sexual encounters with strange men. “In an out-of-the-way street near the Russian Embassy, I took refuge in a van that belonged to the City of Paris [...] The men entered one at a time. When I sucked one of them off, I was either crouching down or lying curled up on one side, trying to raise my ass in such a way as to make it easier for them to grab.”³ As regards the Bois de Boulogne, “I really should only count the men who I gave a blow job to, with my head stuck under the steering wheel [...], and leave out the number of headless bodies taking turns beyond the car door, who with one hand were furiously pumping at their pricks.”⁴

In impersonal sex, the individual and his or her personal features, psychological and moral qualities, and social position all disappear. Only his or her body is there—or a part of his or her body, be that the buttocks, mouth, penis, vulva, or breasts. Though psychoanalysts might claim that this is a throwback to the fascination with “partial objects” typical of early infancy, there is a fundamental difference between the two experiences. An infant hasn’t yet had to do with the whole object but only the partial object, which he therefore takes as the object in its entirety. In impersonal sex, on the other hand, the whole object (body) is present at the start and the fragment (body part) is obtained by erasing what one knows to exist.

Bear in mind that this mental tendency—the corporal breakdown and subsequent focus on body parts—is part of normal lovemaking as well. The partner practicing it concentrates on the other’s torso, vulva, penis, buttocks, back, etc., depending on the sort of activity he or she is engaged in, and this sight takes up his or her entire visual field. The habit of changing or varying positions, moreover, has to do with the pleasure of seeing the other’s as well as one’s own body or sexual organ, from a particular angle.

In impersonal sex, this focus on body parts dominates in importance over everything else. The social identity of the other disappears, and only this one particular remains to be gawked at; enhanced oftentimes by a certain lighting or setting, it commands total attention. There are, or rather there once were, special sex shops where a customer could have sex with a woman or man hidden behind a curtain that revealed only her or his sexual parts. In such a context, concentration is trained exclusively on the genitals, which naturally appear magnified. The same thing happens in visual pornography, where sex organs fill the entire screen. But the identical experience also occurs during normal sexual intercourse. One begins to feel that one’s sex has become enormous. A woman who

has been penetrated often has the impression that a huge penis, if not the whole of the man's body, has slipped in to fill her as if she were nothing but an enormous vagina. Catherine Millet on the subject of fellatio says, "Taking him in our mouth gives us an even stronger impression of being filled than when he is in our vagina."⁵ A man might feel the same way at times while penetrating a woman. He feels at one with his sex, as if all of him were entering her and so completely filling the female body.

The desire for anonymous sex can also be gratified in ways that have nothing to do with the need to fixate on body parts. What matters is anonymity, in and of itself. We don't know, nor want to know, who the other person is. This is the premise animating masked balls, especially those of the famous *Carnevale* celebrations in Venice, when one can experience the thrill of making love with a stranger who might actually be someone one knows in real life and whose identity is revealed in the heat of intercourse, an experience destined to be conserved as a shared secret. In Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut*, there is the striking scene where the protagonist enters a house where an erotic sect is participating in a most particular orgy; the men, all wearing masks, are having sex with women who without exception are masked as well.

3. Promiscuous sexual behaviour

Equally impersonal as far as sexual intercourse goes is the group sex that takes place during an orgy, where the participants both see and want to see the others. While sometimes they may have got to know each other on an individual basis first, they take great pains to render themselves indistinguishable and interchangeable with anyone else in the group. At the very beginning the participants usually interact in a normal, subdued way; then, with the help of drugs—the most ancient being wine, they begin to loosen up, to undress, to embrace, and to have sex, first as a couple and then with the group. The rule is that anyone can copulate with anyone else, and no refusals are tolerated. If you like, this promiscuity is in essence a form of erotic communism.

We have said that throughout history there have been social periods of widespread promiscuous sex with an accompanying devaluation of exclusive love relationships, and periods where the inverse has been true. An authentic collective explosion of promiscuity occurred, for instance, during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, a time that is especially well-rendered by Gay Talese in his book, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*.⁶ This was the era of "Playboy" magazine, an era that eventually led to a generalized revolt against the Puritanical morality of American society, which in its extreme form meant the exultation of promiscuous group sex and

orgies. Here is a brief excerpt in which Talese describes the erotic hippie commune in Sandstone: “Descending the red-carpeted stairway, visitors entered a large, dimly-lit room where on the big pillows lining the floor in the light of the fireplace they could make out faces in the shadows, entwined bodies, large breasts, clutching fingers, jerking buttocks, glistening backs, and an assortment of shoulders, tits, belly buttons, and manes of long blond hair; also, there were thick black arms holding soft white ones, and a woman’s head kept bobbing up and down over an erect phallus. There were sighs, cries of ecstasy, the suction sounds of copulating bodies, laughter, murmuring, and the music playing on the stereo...”⁷

Then there is Millet’s account of orgies to consider: “Today I am able to count 49 men whose sex penetrated mine for sure and whose name or at least identity I can remember. But there’s no counting the men who remain completely anonymous blurs to me. In the various orgies that I am talking about here, the confused nature of the couplings and acts of sexual intercourse was such that, even though they were people I knew or recognized, I was only able to discern bodies, or in truth body parts, rather than individuals.”⁸

But living a life of promiscuous sex doesn’t always mean going to such impersonal orgiastic extremes. There are, for example, individuals who simply desire to have sex with numerous partners, all of whom they know. In some brothels, moreover, there are customers who ask not for one woman but two or three. And to return for a moment to Catherine Millet, she remembers the daring erotic game she played with two friends in a museum, driven by a desire to defile such sublime and noble surroundings and to live the thrilling risk of getting-away-with-it-versus-getting-caught. “We were,” she writes, “at the Museum of Modern Art of the Ville de Paris, where we took advantage of a door left inexplicably ajar [...] in order to sneak behind a thin wall [...] The space was small and cluttered but we decided on the thing immediately, without giving it another thought. While I made myself into a connecting arch between the two guys, I could see a light beam on the floor because we had left the door the way we had found it [...] They both came, one in my cunt and the other in my mouth [...] When we returned to the light, the museum was still quiet and undisturbed, and we went on with our tour of the exhibition.”⁹

There are certain young people who become highly promiscuous during summer vacation; they stay at the same tourist resort or hotel and make the rounds of discos, oftentimes high on ecstasy or other drugs. This impersonal sex is however, not to be compared with the gay promiscuity or orgies just discussed, because such groups of young people all lead a normal daily existence and their promiscuous phase is limited to a set period, which they commonly regard as a “vacation from real life”, rather than a permanent way of life or an ideological choice.

One final observation. The willingness to make love in front of others signifies the willingness to have sexual intercourse with these others, whereas the desire for isolation and privacy signifies the choice of a single and exclusive partner. Promiscuity is contagious. When two or more couples make love in the same bed or same room, it becomes very likely that at a certain point they will exchange partners. And if this swapping hasn't been discussed or considered as a possibility beforehand, it may cause big problems afterwards. For this reason, the tendency all over the world is for two people to have sex in private, without being seen.

4. Drug use and indifferent sexual promiscuity

From the mid-1960s onwards, there was, along with the sexual revolution, ever-expanding interest in a new type of music and in drugs. For simplicity's sake, we will call this music "rock"; from the first instance, in any case, it was collectively enjoyed and danced to. It was in this dancing that a revolution took place—meaning the couple disappeared. In all the dances of the 19th century and early 20th century (and especially in the waltz and tango), couples had danced with their arms around each other's shoulder or waist, if not in a clinging embrace. The waltz evokes a couple's courtship, while the tango, a couple making love. Both dances require attention to detail, judgment, and alertness. You have no need of any drug; the last thing you want is to feel dazed or in an altered state. Well, in the 1960s people started to give up such a dancing style, and each person began to dance separately on his or her own. One could stay close to another, or move away, or dance completely alone, or else in front of an audience. All dancers became interchangeable, and the group began to prevail over the individual. The process continued over time, first with the student protest and hippie movements, then with mass rock festivals on the order of Woodstock, where the people listening to music, dancing, singing, and making love were all part of a unified collectivity. The object of such an audience's love and identification is not another individual but the group. The participants present all feel like brothers, and their depersonalized fraternizing is further enhanced by the use of drugs, especially marijuana and heroin. Historically speaking, the couple as an entity became weaker, and in some cases disappeared; meanwhile the participants in this big festive free-for-all had sex with whoever they liked, in turn.

During the same era, the use of drugs also had a direct impact on the creation of rock music. Drugs became the means for provoking the excitement and frenzy, as well as the spontaneous and independent movements and gestures typical of rock. Having become one with his guitar, the performing rock star shakes, jives, twists about, and then suddenly rolls on the floor as if

“possessed” by a higher power that is injecting him with energy but also manipulating him at will. Although a similar sort of agitated dance, one rooted in African culture, is found in performances of black gospel music, here it loses all religious significance. Really, it’s not going too far to say that from Elvis Presley onwards, drugs have served to produce extreme states of consciousness as well as extraordinary energy drives, which are then dissipated in rock concerts by both the performers and their audience. In the words of Luigi Caramiello, “If one wanted to compile a list of all the contemporary rock, pop, jazz musicians and the like, who wrote their music under the influence of drugs, or who lived or died with drugs by their side, that list would be about as long as a telephone book.”¹⁰

Hanif Kureishi has written numerous stories about musicians, directors, and writers who are always “high” or “tripping”, and who in a state of altered consciousness continue to pass back and forth from a phase of intense excitement or arousal to one of confusion, recklessness, or total apathy (abulia); as a result, the boundaries between self and others become blurred and malleable, and one becomes sexually promiscuous. In the short story entitled “Love in a Blue Time”, the protagonist Roy, a successful director, goes in search of Jimmy, a brilliant friend of his who unfortunately, unlike Roy, has become caught up in the world of drugs and alcohol abuse. Roy finds him in a room where men and women, in a drugged or drunken state, move about indifferently. “Not that Jimmy was able to get into his bed. He was occupied with a middle-aged woman with a clouded- over look on her face [...] Embracing her, as if rocking her in his arms, there was a boy of about 16 with an astute and frightened air about him [...] Jimmy was lying on the floor like a little boy on a playground, his chest under a bully’s foot. That foot belonged to Marco, their host, a wealthy drug addict with a blood-spotted white scarf around his neck. Another man named Jake was standing there, too [...] Kara and the girl took Roy aside and explained to him that Jimmy was drunk. Kara had found him in the Brompton cemetery with a heroin pusher.” Then Jimmy wakes up: “ ‘They’re animals,’ Jimmy muttered [...] The boy in bed, who was now on top of the woman, looked past her shoulders and said to Jimmy, ‘Screw you, you’re not sleeping here anymore. I’ve got better company.’ ‘That’s my bed!’ Jimmy shouted. ‘And stop fucking her, she’s overdosed!’¹¹

The story continues with Jimmy, who comes to stay with Roy precisely at the moment when the film producer that Roy wants for his film is about to arrive. Even though he’s completely high on drugs, Jimmy invents an ingenious storyline for a film, and the producer enthusiastically offers him an appointment for a contract signing. Too bad that no sooner does the producer leave than Jimmy has already forgotten everything and will never get the contract.

The connection between music and drugs remains a given even today. Above all, drugs are common in discotheques where many people rely on them to achieve a state of depersonalized,

sexual excitement. This “mind-blowing trip” is simply the process of shedding one’s self-consciousness in order to participate in the mounting group excitement that leads in its crescendo to an ecstatic end.

5. Prostitution

Prostitution stems from the fact that while a woman normally engages in sexual intercourse with a man who seems worthy in her eyes, she can, if she wants, have sex with any man, even when she feels no sexual desire. A man, on the other hand, must feel sexual desire in order to have an erection; those erections are, furthermore, limited in number. This means that the two sexes complement each other perfectly. It also provides the key to an understanding of prostitution, which can be said to be based on the following logic: you, man, want to copulate with, and scatter your seed in, all the women that you are attracted to, and they are many. We can satisfy this desire of yours in every and any moment. However, since we are not in reality interested in this sex, you will have to pay us. In return, it becomes possible for every man to have the harem he wants without the constraints of family obligations or social responsibilities.

Although prostitution is associated with impersonal sex and promiscuity, this is not a necessary given. Undoubtedly, the sort of fast sex had with a roadside prostitute in the back of one’s car is impersonal, where the woman doesn’t take off a stitch of clothing and where she remains more or less faceless, glimpsed from behind when not taking the man’s sex into her mouth. More commonly, however, the customer studies and chooses the prostitute he wants on the basis of some personal detail. Many men drive round and round in their car, examining the women on the curb, looking for the one that attracts them most. When they reach the hotel, both the man and the woman undress. They exchange a few words, maybe make a joke, perhaps trade a crude sexual compliment or two. Their two naked bodies embrace; she pretends to be sexually aroused to the point of orgasm, and while he knows it isn’t true, her acting job is good enough to achieve its erotic effect. There are numerous men who have pleasant memories of certain prostitutes whom they found enthralling or with whom they had more than mere sex. There are also customers who seek out the same prostitute time and time again, with whom they start up a mutually affectionate relationship in which the money left by the man assumes the form of a pseudo-gift. In higher socio-economic circles, where there is more money and more time to be had, the relationship between the customer

and the prostitute (or call girl) becomes more complex and intimate. The customer merits top treatment because you never know if he'll decide to return and give you (because he really likes you) a gift worth ten times the amount you have asked for this time. And at a still higher social level, he might invite you to spend the weekend on his yacht or in his villa with him.

The customers cruising by in their cars and gawking at the streetwalkers, don't know or interact with each other. Each is shut inside his car and chooses on his own a sole woman, with whom he goes off to have sex. The same thing happens when one phones a madam for an appointment with one of her girls or makes a call-girl booking for a hot weekend. By norm these sexual relationships remain specifically individual ones between a given man and a given woman.

By contrast, there is unbridled promiscuity of a brothel or whorehouse. A man comes here to sit and have a drink in midst of half-naked women, who parade by the tables and every so often sit down among their male customers and fondle one and then another in turn. While each of these men is sexually excited by the prospect of possessing the woman sitting next to him, he is even more aroused by the woman who is flirting with his neighbour while flashing him an inviting smile. If his neighbour goes off with that woman, he is left with two alternatives: either he can go off with a second woman immediately, or he can wait for the woman to finish and then symbolically annul his neighbour's possession by filling her with his sperm.

There are two opposing laws of human nature at work in eroticism. The first dictates that the victorious male is he who first manages to carry off the woman he desires and mate with her. If he doesn't succeed in doing that, and another takes the woman from him, he will feel defeated and jealous. The second law says that the winner is he who in the end carries off the prized trophy. Males are excited by the idea of being able to take the female who has just mated with another male because by substituting him, he is symbolically driving him off. This second law is, in essence, implicitly at work in all acts of prostitution. Each man possesses a woman who has just been with another man, and by doing so banishes him and takes his place.

6. Pornography

Everything we have just said also amply explains the nature of pornography. All human beings, male and female, feel excited and aroused when they see others having sex. Males are especially affected, probably because, phylogenetically speaking, they must stay more active, going in search of a female and, when need be, grabbing this female away from another male with whom she is in the process of mating. The pleasure that comes from the sight of others engaging in sex is

often called “voyeurism” and is viewed as something negative and perverse. Yet, it is in fact a universal tendency common all over the world. After all, for millions of years, males fought each other over who had the right to possess the females, and their excitement reached its height when they witnessed the other’s sex act.

While most people in real life do not have much direct experience with promiscuous sex or orgies, today it is also true that they get an increasing amount of indirect exposure to it because of pornography. Pornography is increasingly widespread and available to everyone and anyone, including children, when one takes into consideration the Internet. While once largely confined to a male public, pornography is now attracting more and more women. In addition, there is the expanding trend of young couples who chose to make love while viewing porno tapes, a tendency which signifies a desire to identify with these others and therefore participate in a promiscuous experience.

Most pornography is scripted to resemble an orgy—with a continually series of copulations between men and women which take place in every conceivable way possible. There may be two men and a woman, or two women and a man, or three men with just one woman whom they simultaneously penetrate in all three available orifices—vagina, anus, and mouth. In this sort of porn film, the viewer sees only the sexual parts—penis, breasts, buttocks, vagina, and anus, all enlarged in close-up, during endless acts of penetration that culminate in gushes of sperm on faces and bodies, and in mouths. If this variety of pornography is so popular and sells so well, it means that there is among all human beings (and especially men) a widespread desire for promiscuous sex that doesn’t require—that, on the contrary, excludes—any sort of personal bond.

There is not just this level-zero sort of porn, however. There are also pornographic films with a bit of a plot and attractive actors and actresses (porn stars) whom a viewer may identify with or intensely desire. This implies a following of fans who re-view films or look for these favorites in other movies. In certain cases a porno star may be considered on par with a normal film diva, the only difference being that her male fan simultaneously regards her as his imaginary lover, in front of whom he masturbates. There exists one other subgenre of pornography, which is that produced by women for women; this type of production tends to be more delicate in focus and with more of a plot.¹²

The diffusion of pornography has had a very important effect on our aesthetic view of female genitals and in general on our aesthetic conception of sexual intercourse. It has brought an end to the era when people talked about their “shameful parts” or about “the brutish ugliness of sex organs and of the sex act.” By featuring gorgeous men and women, who are well-made-up, devoid of body hair, and beautifully photographed, pornography has revealed the beauty of the naked body

and its sexual parts, as well as of the sex act and the physical joining of bodies. By attributing the same aesthetic value to all body parts, it creates a powerful and new form of erotic art. Of course, there are also forms of pornography that focus obsessively on what is monstrous, gross, and violent about sex, or blur the distinctions between the human and the animal, and these require a brief mention here.

Thanks to television and the Internet, pornography and prostitution have become more and more closely connected. There appears to be no end in sight as regards the near future, and already now there are numerous TV programs on at night in which young women in dishabille (if not stark naked) invite men to phone in their requests for paid sexual services and then even give out their addresses. On the Internet, meanwhile, there are thousands of web-sites featuring porno films, where the spectator can opt for the sort of woman he likes (blonde, brunette, red-headed, black, Asian, tall, short, young, old, with natural cleavage or redone breasts, having to do with men with enormous penises, etc.), and in certain cases even schedule a sexual encounter.

Quite a few of these women appearing on television or web-sites go on to conduct normal lives; this involvement with pornography and prostitution constitutes a moment, a singular episode, in their lives. Many of them take pleasure in exhibiting their own beautiful, magnificently groomed, naked body, in the process of making love to equally handsome men or women. It is a game, an erotic experience, participation in a show, and yet at the same time, a job. And since sexual activity in front of a movie camera is considered as a form of entertainment, a girl who lands such a part can then present herself in society as a porno star, or else eventually gravitate as an actress to other film genres. The same is increasingly true for men. Certainly, there are already a number of TV reality shows, featuring individuals of both sexes, that qualify as soft porn.

That pornography has become so widespread is symptomatic of a profound change in the social significance of sex, which is increasingly viewed as a normal daily activity to be regarded as a form of entertainment and a way of making a living. Young children, with their daily access to the Internet, pick right up on this. Whereas up till a few years ago, the young learned about sex from within the context of personal (love or friend) relationships, nowadays this knowledge is acquired through purely impersonal electronic means, privy of all emotion. It is highly probable that due to this fact, the separation between love and sex will increase even in females. A boy and a girl who since the age of ten have been exposed via the Internet to the sight of every conceivable sort of sexual relationship between men and women, between women, and between men, as well as orgies, vaginal, oral and anal intercourse (whether as singular acts or as convulsive multiple penetrations), this boy and this girl cannot but be greatly influenced. Over the course of just a few years they will end up finding as normal all sorts of intercourse and promiscuity. Already among adolescents there

is widespread use of expressions like “sucking up” and “I’ll put that up your ass.” There are more and more cases, furthermore, of pre-teen girls who imitate the pornographic scenes they’ve been exposed to by having sex with four or five boys, either in turn or together, allowing them free access to all their body orifices.¹³

There is yet another effect of this rampant pornography. Seeing that it features so much (and I would go so far as to say, mandatory) anal sex performed by men on women, many women are beginning to undergo an authentic anatomic alternation to the perineal area; by consequence the dilated opening to the anus is becoming larger than the opening to the vagina. Together with the tendency towards promiscuity, which sanctions mixing homosexual and heterosexual relationships, this increase in anal sex matches a rapid rise in bisexuality among the younger generations.¹⁴

7. The origins of promiscuity

We know that all human societies have imposed limits on promiscuity. We likewise know that human beings seek privacy when they want to make love, and that they are possessive and jealous. How can we reconcile all this with the fact that there is a contemporary trend towards promiscuity everywhere?

Perhaps the key to understanding this lies in the phylogenetic makeup of our primate ancestors who competed with each other for a mate. Even though this sort of competition usually results in a monogamous union or in a fixed harem, it always begins with a phase of promiscuity, wherein males compete with each other for the females in heat and then copulate with various females, who in turn mate with various males. On the topic of our arboreal ancestors in general, Helen Fisher writes: “Perhaps those calm and peaceful days were transformed into an orgy when the females went into heat and the males fought each other among the branches for the privilege of mating with them [...] A female chimpanzee [the primate genetically closest to humankind] living in her natural environment while in heat, stealthily approaches the male, thrusts her buttocks under his nose and induces him to mount her and mate. Having finished with this first male, the female goes on to mate with almost all the others in the group.”¹⁵

It is reasonable to suppose that the male feels excitement in the heat of the fight with other males, then pleasure in winning out over them, and pleasure again during the actual mating process. As for the female, she most certainly takes pleasure in offering herself, in watching the males

compete for her, and in choosing the most appropriate male (the one that wins the fight and makes his way to her).

This phylogenetically encoded experience probably explains the tendency in both sexes to participate in orgies and their willingness to take the place of another after he or she has finished having sex with the object of one's desires. We have just talked about how men do precisely that when they wait for the proceeding customer to finish with a prostitute. Not only are they not annoyed at the wait but often they are sexually excited by it; it gives them an imaginary foretaste of what they are about to enjoy in so far as another is now enjoying the same and they are about to take his place.

There is a phylogenetical rationale even behind this male behaviour. If a male injects his sperm into a female's vagina very quickly—almost immediately, say—after another male has done so, his sperm have an almost equal chance at fertilization and of transmitting his genetic patrimony, thus prevailing over the other.

We know nothing about humanoid society nor about that of the Neanderthals, let alone about that of Palaeolithic man.¹⁶ We don't know if males and females lived in separate groups, in a settlement of monogamously-constituted families, or in some sort of polygamous society, just as we don't know if they mated in the presence of others. When it comes to the Neolithic Age, however, we know that firmly set social structures existed, as well as an exogamic family structure and precise marriage rituals. That said, ethnologically-speaking, all societies throughout recorded time have been characterized by fertility cults and festivities which usually take place in spring. During this period, as the work especially by French anthropologists has brought to light, the rules governing daily life, as well as the sexual taboos regulating the structure of the clan or the family, were suspended. During the culminating festivities, men and women were free to have sex with whom they pleased in what can only be termed a mass religious orgy. The children conceived during these orgies were considered legitimate. And seeing that religious sacrifices were always made, Georges Bataille came up with the bizarre theory, which he outlined in *Death and Sensuality: Eroticism* and in *The Tears of Eros*,¹⁷ that eroticism and religion are to be seen as the same thing, and sexuality and sacrificial immolation likewise—in other words, the theory of death in life.

With the rise of Ancient Greece came the all-important cult of Dionysus, as we all know. Most probably, however, the Dionysian rituals, which revolved around the maenads mating with the satyrs, were only the continuation of still older, rural fertility rites. Once they spread to the cities, these rites took the form of sacred feasts during which the followers of Dionysus sang bawdy songs

and got drunk on wine. During the *Phallēphoria*, or the processions in honor of Dionysus led by itinerant actors, there were likewise plenty of dirty songs and skits. Here is an example once again of how when sex is separated off from love, it becomes licentious and promiscuous. In India there are still ceremonies, such as the spring festival *Holi*, where all the participants throw water and colored powders over themselves, then sing erotic songs and joyfully abandon themselves to promiscuous sex. This practice is what remains of the time when religious sects with a predominantly sexual orientation were quite powerful and highly regarded. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous Hindu temples, and in particular those of Kailisanath in Ellora, and of Konarak, including the 86 temples of Khajuraho (the ruins of twenty of which remain today) with their magnificent sculptures of love-making.

All this shows that sexual promiscuity is not extraneous to human nature, nor to sex and love, but rather it constitutes an essential part of us, which remains alive even when we are involved in and committed to a monogamous relationship. Even during the wild festivities of ancient times, where all rules were suspended, sex did not only take the form of orgies. The celebrations left young people free to do as they pleased, and this included rendezvousing with one's beloved, making love, or deciding to get married. In the same setting and under the same rules of institutionalized society co-existed the orgy with its free-reining group sex and the individual choice of exclusive, monogamous love. There was no friction or antagonism between the one and the other. This is because those who are in love are not threatened by the others who are engaging in promiscuous sex, but rather they view it as an equally joyful expression of personal freedom, which they are happy to be surrounded by. The love of two people in love tends to be very tolerant and radiant and want to see everyone happy.

As I said at the beginning, eroticism isn't a unitary system but rather a stratified phenomenon full of complexities and contradictions. Sex and love are co-present and are manifested not only in societies but also in the single individual. There is the sort of promiscuous sexual transgression that has nothing to do with the experience of falling in love and loving, yet it is equally true that people may fall in love after an experimental phase of promiscuous sex. In any case, falling in love always means frenzied sex and transgression. One mustn't be scandalized, therefore, by other people's sexual transgression and promiscuity. Perhaps it isn't going too far to say that the desire for promiscuity finds its fulfilment inside a love relationship in that the couple finds in each other all the lovers they have ever desired.

CHAPTER THREE

MALE VERSUS FEMALE

1. Sex and love in women

We haven't discussed in depth yet the difference between male and female eroticism. Since I covered this subject exhaustively in an earlier book, *Eroticism¹*, which I encourage readers to consult, I'm going to limit myself here to a few fundamental issues. Eroticism as it is experienced by men springs from a focus on visual details (so much so that some men really are incapable of appreciating overall feminine beauty) and on genitals and orgasm. Eroticism for women, on the other hand, is more diffused, more receptive to touch, smell, and the general awareness of one's own body, just as it is more emotionally tinged and discriminating in regards to pleasure, in addition to being directed at the man in his entirety.

These fundamental differences are reflected in the publishing strategies of the two largest publishers of erotic literature in the world today, Olympia Press and Harmony. The former is directed primarily, although not exclusively, at a male readership, and there is a basic plot structure employed in every book. When it's not the story of a man who keeps coming across sex-starved women with whom he has sex in every kinky way imaginable, then it's the story of a woman who meets and gets erotically involved with one sex-starved man after another. There are no feelings, no love, just an ongoing series of sex scenes. The books published by Harmony Press, on the other hand, typically feature a woman in an unhappy marriage or love relationship who, at a certain point, finds an extraordinary, movie-star sort of man whom she never would have expected to be attracted to her. Unfortunately, she has a rival in love who does everything possible to obstruct this relationship. In the end, however, she wins this battle, the fellow falls truly head over heels in love with her, and they have a magnificent time in bed. There may be just a little or a lot of sex in the story, but what there is always in the end coincides with love.

2. Critique of Bataille

In order to really lay bare the differences and similarities of male and female eroticism, it seems best to address for once and for all Bataille's theory of eroticism, which I have made

repeated mention of in the previous two chapters. This theory maintains that eroticism is always and simply a matter of reducing the sublime to the obscene, and the human to the animal-like; the theory also holds that eroticism increases in intensity in proportion to this debasement.

“Men or women,” Bataille writes, “are usually deemed beautiful when they are the furthest from animal-like in appearance.”² In particular, “the erotic value of a woman’s countenance is connected with [...] the absence of that natural heaviness associated with physically exercised limbs and sturdy bone structure; the more there is something ethereal about her body, the more it corresponds to the image of the desirable woman [...] whom the man, however, desires in order to defile. She is [not desired] in and for herself but for the joy certain to be procured by this act of desecration [...] The beauty of a desirable woman forebodes of her shameful parts: those hairy parts, those animal parts...”³ Eroticism is in essence the desecration of that face, that beauty [...] in order to unmask a woman’s secret parts and to insert inside them his virile sex. No one can deny the ugliness of this sex act.”⁴

There are no doubt men in this world who share Massimo Fini’s opinion that “for any man, a woman is an erotic object [...] because through sex he can reduce her to an animal state and deprive her of her identity as a woman, person, and social individual.”⁵ And those same men probably agree with Fini’s description of female genitalia, his judgement being that a woman’s sex “is ugly, foul, sticky, bad-smelling, and covered from front to back with two kinds of discharge. It’s revolting. It doesn’t have any definite shape, it’s just an enlarged hole.”⁶ Still further on in his book, he remarks, “embarrassing a woman is ultimately one of a man’s greatest pleasures.”⁷

I think it’s safe to say, however, that today the men who think this way are exceptions to the rule. After all, the pornography of recent date usually features attractive men and women with equally attractive bodies engaging in kisses and intercourse, and there is nothing repugnant about the shaven female genitals on display, which instead of looking dark or animalesque rather resemble flowers. This is even more true of erotic paintings from the Far East (especially in India), where the depiction of a penis penetrating an equally clean-shaven vagina never suggests violence but always grace and harmony. If one stops to think about it for a moment, this grace and charm is in keeping with the universal human experience of falling in love and finding every inch of our lover’s body adorable and even sublime—not just his or her sex but right down to his or her liver or intestines. We are simply incapable of seeing her or him in any sort of degrading way. Our love for us is nothing short of a divine, superior being.

I believe that these elements suffice to rebutt Bataille’s theory and to demonstrate that it is the product of a male perspective anchored to a specific historical period, when nudity was prohibited and sex considered obscene and sinful, and when a man with an erection felt himself

superior to the “castrated” being that any woman was, and, in conjunction with this, felt a need to defile her beauty.

To conclude this critique of Bataille in the most powerful way possible, however, I'd like to underscore something that we know thanks to works of erotic literature by women. Eroticism for women focuses on positive things like beauty and delicacy, and so is always oriented towards love—even when not embracing true love and passion. This passage from *Emmanuelle* by Emmanuelle Arsan, where the protagonist encounters a man on an airplane, is imbued with such feeling. “The girl saw that he was incredibly handsome. Undoubtedly it was on account of this male beauty that she forgot her own nakedness—or at least felt less embarrassed about it. ‘A Greek statue,’ she thought. ‘A masterpiece like this can’t exist in real life.’ A line of a poem—not Greek—ran through her mind: *god of the ruined temple*. [...] She would have loved to see an abundance of primroses and grasses at this god’s feet, wreaths and garlands around the base, and a light breeze lifting his short woolly hair that curled around his ears and across his forehead. Emmanuelle’s eyes took in the straight profile of his nose, his finely rimmed lips, his marble-like chin. Two strong tendons sculpted his neckline down to the top of his shirt, which was buttoned over a smooth-skinned chest. Her gaze wandered downwards, to the close-up sight of the immense swelling straining under the white flannel of his trousers.”⁸

The Catalan writer Lucia Etxebarria is another who can’t help bringing beauty into play in her erotic descriptions. In her short story, “*A Love Story Like Any Other*,” the protagonist is introduced to a man by a girl friend one evening. And she sees “a incredible male specimen, with a physique that took your breath away and the sort of full lips that promised you a world of pleasure and consolation even if they did nothing more than brush yours [...] I looked (at him), feeling completely overshadowed and stricken to the quick by his beauty...He wasn’t just handsome; he also had the most unsettling eyes—two live coals half-hidden behind his fanning eyelashes. The eyes of the others present appeared strangely immature with respect to his, and I was overwhelmed at the thought of how many things and what sort of forces might have contributed to the creation of such an intensely burning gaze [...] A second later I felt [...] arms encircling my waist and a vertical pressure—unmistakable, immense, immediate, unstoppable—against my buttocks. He gave me barely enough time to turn around and I already had my lips glued onto a mirage, and the secret excitement of my blood—feverish, womanly, preordained—increased to such a point that my heart began beating wildly and out of control....”⁹ There is absolutely no pull of attraction towards the obscene nor any desire for debased nudity in this description.

The following excerpt furthermore illustrates this point; it is taken from a book entitled *Aus den Memoiren einen Sängerin*, which first appeared in 1862 (or 1868). Though published

anonymously, it was clearly written by a woman. The description of the two lovers' genitals is not obscene in any way but rather is reminiscent of the language used in Eastern works of eroticism. "Lowering her eyes, she saw the marvellous tip of his lance, similar to a ruby crowning a royal sceptre [...] the milky juice, gushing like whipping cream from my grotto, filled the mouth of Ferry, who wanted to suck up every last drop. He loomed over me and plunged his burning, gnarly sceptre all the way in, as I gave a sharp cry of pleasure. All the nerves in my body, which had been relaxed up to the second before, contracted tightly and my temple of pleasure felt on fire; his rock-hard arrow felt like sizzling steel to me. Oh, how marvellously he knew how to play the game of love."¹⁰

This is not to say that there is not also violence in erotic works by women. *The Story of O* by Pauline Réage contains scene after scene of violence perpetuated on the female protagonist, who is imprisoned, enchained, raped, and gang-raped by innumerable men, both strangers and acquaintances. The woman is a body for men to use as they please and derive pleasure from; and it is precisely this that gives her pleasure. Even in the case of this book, however, beauty is invoked (over and beyond the apparent brutality). What is more, one catches a glimpse of a sophisticated world characterized by charm and delicacy.

3. Female selectivity

Women are much more selective than men. They are attracted to males who distinguish themselves in some way, who excel in some quality—be that good looks, strength, daring, courage, or else for their elegance, wealth, or power. Have you ever seen a group of preteen girls lining up to catch a glimpse of one of their idols? They crowd together all red in the face, yelling hoarsely, and so worked up that some of them faint and their parents have a hard time restraining them. It is sexuality showing its head for the first time—but it is also love. The girls truly love him, they adore him, they'd do anything for their idol.

Whereas teenaged boys are fascinated by and drawn to porn films, girls are fascinated by and drawn to the emerging celebrities of their adolescent years. In a study which I conducted some years ago¹¹, I demonstrated that even when adolescent girls say that they are deeply in love with their boyfriend, the majority of them would immediately dump him for their favourite idol. This, because he is the one whom in reality they love and desire.

This tendency becomes less marked as years pass, but it never completely disappears. In her book, *A Spy in the House of Love*, Anaïs Nin provides us with a brilliant analysis of the experience of a woman mesmerized by an irresistible celebrity figure. "He looked at her with wide-

open eyes, which now appeared icy blue; utterly impersonal, they seemed to be gazing past her at all women, fused now into one, who at any moment might merge with the others again. Sabina had always noticed this gaze in the Don Juan type of man and was wary of it.”¹² Some time later, however, she finds herself walking alongside him, totally smitten with him. “As a woman she felt fulfilled, for her female vanity and her love of conquest were both gratified. This vainglorious walk gave her a sense of strength and power; she had after all fascinated and conquered such a man. She felt more important in her own estimation, at the same time that she was aware that what she was experiencing was akin to a state of drunkenness, which would wear off the way the way wine wears off.”¹⁵

Throughout their lives women remain more discerning and critical than men. Even when a woman is in love, she remains capable of seeing her man’s defects and continues to feel attracted to her favourite celebrity. For a man, his beloved is literally the most beautiful woman in the world, superior to any other. A woman doesn’t make this sort of error. She conserves her admiration for her male idol, whom she continues to regard as objectively better looking than the man she loves and wouldn’t leave for him. Sometimes she’s as maternal in her attitude as the mother who prefers her son to any other, even if he’s sickly and nothing special to look at.

There exists in every epoch a specific male type especially prized and desired by woman. During the Middle Ages it was the knight, during the 1800s it was the officer in uniform, and in the 1900s it was the movie star, rock singer, or professional soccer player. This is not likewise true for men. Rather, men are sexually attracted to women whose beauty fits the aesthetic ideal of their times. This means women who are tall or short, or plump or thin, in accordance with a specific era and its tastes. Men are also extremely sensitive to a woman’s way of dressing and to her use of make-up, designed to enhance her sex appeal. They really don’t care much if a woman is a famous champion athlete or an obscure starlet. The laws of Nature are such, as we’ve said, that the male will try to scatter his seed in as many places as possible, whereas the female will look to obtain for herself the seed of the strongest, most intelligent, and dominant male. Over the course of thousands of years of human development, this has guaranteed effective male protection for women and their offspring, at the same time that, for the human species, the genes best for survival and dominion were safe-guarded.

This hierarchy of values, power, and wealth has always inclined the human species towards some form of polygyny. “In only 16 percent of catalogued anthropological cultures,” Helen Fisher¹⁴ notes, “is a man allowed to have only one wife at any given time. In all others, he has more than one.” And many rulers, starting with King David in the Bible, had hundreds of wives and concubines. Certain Chinese emperors had sex with other a thousand women and had the same

number of offspring. (There are numerous singers and film stars who have had, I believe, probably an equal number of sexual partners, even if not shut up in a harem.) The kings of Europe, for their part, have always sired dozens or not hundreds of bastards. What woman is capable of resisting the allure of her king? A good source for this subject of the attraction that women feel for the most powerful or best-looking male is, by the way, Richard Conniff's thoroughly enjoyable book, *Natural History of the Rich*¹⁵, which contains a detailed bibliography.

Although women are pre-disposed towards monogamy (even the temporary kind), they have often accepted being part of a harem for the safety and financial security that it provides. In Fisher's experience, "the unmarried girls preferred to become the second wife of a rich man rather than the only wife of a poor one."¹⁶

From these observations we can deduce an important corollary regarding the relationship between sex and love. Whereas there are a number of forms of male sexuality totally divorced from emotions like esteem, admiration, tenderness, or love, in female sexuality there is usually at least one of these components. This is, however, not to say that a woman can't feel pure and simple sexual attraction for a man. It just signifies that it's more likely that she feels this attraction for a man who has some particular quality that she values or else something that makes him stand out with respect to other men. Even if that is only the fact of his being very tall, or of his having a beautiful voice or an immense penis. Consequently, episodes of pure, completely impersonal sex are much rarer among women.

Much rarer but not absent. We are talking about a tendency and not a rule here. How men and women interact as concrete individuals is influenced by history, culture, and their particular experiences. Just as there are men who are happy only if they have at their disposal a harem of at least ten women and the opportunity to make love to a different woman each time, as well as men who remain faithful all their lives to a single woman, there are also women who like having sex with many men. In the case of women like Alma Mahler or Anaïs Nin, some choose exclusively important or eminent men. Others, however, decide to follow in the shoes of a Catherine Millet¹⁹ and take any man who presents himself, conducting a life of indifferent promiscuity and refusing no sexual partner or sexual experience, no matter how abhorrent.

And then, let's not forget, we all tend to change as we go through life. There are a good number of women who are sexually active to an extreme during their younger years, only to then fall in love one day and become completely monogamous.

Here is a bit of Sandy's story: "It was an era when you were supposedly to make it with all your comrades. A guy would come up to you and ask, "How about our getting laid?", and you went

off with him and did it. Why not, after all? Sometimes I liked it and sometimes I liked it less. Then the moment came when I started wanting a gentler, more educated type of man who would talk about love to me. I found a guy like that, who read me his poems. But almost right afterwards I met Sergei. Sergei was a big, violent brute. I loved feeling his heavy body on top of me, I loved his strong arms, his powerful thighs, the way he pounded me, and then when he came, the way he flooded my insides, only to then crash next to me, panting and exhausted. For a while there I alternated between poetry and this awesome fucking. Then I fell in love for real, and God, that was like being hit by a train...”

Agatha, aged 55, says: “I’ve always been a very determined woman, but without any hang-ups. I’ve had a number of boyfriends, and I even had a long affair with a married man with kids, which ended because he couldn’t bring himself to leave his wife. Then I convinced myself that I was in love with another guy, and we went ahead and got married. But that was a mistake because I realized that I didn’t love him. Life together became hell. He was a jealous despot. In the end we split up. One day he got so fricking mad that he walked out, slamming the door behind him and yelling, “That’s it for me. I’ve had it with you!” Right away I got the lock changed and I sent all his things to his mother’s house. I was on my own for many years. Now I’m with a man who is much younger than me, and I admit that I’m terrified that he might leave me some day. I feel much more fragile than I did once. I’m afraid of being alone. He can go off with whoever he wants, fuck whoever he wants, just as long as he doesn’t leave me. I don’t want to sleep by myself anymore. I did it for too long and it was awful.”

4. Impersonal-personal: the famous star and his fan

Outstanding among all the impersonal or quasi-impersonal types of sexual relationships is the sort that men in positions of power or authority, or else in the limelight as a celebrity star, enjoy with any and all women they desire without discriminating between them. It is the classic sort of thing that happens to famous rock singers who are followed by an army of young female groupies, who do everything they can to land themselves in their idol’s bed and have the satisfaction of having, at least for once, made love to their star. Among the cases that I’ve studied there is that of a singer who finds, every time he gets to a different town, an adoring horde of girls waiting for him. Out of the bunch he chooses one, and this lucky girl then follows him around from place to place like a puppy chasing its bone. He doesn’t compliment her in any way but only tells her where follow him next. She tails along willingly, utterly proud to have been chosen and pointed to by all

present as his favourite for that night. One of these girls told me one evening, “I know perfectly well that I’ll be dumped tomorrow, but it’s still worth it.” I think her optimistic attitude stemmed from the expectation that after going round from place to place until the early hours of the morning he would take her back to his hotel room and after a very brief bit of sex (but not always) show her to the door.

In the film *Nashville*, the famous singer actually spends most of his time in bed, listening exclusively to his own music while one by one young girl fans come into his room, undress, and get into bed with him for the few minutes of indifferent sex that he concedes them.

When having sex is as easy as this, a man, once he’s ejaculated, feels absolutely no desire. That naked body next to him bothers him; he wants to be rid of it. There is only one case when a man still may (with even more intensity) desire a woman after having made love with her, and that is when he is in love with her and afraid of losing her. In any case, it will only happen when there is an intense bond. In all other instances, his sex drive functions like such other basic cravings as thirst or hunger; when it is fully satisfied, it disappears, and some time must pass before this appetite starts to stir again.

Almost without exception, a male star forgets all about the hundreds or thousands of women that he’s had; they simply blur together. Nothing could be more different for the young woman who has managed to approach him and get him to have sex with her. The difference lies in the fact that she desires him, she has loved him for some time and the only thing she wants is to be with him as long as possible, be held in his arms as long in possible, and sleep next to him surrounded by his scent and hearing him murmur words of endearment. The quick romp in the hay, and that tiny spurt of sperm that then leaves him feeling indifferent to her, certainly delude her a bit—though naturally she knew what was in store for her. It doesn’t matter if she hasn’t experienced any sexual pleasure herself, let alone an orgasm. Her pleasure comes from the fact of having succeeded in having physical contact with her divinity—with having taken in hand, or into her vagina or mouth, some part of him, the memory of which she will treasure. And this corresponds to the prized male seed that for millions of years her female ancestors went after with lusty eagerness, driven by the evolutionary imperative to produce ever-stronger offspring.

Many people have objected to me that there are also famous female stars and millions of men who desire them. That is certainly true, but the difference is that they long for them at a distance, without ever thinking that they stand a chance of having their desire fulfilled. I carried out research on this subject, which I then published in my book, *The Nuptial Flight*.²⁰ I must have that I found a marked difference between young males and females. I saw how young girls of about fourteen or fifteen will frequently swoon over their idol, even trying to touch or kiss him, intimately

convinced that if only they could be alone with him for a bit, he might be attracted to them and maybe choose them as his love partner or girlfriend. Boys of the same age, on the other hand, can't even faintly imagine a glamorous star taking them into consideration, let alone of a serious sort. This defeatist attitude extends to adult men, the majority of whom, assuming that they succeed in getting any star interested in them, know very well that they can't measure up to her standard of living. Beautiful female stars (but not only stars) are for powerful men and millionaires, not for the penniless.

Perhaps the best extended example of this rule from recent history concerns the erotic favours of the great sex queens, which is to say the famous socialites (a euphemism for prostitutes) of the Belle Époque; sex with them was the prerogative of millionaires, grand dukes, and sovereigns. Millionaires like Vanderbilt and Rockefeller, Grand duke Nicholas of Montenegro, King Leopold of Belgium, Czar Nicholas II, the Kaiser, and the Shah all competed, for instance, for the chance to spend the night with Bella Otero, showering her with jewels that were sometimes worth up to a million dollars.²¹

5. Social promiscuity

There's a vast amount of money, success, and power in circulation in certain political and entertainment circles. And since power and success always translate into economic terms, let's say that the first of the three ultimately dominates. The most beautiful women are inevitably found in these circles. They wind up here for various reasons—to get ahead in a career as an actress or a showgirl, because they are looking for work as a model, or because they are someone's mistress. They are attracted by the money and success they see; they are here looking for men wielding the power that can launch their career or their ascent to fame. Most of them try to get what they're looking for by passing from one bed to another, and if, besides being beautiful, they are also intelligent and able, they may even succeed. Some manage to get one of these men to marry them, or even collect husbands and in this way learn how to become even richer than the men on whom they first depended.

At certain receptions or parties you see groups of young women, all of whom are strikingly pretty and well groomed, and you can't tell if they are the daughters, or the girlfriends of the sons, of the balding men around you. Or if they are their young mistresses, or simply invited guests, or girls who are there thanks to some small-time journalist, bureaucrat, or middleman in the

entertainment field, who they are sleep with in order to have the right introduction to circles where it's possible to find a rich or powerful man willing to take a girl under his wing and launch her.

If you make the rounds of the party circuit, you'll end up encountering these girls all the time, though often with a different man. This means that they are still searching for Mr. Right. Some of them have begun to show signs of anxiety, for time is passing and as they approach the age of thirty they begin to feel frightened that they will end up with nothing. You can tell the ones who have "made it" as actresses, models, mistresses, or well-off wives—they're the ones who look so sure of themselves and seem so proud to be an integral, established member of the social set and with nothing any longer to fear. Some are part of the international fashion jet set that is constantly on the move between New York, London, Paris, and Rome. This world has been described in detail in Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*²², and in the famous TV series of the same name. It is a world where despite the constant presence of sex, the power of money and the desire for success are such that there is no room for love, let alone eroticism.

Some of these social circles resemble—much more than what first meets the eye—life at a royal court, on the order of Versailles, where erotic play coincided with a fierce struggle for power and where aristocratic men and women formed an authentic community, one characterised not only with a lot of partner swapping but also a vast range of kinship ties. Today these "courts" spring up around media magnates, who seem like genuine sovereigns with vassals and vassals' vassals, together with all their respective wives, mistresses, and concubines.

6. Harem

There are forms of male sexual dominance in our society which seldom get mentioned, both because they are less common now with respect to the past and because they are usually kept hidden.

Let's listen to Ivan tell us about one that he personally witnessed. "When I joined the company's management, the first thing I noticed was the president's personal secretary, a buxom woman wearing a very tight, low-cut dress. Then I saw two young secretaries, likewise very pretty, who were wearing min-skirts and snug blouses. Towards the end of the meeting, we were joined by the young woman who had been the mistress of Harty, the previous company president, a young, bright and dynamic manager who had recently moved into a more important position. To make things short, I eventually realized that all those women had been hand-picked by Harty when he was president and that they had been chosen because he was attracted to them and intended to make

them his mistresses. They made up his harem. A bit like Gheddafi's corps of body guards, all beautiful women soldiers whom he takes to bed.

“Then when Harty moved on, he left his harem as an “inheritance” to his successor, who did nothing to change the women's look or function. He's the one going to bed with the vampish personal secretary these days. Every so often, however, Harty comes back to the company for a visit and pays his respects to his “wards.” The one time I was present, I saw that the young women were outwardly formal and respectful with him and yet I could feel the tremendous intimacy that was actually there. I guess they still continued to consider him their ‘herd leader.’ He still had first dibs on them sexually-speaking. Personally I believe a few of them were in love with him—or in any case they worshipped him like a movie star. Thinking back over it all, I don't think it's exactly correct to say that he left his harem in inheritance to his successor; rather, let's say that he granted him the run of it but not exclusive rights.”

7. Ariadne and Medea

Why does Medea, the daughter of the ruler of Colchis, Medea the princess, Medea the sorceress, fall in love with the head of a band of adventurers—pirates who have travelled the seas to steal the most precious and famous treasure of the realm, which is also her family's only patrimony? Mesmerized by this adventurer, she sides with him against her own people, helps him to steal the sacred object (the Golden Fleece), and flees with him, not hesitating to kill her brother, to hack him to bits and toss his remains into the sea to prevent her people from catching up to him. Why didn't she use her magic powers to reveal the enemy come ashore on her island instead of taking the side of Jason, their leader? Was there a specific motive? Was it hatred for her own people or the terrible, fascinating allure of the stranger? Nausicaä, too, falls immediately in love with Ulysses. He is a strong, mysterious man who has arrived by sea, a man who has seen extraordinary things in his travels and lived through amazing adventures, a man who knows the world. Perhaps Jason appears to Medea's eyes in a similar way. He's arrived on a new means, a ship, which has enabled him to cross the mysterious sea and to come to her from fabulous faraway lands and an advanced civilization. A strong man, a messenger bearing knowledge of an unknown and fascinating world. Medea, like Nausicaä, is attracted by something that lies beyond her world, where there is adventure, the future, and destiny awaiting her.

And Ariadne? Ariadne lives in the center of power, Knossos, dominating the Aegean; the Mycenians have to supply sacrificial victims to the Minotaur that lives in the labyrinth. Theseus

does not come from a strange, superior world but from a vassal state. He is not the bearer of advanced knowledge or technology, and he isn't even the strongest of men; without the woman's help, he would perish. So why does Ariadne fall in love with him and help him to kill the Minotaur, whose death brings ruin to her father's house and kingdom? There must be something else that attracts her. But what? Theseus is the head of a band; he's audacious, bold, fearless, and sure of himself. He stands out from the others on account of his personal qualities and mesmerizing charm. Ariadne has had her fill of the debauched court aristocrats and is bored with her courtesans. She is fascinated by this new man who is daring enough to defy the mysteries of the labyrinth and to discard tradition and traditional power relationships. Even later, when Theseus abandons her on Naxos, Ariadne the rebel stays true to her nature; upon the arrival of Dionysus, the son of Zeus and derisory god of revolution, along with a procession of maenads and satyrs, Ariadne doesn't hesitate to join him and marry him.

Agatha Christie underscores in many of her books the fact that young women have the tendency to fall in love with men who are bold and dishonest but brilliant, who know how to take charge of a group, and who are very self-possessed while lying through their teeth. Women, as it were, fall in love not only with famous stars but also with bandits and famous criminals—as happened in Italy in the case of Renato Vallanzasca. In France, the murky reputation of Alain Delon only increased his appeal. And the examples are countless. For it is transgression—or deviance—in itself that attracts women. The irresistible appeal of a Don Juan, of a man whom all women fall for, doesn't just stem from a woman's identification with her fellow women who acknowledge this man as desirable but also from the very fact that she knows he will deceive her. A woman who goes off with a Don Juan has no illusions about keeping him or converting him to monogamy. She knows that he'll leave her for other women and that even if he says he loves her it isn't true. She would expect faithfulness from a husband, boyfriend, or beloved, but not from this playboy. No, she wants him different, she wants him to be an unfaithful deviant. She takes him in the same way as he takes her—she feels as if she's made off with stolen goods.

8. And in the future?

I wonder if this feminine attraction for the successful man, the powerful man, the rich man, the champion, or the celebrity star is destined to last. There are, after all, a number of phenomena that suggest that things may be changing.

The first is the progressive equalization process in act between men and women. For hundreds of thousands of years, a woman needed a man for protection while her children were young. Having found herself in this position of inferiority for all this time, she became accustomed to seeking out a rich and powerful man capable of providing comfortably for her and her offspring. This is no longer the case today. A woman who works, a woman with a career, has absolutely no need of this sort of protection nor of a man's wealth.

There are still other significant changes taking place, however. Many men today have a woman in a position of power and authority over them. This influences their way of acting, rendering them less sure of themselves as they no longer feel dominant. In addition, there's the fact that more and more men are beginning to feel attracted to women with power. For now, this attraction is more sexual than emotional in nature; men, moreover, tend to view this sex as a victory. "Christ," Alex explains proudly, "you can't imagine what satisfaction it gives to be fucking your general director!" In the future, however, there will be greater, manifest emotional dependency. Seeing that all males have had mothers, the development of this sort of feeling is inevitable. At the same time, women who are powerful but no longer young are happy to have more sexual choices now, and to take young and beautiful lovers, the way only men were able to do once.

The flip side of this coin is that women who still have as their unconscious ideal the model of a strong, authoritative man, are finding it harder to find one. There are fewer and fewer commanding leaders who know how to passionately love their woman, gallant bandits who would do anything for love, or fascinating and charming Don Juans who know the magic words to make her burn with desire and feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. For this reason, these women claim that "there are no real men left."

At this point, all we can do is point to the most radical change of all: in a near or distant future (we know not which), sperm banks will be created for the sole purpose of collecting the semen of the fantastically handsome, or of champion athletes, renowned artists, and geniuses. And it will be possible to produce a variety of embryos, giving a prospective mother the chance to choose the one with the characteristics she prefers. It will not be in any way necessary anymore to have concrete physical contact with a man, let alone sex with him. Will this influence, within certain limits, the propensity women have to seek out the superior male? It is extremely likely to be the case, and this could provoke a radical mutation in the relationship between the sexes that extends far beyond the issue of maternity and paternity.

CHAPTER FOUR

PERSONAL SEX

1. The First Encounter

On the basis of what criteria can we term certain relationships “impersonal sex” and others “promiscuous sex”, and still others “personal sex,” by which I mean the sort of sexuality that is directed at another person in his or her entirety and just at his or her body or body part? We must be careful here to bear in mind that even in promiscuous sex those participating may manifest their individuality—this, because promiscuity does not signify the cancellation of individual distinctions. As we know, Catherine Millet¹ undertakes many of her promiscuous adventures in the company of one or two friends. Likewise, Pauline Réage in *The Story of O* is guided through her promiscuous experiences by her lover Paul. In addition, promiscuity also allows for the fact that participants may already be personally acquainted with each other, as is the case for the habitués of group sex. A variation on this scenario can be found in the many Indian miniatures which show the master of the house having intercourse with his wife or favourite while surrounded by numerous naked concubines. Still another variation, more familiar to us, is the swapping of partners between couples, in which each watches his or her partner making love with the other.

What sets personal sex off from the other varieties is not familiarity or acquaintanceship, therefore, but rather the separation from—meaning the exclusion of—all others. The possibility of trading or exchanging partners, like the principle of interchangeability, is excluded. Let’s take as an example a scenario with a maximum degree of promiscuity—that of an orgy between total strangers, where a given body can be substituted by some other body at any moment. Let’s say, however, that at a certain point I catch glimpse of a person to whom I feel so drawn that I want only her or him. A mere gesture may set this reaction off, or a facial expression, or in general something about how this casual partner is acting with me. The result is that I desire this person because there’s something different about her, something I want to have. For this reason I stay right by her side and make sure nobody else comes near her or takes her from me. This is a way of signalling to others that “this person is mine.” This action of mine places her beyond the reach of the law of “all for all” and breaks free of the system of erotic communism inside which we found ourselves up to a moment before. My behaviour is an invitation to her to participate in a privileged relationship with me. Now it’s up to her; everything depends on her answer. If her response matches mine, if her eyes

say “I prefer you too, I want you,” then a fundamental change is underway, especially if this gaze of hers is followed by consonant action or behaviour. Everything seems to be the same as a minute ago when in reality everything has altered. That our relationship has become exclusive constitutes the essential difference.

Seeing that a personal sexual relationship is possible only after this separation from the group and this blending of two individual wills, identities, and make-ups, it is by nature something that you must work for, that you must achieve with effort. It’s not something that just anyone can have on instant demand, for it goes against the rules of indifference and what we’ve termed erotic communism. A personal sexual relationship always unites not only two bodies but also two souls, even if sometimes it is only for a short period, and separates them off from the rest of the world.

Here is an excerpt from Robert’s interview, where he testifies to the suddenness and intensity of such a personal sexual relationship, as he experienced it one day. “I think back to that time long ago in a distant village. I was at a party where everyone seemed to know each other. They were all dancing and drinking and every so often someone would disappear off somewhere. There was this girl standing by herself, who had the most incredible long wavy—no, I mean, curly—hair, and she kept looking at me. She wasn’t pretty, but anyway she was different-looking and intense. My eyes kept coming back to her.. At a certain point they started showing a film, and we ended up sitting next to each other in the dark. I don’t remember exactly how it was that my hand touched hers, but anyway, she didn’t pull it away. Then I squeezed her hand, and she squeezed mine back. We started touching and fondling each other, both of us getting madly excited and aroused. Then we ran off to her room on the other side of the house, and furiously made love. And she wasn’t even pretty. In fact she herself told me, ‘Look, I’m not pretty.’

“I saw her again some time later but I didn’t feel any desire for her. Still, I had this incredible, intense memory of that unforgettable moment in the dark when we started passionately groping for each other. And this memory is at the same time one of affection and gratitude. It all was sparked by the fact of being far from home, by that long hair of hers, by the dark and our running off from the others. That snatch of love, the secret and adventure of it, I don’t know. But I am glad that I followed my impulses. If I hadn’t found the courage to take her hand, and to feel her response, I would have been left with a crippling sense of nostalgia, wondering about what might have been. And that hair of hers, which I know now was no sign of beauty, would have seemed to my eyes and mind to have been the epitome of arcane beauty and indescribable pleasure which I foolishly, out of laziness, fear, or oversight, let slip past me—something precious that I lost out on.

“This experience,” Robert adds, “made me realize that all of us, men and women both, are ready at certain moments of our life, if given the right circumstances, to throw ourselves into each

other's arms and make love as perfect strangers. Maybe this is a sort of instinct, or something atavistic, which we've learned to control usually thanks to the rules of society and our own personal upbringing. But in any case, it's always potentially there. Any great womanizer or Don Juan knows how to take advantage of this force."

Neither one of them knew anything about the other, Robert says. Does that make what he experienced into an impersonal encounter? No, it doesn't. After all, the two "recognized each other" from a distance: they had communicated with their eyes, remember? Also, via more or less unconscious means, they found themselves sitting side by side. For Robert, that woman was not just a body. Rather, she stood out from the group and seemed unmistakably unique, mysterious and alluring, with something both physical and spiritual to reveal to him. A magic spell was cast, however brief and fleeting.

2. Concentration

In Ruth's interview, she says that she has no doubt about the fact that personal sex provides more erotic pleasure than promiscuous sex. "I love your strong shoulders, your hands, your back, your smooth loins, your way of walking," she rhapsodies. "I love your smell and your voice. I like dancing in your arms, I like your teeth, I adore your lips. I love feeling your body bearing down on mine. I like it when you get out of bed naked and you look like a giant to me. With you I have experienced true sexual ecstasy. How stupid people are to think that the most incredible sex is to be had in an orgy, going from one body to the next. Not true—a thousand times no. An orgy is a thrill, a state of drunkenness, in the end it wears off and you're left with nothing. Do you really taste that wine you're drinking when you're drunk? Of course not—you don't taste a thing. To appreciate wine you have to be alert, vigilant, awake, concentrated. You reach the pinnacle of pleasure with one person only. You and I can testify to that."

In Hasan's interview, he offers even more insights into the gratifying nature of personal sex. "Many men and women," he says, "are sexually aroused by promiscuous fantasies, but the greatest, deepest sort of sexual pleasure comes with only one partner—and this often only after the two of them have become fairly intimate. I myself get excited by porno films that show two women making love first with each other and then with a man, or else two men taking turns inside the vagina and the mouth of the same woman. But in reality it's different. It's happened to me on occasion to make love to two women at the same time. Each time at the start I always went back and forth from one woman to the other, but then I lost interest and began concentrating on just one of them. I forgot about the other woman entirely at that point; if she had left the room I wouldn't

have noticed it. The body of the woman who I am making love with is for me the most marvellous thing, and I never get tired of gazing at her in motion. It enchants me to observe all the little things about her, the expressions that cross her face, her eyes, or her mouth. Making love is like going on a trip somewhere, making a discovery, experiencing a revelation. And it's like music invented by the two of us, turning on the harmony between our bodies and souls. All this takes an incredible amount of concentration. You can't concentrate with two or three women—their presence bothers and distracts you. Your relationship with them becomes empty and superficial. You only experience that supremely intense and profound kind of pleasure when the woman you're making love with represents the entire world to you. When you love her, when you adore her, even if it's just for that space of time. And this means that even the most indifferent prostitute at the start can change into a genuine lover.

“Another idea that's common is that only men who make love to a number of women at once are able to come a number of times. But that's false—it's a big mistake to think that. Actually the opposite is true. Sexual potency is enhanced by concentration. When you're totally focused, totally absorbed by the woman that you're making love with, it's like you become both your own dick rubbing against the walls of her vagina and at the same time you're the man observing and admiring her. Personally, after I have an orgasm, I prefer to stay inside her vagina and just take it easy until my penis gets hard again and I come again, and then again.”

At this point I ask Hasan a question. According to the tenets of Taoism, if a man wants to prolong sexual intercourse he needs to retain his semen and not ejaculate at all. “You don't have to do that,” Hasan replies. “All you need is to concentrate, and gradually your penis will get hard again. The important thing is to stay there next to your woman and feel joy and wonder at having such a beautiful thing happen to you. After a bit, maybe after she's kissed or fondled it, you'll probably feel like penetrating her again. Your penis doesn't have to be as hard as a brick. You can enter her with it just half-soft, and it will naturally get big, the way it would inside her mouth. It's really nice for a woman to feel a man's penis swelling inside her, getting hard and potent. When a man experiences his woman in this way, when he adores her body in this way, when he's totally concentrated on her in this way, he mustn't hold anything back. And she'll have her multiple orgasms too, or the type of pleasure she prefers. It's the selfish sort of prolonged erection, or priapism, which makes a man half-impotent and leaves a woman feeling empty and incomplete.”

3. Personal sexual awareness

It's hard to get people to talk about their own sexual experiences. Girlfriends do so among themselves, of course, and we all do on certain visits to the doctor or to our psychoanalyst. We are likewise ready to broach the subject with a person we would like to have sex with as well as with the person we are currently going to bed with. In short, we are open to talking about our sexual experiences with those individuals in front of whom we undress and show ourselves naked without embarrassment. When it comes to sex, there is a profound connection (and sort of reciprocal identification) between the display of one's body and the display of one's soul. When we engage in conversation with another person, we use the neutralized language of everyday life which excludes—which bars the advancement of—eroticism. In order to recount our sexual experiences, however, we must necessarily enter the erotic realm. This entrance is as sudden as the yanking open of a door.

Viewed externally, say, by some imaginary observer unfamiliar with the workings of the human psyche or the ins and outs of human behaviour, the process that leads from everyday social behaviour to that precipitating towards sexual intercourse would appear utterly stupefying. One minute you have two people who are addressing each other politely and keeping a socially sanctioned distance between them, and the next minute there is a lightning-fast exchange of information and a change begins to take place. A certain interest—perhaps simple curiosity—is awakened in them, the two move closer together, and some brief, casual touch occurs. This may lead nowhere; they might just pull away from each other. The separation won't last long, however—only until they become conscious of their desire. Then each will lean towards the other, sending out signals of excitement and appeal. In our culture, it's usually the woman who at this point waits for the man to take the initiative. It's a way of putting him to the test, as it were, seeing if he can bring it off with a minimum of ability and courage. He has to get round the final barrier by giving her a clear and unequivocal signal. It's enough for him to touch her finger in the dark and for her not to draw it away. Or else—as millions of comic films have shown us—for him to play footsies with her under the table and for her to be willing to keep up the game.

As of that moment everything precipitates at once. There are no more obstacles; it's as rapid as a landslide or a cascade. Instantly, all the conventions that they were bound to until just a few minutes before dissolve into thin air. Sometimes, without even uttering a word, the two may throw themselves into each other's arms. They kiss. He gently touches her breasts. Or perhaps they forgo that ritual all together and begin frantically to pull off all their clothes. They totally forget about aesthetics and good form. He's there struggling with his feet caught in the ends of his trousers and falls on top of her as she's trying to take off her nylons. If they were to see themselves on film, they

would find themselves ridiculous. But their sexual desire erases all other emotions. They fling bits of clothing here and there around the house, all the while penetrating each other in all possible ways, contorting their bodies, panting, muttering obscenities, sucking and mixing their secretions, and in general doing everything that is not only prohibited but also considered offensive in their public everyday life.

At the same time that these physical barriers are falling, moreover, all their mental barriers are likewise disappearing. Two people who would never have recounted anything before this minute to the other about their own sex life, who would if anything have considered it terribly indiscreet to ask the other about how his wife or her husband is in bed, are now ready to tell each other everything. And everything means revealing their intimate sexual preferences, their pleasures and sorrows, their delusions and bitterness, and even what they experienced with their previous lovers and why they'd been disappointed in the end. Just as they have bared their bodies, now they are ready to bare their souls; just as each has offered the other his or her sex, now each shares his or her sexual experiences.

If we stop and think about it for a moment this is the direct opposite of impersonal anonymity. In impersonal sex there are no words, there's only the body. There's no one to undress or who undresses in impersonal sex because it's as if everyone were already undressed and in their nudity completely anonymous. In personal sex, on the other hand, we take off our clothes for each other, displaying our bodies and offering our hidden attributes and features, ready to communicate all. We show our bodies and do our talking to, yes, another body, but also to a person with a concrete social standing and unique identity. Each of us is himself, different from any other. My body and her body have a name, a life, a past, a uniquely personal set of knowledge, and with our nakedness we are willing to reveal ourselves and say things to each other that perhaps we will never show or say again to anyone else. And when, after merging our bodies and spirits, we get dressed again, each of us has become the possessor of the other's initiation secret.

4. Sudden loss of control

It may happen that a sexual encounter occurs in such a violent and sudden manner that it externally appears to be an explosive case of love at first sight, when in reality what is going on is sex in its purest form.

Let's listen to the account that Evelyn gave to a girlfriend. "You know how much I love my husband and how well we get on together. You know that I'm not the unfaithful type. But that's

what happened to me on a boat. It's strange being on a boat, you get very physically close to people, all of you shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow, body to body. It creates a kind of promiscuous atmosphere. We were on the prow, where there was a huge mat for sunbathing that could fit up to four people. I was on the left, Max in the middle, and Flora on the right. Flora asked him to apply some suntan lotion to her back. She had taken off her bikini top but was lying face downwards. Max started to rub some lotion on her back, then on her buttocks and down along her legs. After that, his hand inched upwards again, stopping in between her thighs. I suddenly felt incredibly envious and jealous of Flora, and propping myself up on my side, I asked him to please put some sun lotion on me as well. I was bra-less like Flora, and I realized that he was staring at my breasts. As he said, "Now let's give a hand to poor Evelyn," he continued to gaze in my eyes. He turned completely around to me and started applying the lotion. Instinctively, I opened my legs a bit so that when he got to my buttocks he would be able to slip his hand between my thighs. In fact his hand stopped there for the longest time, during which he was silent. Then his hand went down over my legs and came back up. This time I tightened my buttocks till they became hard as rocks. He began to caress them as he applied the lotion and relaxed them again, opening my legs. I was creaming at this point, my cunt was completely wet. There was a strange sort of understanding between us, a process of communication. After a bit, everyone went ashore to do some shopping except for the two of us because we were supposed to cook lunch. He grabbed me immediately, hugging and kissing me and thrusting a hand down my bathing suit. We went below deck, closed the door, and frantically started making love. Maybe it was out of fear, the worry that the others might discover us there, in any case it was as if we were head over heels in love and finally now able to unleash a passion that had been building up inside us for years. Afterwards, we went back on deck, hand in hand and trembling, gazing in each other's eyes. When the others came back, however, we reverted to our normal selves, well-behaved as schoolchildren. Just think, we have never made love again after that day. And when he left with his friends we said goodbye in the most conventional way, except for that brief instant during his departure when he turned around and looked at me intensely."

It's evident in a case like this that the sight of the man erotically caressing her girlfriend—this process of mimesis—was what triggered Evelyn's desire. And the violence and frenzy, moreover, derived from the fear of being discovered. Yet even allowing for all that, this is clearly a personal relationship, one between a woman named Evelyn and a man named Max. All others are excluded; the act of locking the door expelled them, kept them at bay. Only the two of them existed in the love act; at the same time that they merged together they were keenly aware of the other's identity. More than once, for instance, Evelyn describes how they continued to gaze into each other's eyes.

There is another correlation that can be made about this sort of immediate, uninhibited sexual encounter: it is most easy and likely to take place at the start of a relationship, and sometimes shortly after the two people lay eyes on each other. The emotional process is that of a yielding to a wave of spontaneous desire, unthinkingly, without erecting the usual barriers and without any sense of sex as an infraction of the rules, but rather treating it as natural as a kiss. Thomas puts it this way: “If you act immediately, and by that I mean as soon as you realize that she’s interested in you and feels attracted, she’ll be more likely to let herself go. It’s as if she hasn’t had enough time to man her defences. It happened to me once with a gorgeous woman who had been going out with another guy I knew, only then to break up with him. While we were dancing, I said to her, ‘I want to make love to you right here, on the floor.’ She was quite affected by that; she looked vibrant. I led her by the hand into the next room and we kissed. Then immediately we made love on a broken down couch leaning against one wall. If I hadn’t uttered those words in her ear, if we had just casually taken our leave of each other, probably nothing would have ever happened—even if we’d run into each other again.”

Violet offers us yet another female perspective: “I don’t what came over me that day. He had just finished saying something; I remember feeling extremely attracted to him but also very shy and embarrassed. Despite all that, he’d kept gazing into my eyes. I know that I have beautiful eyes, and I’d realized that he was interested in me and found me attractive. When everyone else left—it was around sunset—we two stayed on. Without saying a word he put his arms around me and kissed me, and as I kissed him back, I felt all dizzy. Then I let myself slide to my knees. Unhesitatingly, he undid his fly and I took him in my mouth as if it were the most logical and natural thing in the world. The idea of not doing so never crossed my mind. I’m still amazed at myself today. It didn’t happen—it hasn’t happened—to me again after that. It was like the simple continuation of our embrace, of that kiss.”

5. Experimenting

“There was a period in my life when I had sex with a lot of men,” Laureen says. “This happens to many women at certain times in their life. But seeing that you’re a man, I want to make one thing really clear. Don’t think that it’s ever an easy or light thing for a woman to change lovers or pass to yet another man’s bed. Actually—and I’m telling you a secret that most women keep to themselves—it is often incredibly hard. Except for those exceptions, like when you’ve on a vacation or encounter in a distant place a man who charms you off your feet, it is an arduous and sometimes

even dramatic process. Because—and I'm speaking for myself here, but I can assure you that it's true for a lot of other women who don't go around talking about it, that when you go out with a new man, in your heart of hearts you're always looking for intense, stable, true love. Even if in your mind you've given up on ever finding it, your body still is searching and yearning for it, and this means that you're going to get a lot of intense, mind-blowing pleasure out of this relationship only if, at least in that moment, you feel love for him. What follows afterwards can be completely different, full of mistakes even. Maybe you are even the one at fault, you are the one who didn't find the right words or make the right gestures. But above and beyond that, there's the fact that another person is always a mystery, a stranger, and he remains so even when he's avidly kissing your body and you, his.

“Maybe it's a mistake to go to bed with a guy straight off. But that's the way it is today. Everything begins with your going to bed, and even after this sexual encounter, it's not finished, not for me—and not just for me. Maybe that's the way it is for a young male stud. But for me, for us, then there are all the disappointments and disillusionment because you find yourself with an erratic, banal, boring, stupid, or vulgar person, with no understanding of intimacy and incapable of dialogue. Some guy who talks to you about cars or soccer or money, or maybe instead it's a guy whom you're really crazy about but who keeps telling you that he needs his freedom. In other words, you are stuck in a relationship where it takes a lot of strength sometimes not to resign yourself to fate, or feel overwhelmed by sadness or the idea that there is no man out there who is right for you. And how many times—and they were many times, believe me, have I gone to bed with a man—the way many women go to bed with a man—simply out of a secret hope that it will open a doorthe door that leads to an immense, enduring love.”

6. Charm

A body in itself transmits no charm. Charm is conveyed by a person in his entirety. You can't find this charm in impersonal promiscuous sex. If you step out of that world, you will see it. It's there in that face which all of a sudden strikes you as beautiful, noble, intriguing. This charming face stands out from the others. From such appealing facial features you sense gentleness and daring. You can intuit a life, a past—or better, the mysteries of a past, for that other person is sure to have loved and to have aroused love in others. You come to the realization that someone was probably once desperately in love with this person, and for an instant, while this person is casting a spell of enchantment over you, you experience a shade of this same passion.

In Martin Scorsese's film, *The Age of Innocence*, Countess Olenska, played by the actress Michelle Pfeiffer, penetrates thanks to her alluring, European secret past love affairs (in an even more striking manner than the same character in the original novel by Edith Wharton³) into banal, snobbish New York high society. The mystery of her past is there in her disarming smile, in the proud, sad gentleness of her features, in her self-confidence in dealing with the others' hostility, and her anti-conformist attitude which hints of radically different customs and forbidden relationships. There's a glow of fascination and charm in any past and any world that are unknown to us, just as there is always allure in a transgression of everyday routine and order. Since every human being is absolutely unique and unknowable, he or she always represents diversity and mystery to others. His or her power of charm and seduction stems from the revelation of the existence of this mystery. Everyone, therefore, is fascinating and can be seen as bearing charm.

And when this happens, the person we are talking to or gazing at all of a sudden stops seeming a banality, a mere part of the social landscape, and becomes specific and particular to us. A door seems to stand cracked open, affording us a glimpse of a past and a separate existence, which attracts us and stirs our curiosity. Our falling prey to someone's charm consists in this pull of attraction, this wanting to know more, this trying to understand and imagine, and this feeling excluded. Seeing that we can never really embrace this other person's past or experiences, our initial impression is that something about him or her eludes us, or that we can almost grasp it but then we lose it.

The other person in a couple is always—and here Girard is right—someone who belongs to another individual or group. Whoever you begin to love always belongs to others, and you must enter their world. You are always “the stranger” that each one of those others, and above all the person you are interested in, can decide to chase away. You are always the thief bent on making off with valuables that don't belong to you. Like Jason with Medea's family, or like Theseus when he enters the palace in Knossos to seduce Ariadne. The myth tells about his victory, not about all the awful mystery, fear, and mortal danger. But the attraction lies also in those aspects. Medea's allure stems from her barbaric, magical world, just as Ariadne's appeal has much to do with the monster lurking in the labyrinth.

Do a woman's or a man's looks and gestures alone constitute this seductive charm? Absolutely not. Other factors count too, such as one's posture or way of dressing. Over and above that, charm is also a question of dignity. This is the reason why women who want to look attractive and alluring dress elegantly, and when the occasion calls for it, even in refined evening dress. Naturally a man needs a bit of information, however vague, in order to make sense of this charm. Someone present on the spot, part of that social circuit or club or party, fills you in. Just a couple of

words of introduction, or maybe just a comment, and suddenly you know that she's the wife of some businessman, or an actress, or even just a beautiful woman passing through—about whom you can privately imagine all sorts of things.

And when it's a man? What renders a man attractive and appealing? Of course, we have already discussed at length the fundamental things that make women sit up and notice a man—success, wealth, and power—yet while these attributes all have to do with a man's life, past and reputation, they are not evident at first sight. This is because there is another sort of masculine appeal that has nothing to do with power in society or power over others in general but rather with the seductive power that a man can exert specifically over women. Think of the great womanizers, the Casanovas and the Don Juans that no woman can resist. Their seductive power lies in their appearance, their gaze, that way of addressing women with firmness and yet gentleness, their seemingly peremptory gestures that feel like caresses, and their voice which, no matter what they are saying, is always sexually beckoning. “He looks at you,” writes Anaïs Nin, “as if he were looking through you at all the women in the entire world. And you sense in his gaze that all those other women desire him and are ready to give themselves to him.”

If he begins to whisper about love or sex—which only he can do, only he is allowed to say anything he wants—their residual resistance wanes. His words are hypnotic and irresistible. Any woman is bound to become languid, aroused, and wet. His voice melts even the most frigid, puritanical, and demanding of women, who, even though they are not interested in sex with him, still find him nice, intelligent, polite, and fun; they like laughing and talking with him. And all these women, without exception, wholeheartedly forgive and excuse him for everything, even for what would be completely unpardonable if committed by their husbands or boyfriends.

7. Fascination with luxury

We've already talked both about how a woman's looks count much more for a man than the fact that she is the Finance Minister or the president of General Motors, and how at the same time clothes and makeup are also important enhancements of feminine appeal. While it's true that men inevitably prefer the beautiful maid to her ugly mistress, when they have to choose between two comparably attractive women, one of whom is dressed in sloppy or shabby clothes and is wearing no makeup, they will only have eyes for the other—the one beautifully dressed, well made-up, and with a sexy sway to her walk. The contrast between a woman who neglects her appearance and the same woman in “ceremonial dress” is so great that a man has the impression of having to do with

two different human beings. When in the famous film *Sabrina*, the girl (Audrey Hepburn) returns to Paris elegantly dressed, the two men first don't recognize her and then fall in love with her. Women themselves convey a message via their clothing. When, for instance, a woman wants to communicate to a man that she doesn't find him sexually appealing, she will expect him—or go to see him—dressed in baggy clothes, with messy hair, and wearing no makeup. On the other hand, when she arrives elegantly dressed and groomed, looking as if she's just come from the hairdresser's, it means that she is interested in, or even in love with, him.

In every society and in every historical era, women have always taken an interest in not only clothing and makeup but also in decorating their home, especially as regards the living room and bedroom. This task becomes all the easier the more wealth and free time she has, or when there are people with good taste on hand to advise her. The fact of being wealthy becomes an erotic component here, in that money allows a woman to make herself attractive in an attractive setting. It's not her wealth per se that attracts a man—which is the opposite of what happens in the case of women, who will find a millionaire attractive even if he's dressed in jeans and a torn T-shirt, but rather the aesthetic-erotic manifestations this money permits. Naturally, there are times when a woman may be enchanted by the sight of a soldier who instead of his usual civilian garb appears in front of her in official military dress. But you can rest assured that she is much more attracted to the man in a T-shirt who invites her to come have a drink with him on his luxurious yacht.

If a woman is drawn to a singer, soccer player, actor, writer, politician, musician, or famous adventurer, it is also because when she's around these men she catches a glimpse of an extraordinary and glorious existence. Certainly, she may simply be bowled over by how handsome he is. If this handsome god is poor, however, she'll consider him at most as a lover, for a fling. Unless she herself is rich, that is. In *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto, Angelina, the most beautiful woman in all the world, spurns all her famous and valiant suitors, including the top-ranking Orlando, and marries a simple soldier named Medoro, solely on account of his being as gorgeous as a god. That said, Angelica is the daughter of the Emperor of China and hence can do as she pleases.

A rich woman spends her money on making her body appear as erotic as possible. This means glamorizing and improving on what she has, from her hair to her eyes to her skin. An army of stylists, tailors, shoemakers, hairdressers, beauticians, cosmetic surgeons, make-up artists, and jewellers is there to tackle this task. They know how to transform women into extraordinary, superior creatures who have no need of contact with everyday life; a beautiful woman in an evening gown communicates to us common mortals—this, with her looks and way of moving and sitting and looking—that she no longer has anything to do with the world of work, troubles, and worries

which is ours. Rather, she belongs to a different world, where her life is full of pleasure both given and received, the sort of pleasure that is beyond us to imagine. At most, it makes us think of the life of Hollywood stars, who go from one luxurious villa to the next and from one great love to the next. We will never experience any of this; we will always be excluded from this realm of existence.

This calculated sex appeal (I'm referring back to the glamorous woman in evening dress) is simultaneously an overt invitation—a come on—to a man and a way of spurning his advances. That evening gown both covers and reveals the woman's body in an erotically provocative way. It encourages a man's impulse to tear her clothes off at the same time as it creates a distance, a formal denial of permission. A woman dressed in this way is showing how infinitely desirable and available she is—but not for just any man, only for the happy few, for the elect. This is why she unsettles and excites most men. She lets you, the average guy, get a peek at the privileged life that she and her similars enjoy and from which you are excluded, while at the same time she leads you to suspect that this is not a definitive exclusion. Perhaps even *you* could

8. Putting the brakes on

We've said that eroticism belongs to a separate realm of existence. All it takes is your opening the door and entering. Every day we have to do with numerous men and women whom we look at normally, without erotic intent. We remain firmly in the existential sphere of work and competitiveness, and we do not open the door of that room where all objects become erotic and a target of sexual desire. This distinction remains foremost in place in the minds of doctors. A gynaecologist examining a patient is all business.

The door may also remain shut in situations normally considered as erotic or potentially erotic. Take for example a private encounter, a dinner for two, a chance meeting during a trip or in a hotel. And the people who close the door on Eros, or keep it closed, may be the type who normally get easily aroused. There are times, after all, when after that initial moment when we are taken by a person and find ourselves attracted to her or him, something all of a sudden changes. It may be a word, gesture, or an irritating phrase; perhaps we feel politically or religiously offended. In any case, all sexual desire is gone. The relationship has slipped out of the erotic realm for good.

What chases that sexual desire away is sometimes fear. Here is how Martin remembers things: "I liked her start from the start. She was an incredible woman and had a charming way of doing things that appealed to every man she came across. Whenever I found myself in an office with her, or if we entered a crowded restaurant today, I was conscious of how all eyes were drawn to her. Men changed in her presence. They would gaze at her languidly or provocatively, and try to

say something witty. Around the same time, I began to realize while I was talking to her that she felt strongly attracted to me, that she liked me. As soon as I phoned her, she'd come running over happy to see and talk to me. All I'd had to do was say the word, or give some small sign, and this goddess would have thrown herself in my arms. One day I got myself into such a trembling state of desire and anticipation, waiting for it to be time for us to meet, that I started counting the minutes on the clock. When she got there, she nestled up against my shoulder and we started to talk. She told me about herself, about what she did, about her problems and her desires. I sensed nothing but anxiety, hurry, and need in all this. And I realized that although I really found her great, I no longer wanted to undress her and make love to her. I was just happy about my conquest—that was enough for me, you know what I mean? I didn't know why. But later on I came to understand that she wasn't a woman who you could have sex with once and then say goodbye to. She was a woman who would involve you in her entire life, bond with you and bound you to her, sweep you away, and always have a hundred things to do and to ask. She was attracted to me and was happy to go to bed with me, but it really wasn't sex or love that she was after. She needed to ask for things, for aid and assistance; she had to deal with her problems and wanted me involved in that. She was bound to become a burden on me, I sensed. And I didn't in any way want to be tied down like that."

If Martin was turned off by this request for help in facing problems, Léon, on the other hand, cut short his relationship with a woman because she was too distant and elusive. "A woman that I know has just come in," he says, reconstructing the scene. "She's really beautiful. And she's got rather of a reputation as a femme fatale, a man-eater, with a perchance for depravity and debauchery. There can be no doubt about her having charm and appeal—of the dangerous variety. I am always quite taken with her face and that look of girlish ingenuity. When she smiles her sweet smile, two little dimples appear. She's got to be around 40 but looks 25. I know that she's uninhibited and had her fill of experiences. She's already had three husbands, who have left her a fortune, and countless lovers, even though she has that air about her of being a defenceless little girl. I am perfectly aware that if she decided to seduce me with all her artful charm and acting ability, I'd be likely to fall for it, like the hundreds before me. But she's not going to do that, she's not interested in me right now, she has nothing to gain from it. And since she's not training her attention on me, all those things that I know about her serve as my defensive shield. I don't feel any attraction, zero lust, for her. I admit she's gorgeous but it stops there—her seductive charm can't touch me. Fortunately."

Hélène, too, has felt attraction that was conditioned by fear. And she also put the brakes on her feelings. Then after many years, she happens to see the same man again. They start up a relationship, and she feels regret at not having given in to her feelings the first time they were

together. She even tells him so. “How many years have I foolishly let go by. I was convinced that you didn’t feel anything for me, that you weren’t even aware of my existence. So I kept hanging back, even physically keeping a few meters from you when we happened to meet. I really liked you—God, did I like you. But you were beyond my reach, you were too good for me. You belonged to another world, where I felt out of place and unwanted. I felt so inadequate and totally lacking in courage. And so, little by little, I stopped daydreaming and imagining things about you. I stopped looking for you and then even thinking about you.”

9. Confinement

In Margaret’s words: “I realized that he was as attractive as he was dangerous. He was intense and curious about everything. Travelling with him, or even just walking through the streets with him, was a fantastic adventure. He could see all sorts of things that no one could, and convey his emotions to you. He often seemed like a defenceless little boy, but you could still sense that he was inwardly incredibly strong. On top of that, he made love divinely! Every day I wanted him more and more, I just couldn’t get enough of him. I knew that I was starting to fall in love with him and this made me afraid. I mean, because he was so unknowable and indomitable. But I couldn’t help it—I didn’t want to stop. You can’t say no to life—you’ve got to live it as it comes, all of it, no matter what it costs. I paid for it, it’s true, I paid dearly for it, because—courageous me—I fell in love with him but he didn’t reciprocate. Still, gosh, did we make love a lot! Afterwards I always felt completely exhausted, dazed, drained, and happy. He was happy too. I knew he found me really attractive; he liked my long legs, my pointed tits, the way I swayed my hips when I walked. But he never told me, ‘I love you’...I accepted this, I took him the way he was. We stayed together and got drunk on the pleasures of sex together. Then he left. I’ll always remember it as a fantastic period in my life, full of indescribable joy and also immense sorrow. Still, I’m happy with my choice.” In order to remain with the man she loved, Margaret agreed to confine their relationship to the sexual realm, the way her lover demanded.

Albert is another one who falls in love while at the same time he is afraid of love—afraid of losing control of himself (like many men). He wards off this fear by confining the experience strictly to casual sexual relationships, which he refuses to let develop into something more. “I met her at one of those parties that people in the entertainment business are always throwing. She was young and quite beautiful in the evening dress she had on, one of those designed to be teasingly erotic beyond comparison. I mean, she was dressed and at the same time naked—that is, the dress

made her seem infinitely more naked than she would look with her clothes off. She was there with some insignificant-looking date. She really came on strong to me, flirting incessantly and giving me her phone number, then asking me to escort her around. Then, when I was about to leave, she pleaded with me to phone her and asked me if it was all right for her to phone me. Now it's really really hard to think, when you're facing a woman that young, beautiful, and seductive with those big ingenious eyes of hers, that she is doing all this just because she wants to use you, because she wants to make it in show business, and that what she is attempting here with you, she no doubt attempts with many others. Not only, but if in a few minutes some other man comes up to her from whom she stands to obtain something more, she'll turn on her heels and follow him without looking back. While I was gazing at her spellbound, I thought about all these things and I knew that if I decided to follow her, I could end up desiring her too much, maybe to the point of falling in love and suffering for it. Consequently, I let the minutes pass without doing anything but impressing on my own mind that she was offering her body in order to obtain certain things. Given the profession she had chosen, and the circles she was forced to move in, she had no possibility of doing otherwise. It was a trade-off—sex and love for success. I would be forced to take the sex and leave the rest, making sure to keep myself from any slip into the realm of tenderness or love. I would have to act the way almost all the men in her world acted.”

There are times when we don't want to fall in love because we don't believe in ourselves or in the future. We are afraid and we seek refuge in sex lived in the present. After having affairs with men who she feels nothing for, the protagonist of the novel, *Un uomo a perdere (A Throw-away Man)* by Giulia Fantoni, falls in love with a strange, solitary, married man. The two of them never speak of the future because they don't believe in one. When they meet they spend all their time making love. In a dry voice and vulgar terms, the woman describes their encounters. “When the two of you have finished eating, he stands up and comes over alongside of you. He pulls out his dick again. You take him in your mouth and you work at his dick with your hand for a bit. Then he takes your hand off his penis and grabs it with his own and pumps, jacking off with it still in your mouth. When he fucks you standing up, it's a fast fuck and he comes almost at once, but when you do it on the couch, he lasts longer and you almost always come. And when you come, you shout. It's a loud shout, and you are almost sure that the neighbours can hear you.”⁴ This language allows the protagonist to keep their relationship confined to sex, and also prevents love from entering into it—love which implies continuity, hope, and a future. At a certain point in the novel, there are three of them making love. The scene is a vertiginous one of multiple penetrations by multiple penises provoking multiple orgasms and multiple shouts. And yet, even in this tangle and blend of bodies,

the woman constantly searches out her man's eyes, a signal that she loves only him. Only she doesn't say it. Indeed, love is never mentioned once. "We know how things began but not how they will end." She prefers to stick to the present and to sex, where everything can end from one minute to the next. About herself she observes: "You don't have anything; you've never been anything and you've never had anything."

10. Intimacy and togetherness

The range of possible erotic experiences is endless. There are cases where two people communicate to each other their willingness to have sex without uttering a word or without there being any physical contact between them, but simply via an exchange of sublimated stimuli. Sometimes they do this so rapidly that they themselves gain awareness of what took place only after they have parted. And perhaps, over the course of the following years, each will remember with nostalgic regret that extraordinary moment when they found each other only to lose each other.

George recollects the time when such a thing happened to him. "I was attending a convention abroad, accompanied by a young woman colleague. An odd sort of relationship had sprung up between us, one that was friendly and supportive and charming all at the same time. We had dinner together that evening and talked for a long time, then she accompanied me back to my hotel. She waited for just a minute before getting back in the taxi. It was just for a few seconds, though now I remember that moment lasting infinitely longer. All it would have taken was for me to invite her up to my room. Instead, and I don't know why—really, I don't understand what sudden inhibition came over me—I didn't do so. She gave me a little hug, said goodbye, and left. At that precise moment it dawned on me that I'd made a big mistake. And still today I have the impression of having missed out on something beautiful and important, a bit of life which I regret not living. I'll never forget that evening, that dinner, and that goodbye. No, it wasn't love or a sudden crush or a question of being enchanted with beauty. It was that sense of mutual understanding. The knowledge of being drawn to each other and wanting to get more intimate. It was the sort of encounter which just naturally should have culminated in making love together. And that then, followed by one last kiss, would have left both of us feeling fulfilled and at peace. In place of all that, there's just this suspended desire and nostalgic yearning."

A simple advance, like the momentary flirting that leads nowhere, in more than a few cases constitutes a moment of intimacy that will be remembered, perhaps nostalgically or by both individuals, for years to come. Clearly, these cannot be considered as true romantic ties, and yet

they do establish a feeling of closeness and understanding, at the same time as they create a place for that person in our emotional landscape. We joyfully experience this touch of eroticism in that particular moment and also the bit of warmth and sweetness that it leaves with us when the moment has passed.

For some people, the experience of having sex once with another—the so-called “one-night stand” sort of thing—creates a lasting sense of intimacy and mysterious bonding. The memory of their encounter keeps coming to mind, and they continue to feel mutual affection and attraction. Should they happen to meet up again, they will probably lavish on each other hugs and kisses, and maybe even make love again for old time’s sake.

Once again, of course, we have to allow for significant individual differences. There are many men, for instance, who are obsessed with money, power, competition and success, and for them sex is something to be grabbed and devoured like food, without thinking of it as something essential and important in their life. On the other hand, there are also men whose personal store of erotic memories and emotions constitute for them the most precious part of existence. Naturally, they can’t say that officially because society would eye them with condescension. Yet if they could, if they weren’t afraid of ridicule or judgment, their response to the question, “what have been the most significant experiences for you in life?” would be to talk exclusively about their erotic or love relationships. Perhaps they would mention only a detail or some instant, and yet for them it would be unforgettable beyond comparison. Certainly, that is, far more significant than any of their economic or political meetings, business successes, awards, or medals.

11. Memories

Gabriel and Geneviève are reminiscing. “When I think back over my life,” says Gabriel, “I can say that I fondly remember all the women I have loved or even just kissed. When it comes to men, the only ones that come to mind are my few friends and the few people I’ve really admired. Thinking about the women, on the other hand, fills me with a sense of joy and affection. I admit that there were also bitter moments and pain. There was a woman with whom things really got ugly, too, though even in this case when I stop to think about the crazy start of our relationship, when we really passionately in love with each other, I still find the memory incredibly pleasant and moving. Afterwards came the storm, something happened, a misunderstanding arose and ruptured our relationship, but I don’t want to think about that. I’ve erased it, wiped it out. And that way the first part remains intact and seems as sweet as springtime.

“The best part is that I can remember clearly each woman in turn, even the prostitutes—yes, them too, and even the ugliest of those whores at that. I remember each one’s face, gestures, body, and words. Of course those encounters were very brief, but that wasn’t on my account; with the prettier ones I would have willingly gone out with them and tried to get to know them better. Sometimes I managed to do just that. I invited them to lunch or dinner and then we’d go for a walk—no money was involved here, I want to stress that—just like a normal couple or two good friends. Those women taught me many things, both about themselves and about men—and so about myself as well.

“I said before that I remember all the women that I’ve made love with or even just kissed. And that goes right back to the very first teenaged girl whom I wanted to kiss, but lacked the courage to do so, until finally one day I somehow managed to. Probably it had to do with the fact that she pretended to trip and ended up on top of me. I recall awkwardly trying to thrust my hands under her clothes and the fact that she pushed me away. I didn’t know then, I only learned later on, that all I had to do was to take her hand and guide it where I wanted it to go. Oh, and then I remember how once in a hotel I boldly entered the room of a blond woman who had smiled at me in the lobby, and recklessly slipped into bed with her. And guess what? She was surprised but happy. Then there was a feminist who I remember rocking me in her big maternal bosom. And so on and so forth, all those women, one by one, who offered me their lips, their mouth, their body. I can still see their eyes full of love and tenderness.

“For this reason, I guess, I conserve a wonderful, grateful, and affectionate memory of all the women of my life. I just wish I could have done more for them, that I could have shown them more tenderness than what I was able to offer at the time. And if I could see them again, I’d embrace every last one of them, no matter how much they’ve changed, because inside me they have remained the same, the way I knew them back then.”

“That’s not the way it is for me,” is Geneviève’s comment. “I do have a sweet lovely memory, sometimes even tending towards nostalgia, of many of my lovers, but with many others that’s not the case. Ah, when I think of my first great love! How happy he made me, how much he could have given me if only he’d understood and believed in me. But then right afterwards comes to mind the other one, with his big house and fine airs and nasty temper. Sure, I went to bed with him, what did it matter to me? He was a stupid ox and stayed a stupid ox. Certainly I’ve had lots of men, and a lot of them I really liked and was attracted to. But there were also those who I didn’t like. I was beautiful and all the men chased after me. Every so often I’d choose one to go out with. Once it was a champion athlete, the next time it was a famous actor. He was really sexy and romantic in films and I was really attracted to him and dying to meet him. What a disappointment

he turned out to be! He had the most awful smell. I was itching to just get up and leave his room in the middle of the night. No, I can't say that I have fond memories of all of them. I recall men who thought they were great lovers when really they were merely violent brutes. I encountered others who were nothing but cold and arid. After that quick bit of sex, all I felt was nausea. On the other hand, I have a wonderful memory of the times I went to bed with a friend or two—true friends—with whom I wanted to make love not because there was any romantic passion or commitment attached to it but simply because it was great just to be together, in the name of friendship, a friendship that continues even now. Are you sure that you're not idealizing women? Or perhaps you're just remembering the good things. You're a gentle sort of man. Most men are nice at first, but then they get rough. There are guys who get very coarse and crude, like, 'Come on, fuck me, you slut, feel how hard my prick is, you love that now, don't you?' And you have to say you do. Then there are others who ask, 'Go on, talk dirty to me, like a filthy minded slut.' There are men who can't get it up without obscenities and debasing you. Others handle you so roughly you'd think they had claws. Believe me, men are very different. There may be women who share your opinion but I certainly can't say I do."

12. Ambiguities

Any sexual relationship is always extremely complex and loaded with symbols and meanings. It is also always a ritual with stage directions. This clearly emerges in this excerpt from Marlon's diary. "It comes to mind that time when you stayed around to listen to me and ask me questions. You were ever so patient and attentive to my answers. There was another girl with you, a friend of yours, with really striking eyes. I wonder now if maybe you were asking yourself if I liked you, if I preferred you to your girlfriend. Perhaps you were even fantasizing about making love with me and thinking, 'the hell with this polite farce of guests and coffee and refined conversation.' As for myself, I repeat, I couldn't have cared less about any of what was going on. I couldn't have cared less either about the little ritual we went through later, when I entered your secret little studio apartment which—go on, admit it—you kept on hand when you wanted to go to bed with someone other than your husband, and it was now my turn, my lucky day. Immediately I started asking you about how things were going, and what project you were involved with at work, and you then wanted to know more about me, what I had managed to achieve, and so half an hour must have passed—the two of us telling each other about our life and me just thinking about how I wanted to rip your clothes off and make love to you there and then. We finally put an end to this chit-chat and

you lay down on top of me and started riding me furiously. You called all the shots. Fortunately I can hold an erection for a long time, and you kept it up for probably an hour. Afterwards, all breathless, gasping, and exhausted, you stretched out next to me to catch your breath and then to do something with your mouth about my continuing excitement. It's incredible the difference between one woman and the next as regards this kind of art. It's like the abyss between Raphael and a housepainter. You squeezed out of me everything I had to give, down to my soul. And when I left I was so happy, satiated, light-hearted, and optimistic, and I knew that I would phone you again in order to repeat this incredible experience. I was perfectly willing to go through the charade again, do what our upbringing and social standing imposed on us to do. But the only thing I desired was to enter that apartment again, fling off our clothes, make love in that way, then get redressed and leave in a hurry without much in the way of words.

“Only maybe that last bit, about the words, isn't true. Because all that talking, that chitchatting while standing next to each other as we waited for our moment to come, simply fanned our desire for each other; there we were, two respectable, civil, educated people, intent on stripping bare of this guise in your little apartment. And the immense surge of pleasure that I felt the first time that I found the courage to take your hand and put it where I wanted it was generated by all those previous encounters and conversations with you that had never led anywhere. In other words, that came from how hard it was to find the courage to go beyond the breaking point to where we could be free, and let ourselves declare not with words but with our bodies, *I want you*. If that evening was so unforgettable it was precisely because we were forced to wait frantically and silently for hours beforehand. So when it happened, when we could finally let ourselves do, the release of all that pent-up energy jolted our bodies and our lives. And yet I didn't love you, I wasn't at all in love with you. I cared for you, and would have helped you if you'd needed a hand, but the only thing I wanted from you was sex—that whirlwind of sexual pleasure that meant so much to me that today the nostalgia I feel isn't for you but for those encounters. Sex is strange. I mean, all that desire, pleasure, vital force, so much appreciation and so many sweet memories, and yet no rending emotions, no words of love. It's something important, fundamental, admirable, magnificent, and yet incomplete. I don't know myself how exactly or why.”

We are also in possession of Madeleine's reply to this diary entry, written after we showed it to her (with Marlon's permission). “But did you really believe that I didn't know? Did you really think that I was interested in those long conversations in the presence of my friend? The only thing that I feared was that you wanted her. The only thing I wanted was for you to choose me and to decide to do something about it. That studio apartment was my secret weapon. If you want to land a married man whom you're attracted to, if you want a man who's afraid of being found out, then you

need a safe refuge where you can take him. To be honest, I liked listening to you talk, I liked the things you had to say and I liked looking at your lovely mouth, savouring the moment when I would be able to kiss it. I liked seeing you curl up on the couch so that you could eye my breasts or scrutinize the space between my legs, all the while acting as if nothing were happening. And I started getting all aroused and wet, knowing that you didn't realize it, you didn't know. I left feeling completely weak and exhausted, and sometimes even completely disheartened, but still, I managed keep up the game. I was patient, ever so patient. Then finally the occasion finally presented itself. A night car trip, with the driver in the front and the two of us in the back. And finally you made your move. It was a liberation for both of us. You can't imagine how much joy it gave me. I would have shouted with joy and exultation if I could have. Then, in the end, I used my secret weapon—in reality my two secret weapons, the apartment and my other ability, which is very important to me since I'm not particularly beautiful.

“And through it all I loved you. Yes, I loved you infinitely more than you could imagine and more than I myself could bring myself to admit. When I didn't hear from you for a week or ten days, I was miserable, I cried my heart out, but I didn't pick up the phone and call you out of fear of irritating you, out of fear that you would get tired of us and leave me forever. I knew that you weren't in love with me. I knew that there were more beautiful women around who wanted you. You weren't aware of it, but there were. I saw them. And so I kept a tight grip on myself and maintained my silence, and then you would phone and my heart would beat hard at the sound of your voice. I would have spent every day by your side, every night. I would have worked for you, taken care of you if you'd fallen ill. I would have given my life for you. I couldn't tell you these things, my love, but I could provide you with everything that gave you pleasure. And that made me happy.”

CHAPTER FIVE

SEXUAL DESIRE

1. Thy neighbour's woman

Here is Nasif's account. "Until recently I had no idea of who you were. I first met you at home with your children and husband while you were vacationing at the seaside. You were a friendly, outgoing, fun woman and nothing more. Then suddenly one day I understood. I understood everything about you the evening of that gala celebration, when suddenly I saw you in an evening dress, surrounded by a crowd of men whom you seemed to be attracting like a magnet. Your husband was away and you were there on your own. Anyway, all of a sudden like that—maybe because you'd had something to drink, or maybe because something inside you had been reawakened—you had become glamorous and captivating. You were talking, laughing, glancing from one man to the other, and bantering with them all with a flair and finesse that I would never have guessed you had in you. To be honest, I've never seen any other woman do it so well. They were telling you off-colour jokes and paying you impertinent compliments, to which you made witty and provocative replies, egging them on and making each one hunger to have you. They had eyes only for you; they desired you alone. I could feel their palpable sexual desire, I could smell their scent of males aroused by a female and also your scent of tempting female. I'd probably watched for a hundred times that scene in old films where a group of male dancers spin turns around the prima ballerina, without really understanding what it all meant. In the same way I'd never been able to fathom why during the Belle Époque so many nobles or aristocratic types dissipated their fortunes for women like Bella Otero. What was it that drove them all to seek out and compete for her alone, when there were so many other women around selling their bodies to the highest bidder? You had a talent like hers, I guess. You had the extraordinary ability to give each man the impression that you wanted precisely him. Consequently, he would move in on you, but as soon as he had gained confidence you'd start speaking to and smiling at some other fellow and he'd get jealous.

"One by one, you did the same thing with all of them, beckoning and then turning away, but never breaking off any understanding definitively, because you were always able to call them back with a promising smile or glance. It was incredible how you made them all pant for you and also how you played one off against the other. I found myself watching all this like a silent spectator completely excluded from the action. I wanted you like crazy myself, only I wasn't about to join the

rabble, and I just stood there seething with vexation and lust. All I wanted to do was to get rid of all those men crowding around you; I would have killed them just to get a chance to be alone with you and make love with you there on the spot, on the floor.”

What is happening here to Nasif? He’s attracted to this woman because suddenly he’s seen her in the midst of other men, flirting with them and being lusted after by them. This psychological re-elaboration has been studied in detail by René Girard¹, whose theory would suggest that Nasif has identified with these men whom the woman has aroused. He feels mimetic desire, in other words. The consequence of this mimetic character of desire is that Nasif enters into rivalry with these men because they desire the same object. This rivalry brings about an increase in desire, which augments in intensity in proportion to the number of rivals.

Nasif’s account continues with conjectures on the woman’s past. “And I got an idea of how you must have been before you got married and became a wife with a nice house and kids and neighbours. I could picture how your husband must have seen you back then, and how your various boyfriends and lovers had. What sort of life did you lead in Paris when you were working in television and film? How many producers, directors, famous actors, and millionaires did you know and go to bed with when you were involved in cinema? How many? There must have been a ton of them. And what did you do with them? I bet it was the kinkier the better for you. I could tell how licentious you were just by looking at you the other evening. Admist all those men, I saw you making love with all your lovers from the past and the future. I want whatever comes now. I want you and I want you all to myself. Nobody else has the right to touch you anymore.”

2. The erotic wait

The erotic realm is permeated and dominated by a pulsing desire that uses our body as its sensory instrument. That interlude of waiting for it to be time to meet our lover is not only a prelude to sexual pleasure but also integral part of it—indeed, the flood gates of eroticism have already been opened. Anaïs Nin tells us about Sabina, who “emerged a week later dressed in purple and waited in line for one of those buses on Fifth Avenue on which smoking was allowed [...] She inhaled deeply, feeling her breasts heave against her purple dress. The rolling sways of her gait, originating in her hips and thighs, made for a long, powerful muscular rippling from her feet to her knees, and then rose towards her thighs and waist. She involved her entire body in the action of walking, almost as if she were rushing towards some event in which she would give her utmost physically-speaking. Her face [...] displayed a veemence that attracted looks from passersby [...] Her hair, eyes, nails, and even the folds of her purple dress seemed to shine.”²

This wait, this foretaste of what is to come, is nothing other than our entranceway into the erotic world. During the phase when Alex was ever so in love with his wife, he was scheduled to participate in committee meetings in Los Angeles. He recalls that while he was listening to the speeches, and even while he made his own contributions, he was invisibly immersed in erotic fantasies both visual and sensual. At the same time, without realizing it, he was making all sorts of doodlings on the paper in front of him. He wasn't drawing a female body but just curves, to which he added contours and shape. One evening, after a meeting, he showed these drawings to one of his assistants, and laughingly said, "Take a look at this. Here's a bone. Look at how it swells out at the top and at the bottom. I guess you can call it a Freudian bone." His assistant looked at the picture carefully before she replied, "That's no bone. It shows the shoulders, trunk, and behind of a beautiful naked woman." Alex confesses that he didn't know how he ever managed to perform decently on the job. "Because in reality I kept mentally caressing and making love to my wife. And as soon as I was able to get back to her, that's exactly what we did, nonstop. We only stopped to eat or sleep."

3. Sex and beauty

As we've said, there are enormous differences in attitudes towards sexuality and love. The same Alex who told me about how erotically preoccupied he was when he was in love, also said that he liked pornography. When I asked him why, he explained, "I think it's because I find the female body beautiful. Breasts and buttocks are beautiful to me, and also female genitalia, especially since nowadays they are shaven. I get worked up over the simple sight of the vulvus viewed from straight on, just a mere closed crack. But I also like the sight of it opened like a orchid, or a view from behind, where it looks like two lips. I'm attracted to the same thing in photography; I'd willingly put frames on these pictures and hang them up on the wall.

"And this is just the static, still sort of pose. Then there's the incredible beauty of a woman's sex in motion, in a dance. Once I saw a video of a girl from Thailand or Vietman. She was in a large armchair, with her hips thrust forward as she fanned her sex with a fan, and meanwhile with her arms and legs she made dance moves of an absolute harmony and perfection. If in Western dance, the focus is on the body, here the body, arms, legs, and movements are used to enhance a light and delicate spell of sexual enchantment. The spectator feels no desire to penetrate or violate that flower which is displayed and then hidden, displayed and then hidden; he doesn't want to interrupt that dance of offering but watch it forever. I sometimes wonder how many thousands of years of erotic exploration were necessary in order to come up with such masterpieces of art."

“Would you have liked to have lived in and known more about that part of the world?” I ask. “Absolutely,” he answers, “but that wasn’t possible. In any case, I’m happy enough with the little bit that does come my way. I’m just as fascinated with the sex act itself, with how a penis that enters and pulls out of a vagina pushes the woman’s body back and forth—especially when she’s small and has tits that bounce as if they were full of liquid, or else that sway when she mounts on top of a man. I find it fantastic to watch a woman kneel in front of a man, pull down his zipper, take his penis in her hands and caress and kiss it, then put it in her mouth and with those kisses make it get big and hard. It’s like a loving, maternal thing to do, to me. And what I find so fantastic and moving of all is when while she’s doing that, she glances up to look him lovingly in the eye. That glance really gets to me because it just seems like the perfect synthesis of love and sex. Oh I know that it’s just a film, that they’re following a script, but there are a few exchanges of glances that I’ve seen that just can’t be pure simulation or acting. Sometimes I think that a given erotic scene must absolutely have been between two people who really are drawn to each other, and who maybe are really in love.

“What, however, I find disgusting in a lot of pornography is when two or three guys, who have just penetrated a woman in every way and place possible, top things off by ejaculating all over her face. I find that such a vulgar, derogatory thing to do—it’s as if they were defecating. On the other hand, all that changes when there are the adoring eyes of a woman in love and trembling with desire, who takes her man’s sperm as a gift of love.”

“But you know very well,” I say to Alex, “that many women today are looking for sex without love. And many men are troubled by the self confidence that these women vaunt. The men are afraid of being rejected, of not measuring up to expectations; they worry that their penis is too small or short, that she might be comparing them with another, that she will terminate their relationship without an explanation.”

“Yeah, I know,” Alex answers, “and that’s maybe why they want so much to see that look of love in a woman’s eyes. That look which is so warm and reassuring. I’m thinking about myself when I say that, but maybe all we men are like that, all of us want love in addition to sex. That’s why I find so moving—yes, moving—that loving look a woman gives her man as she is providing him with sexual pleasure.”

I ask him why he doesn’t have the same emotional reaction to love scenes in normal movies, which show us two lovers embracing and kissing in bed. If the impact of love with sex is what interests him why not feel moved at this, too? “No,” is his response. “In most films all you see are people rolling around on the sheets, then women who hoist themselves up on an overexcited man, and everyone goes into a frenzy. It’s rather the normal, calm sort of act or gesture that all women

perform in reality that I find so moving. And that look that a woman can only have when she is really making love with someone she loves or finds utterly irresistible.”

4. Intensity

The intensity of a sexual experience may derive from many factors. And yet most of us regard certain experiences as revelations that have left an indelible mark on our life. We may term these experiences instances of “love at first sight” without forgetting, however, that in reality they belong exclusively to the erotic and sexual realm of existence.

Here are two accounts, one from a male perspective and the other from a female perspective.

“When we got into the car,” Johnny remembers, “she opened her fur coat and I saw that underneath she was stark naked. Her breasts came tumbling out, and I got uncontrollably aroused and excited. It’s impossible to fully describe what you feel at a moment like that. There aren’t words for it, at least not for me. How can I put it? That the whole world seemed to revolve either around those big round protruding tits of hers on that body peeking out from under the fur coat, or else around the smooth skin on her neck or her belly. There was nothing more beautiful that I could ask for, nothing more seductive—but that’s a stupid word. I was going nuts over all that beauty, that incredible revelation, and I wanted to make love with her, I wanted to enter her, be inside—another stupid word that comes to me. Instead, she was the one who, without saying a word, slipped on top of me. I don’t remember what I did or what she did exactly. I know that at a certain point I was immersed inside her body with my head buried between her breasts, feeling an incredible high of exultation, pride, strength, happiness, and wellbeing. I’ll never ever forget the moment she opened that fur coat.”

Here, on the other hand, is Jennifer’s story. “He accompanied me home and I invited him in. We were both in formal evening dress—he was wearing a tuxedo and I had on a short-sleeved green dress. He was very handsome. Extraordinarily handsome. As soon as he came in the door, he stopped and looked at me, as if he were seeing me for the first time. I could sense that he was very attracted to me, and I wanted to be standing in front of him stark naked. I hadn’t realized that my opening the door and having him come in had already decided everything. He kissed me on the lips and told me that my lips were as soft as the petals on a freshly blooming rose. I felt close to tears. Then he lowered the shoulder straps of my dress and started kissing my breasts and squeezing hard on the nipples. I felt a shudder of pleasure from head to foot, and then came all the rest. It all felt incredibly natural. It was as if I had always known him and he, me. Every time he entered me I gave a start and opened myself to him even more. Little by little I felt something even deeper inside me

opening and melting, becoming liquefied. It was the sweetest, most marvellous and indescribable sort of pleasure. I asked him to stop for a moment in order to savour the experience, and go limp. When enough time had passed for me to feel aroused again, he entered me a second time, and my whole body gave another shuddered start. How long did it all last? I don't know. I kept coming over and over again, but what was important wasn't the orgasm as such as much as that continuous, rising wave of pleasure. I'll always remember everything about that night, especially that moment when we walked in the door and he stood before me, tall, elegant, and handsome, just about to kiss me. And I...I loved him already by then. Yes, I loved him and I would love him afterwards for years, with all my body and all my heart.”

5. Seduction

Why is it that during seduction, vulgar and derogatory expressions are never used and, moreover, CAN'T be used? There simply is no place for them, they serve no purpose. Seeing that the purpose of a seductive ploy, by either a man or a woman, is to attract, arouse, and make a lasting impression on the other, he or she necessarily dresses up, is nice and pleasant about everything he or she says, and is in general suave and vivacious. If possible, a woman will choose to wear flattering clothes that show off her body and/or best features, whereas a man will try to appear at his formal, well-mannered best. Given such a display of self-control, no one would be inclined to say that there was any likelihood of either one of them throwing him- or herself at the other and ripping off their clothes.

Seduction takes place because first a barrier is erected—which the other is then invited (but only with discretion and in a round-about way) to break down. In any case, seduction is not only about sex, nor does it promise that there will be nothing but sex to be had in the end. Rather, the seductive action regards the other person in his or her entirety. A woman wants to be admired for her clothes, her taste, her beauty, her worth, and simply for herself, and accordingly an able Don Juan responds to these desires. In each woman, furthermore, he manages to see something unique and extraordinary, which he then reveals to her. When he is surrounded by a group of four or five women, he conveys a sort of vibrant excitement to them, which each one proudly takes to mean that she is the chosen one. And when he addresses the one he does want, he makes her feel swept up by his desire, admiration, and passionate love. He appears ever stronger and surer of himself at the same time that he seems gentle, ardent, and delicate. He speaks in a winning, reassuring, hypnotic way, and while he is talking, he begins with great naturalness to caress her, and she finds that she

wants him to keep on doing so, and she feels more and more pleasure from it, as well as an irresistible desire to let herself go, to abandon herself to him.

And this goes on until the moment—that split second—when like a switch clicking on, the woman agrees to listen to his sexual talk, and by opening to these sexual words, simultaneously sexually yields her body. The able Don Juan begins to describe in a hypnotic voice what he is doing and so induce the desired erotic reactions from the woman. “See now,” he murmurs into her ear, “I’m caressing your small ears and lovely neck, I’m touching your soft breasts, I’m taking your nipple between my fingertips, and that makes you tingle deliciously all over.” As if in a trance, the woman lets him do as he pleases and trembles under his touch. After a few moments, he starts murmuring again. “Now I’m running my hands over the inside of your thighs, which loosen and part for me, and now I can caress your sex, open the sweet, little delicate folds—you can feel me, you want me—and as I touch your clitoris, you start to vibrate and tremble with pleasure.” As if under a spell, the woman cannot and does not want to refuse any longer. She will follow him wherever he wants and make love with him however he wants, entirely under his sway.

The able Don Juan is also capable of pulling off a rapid and brusque transformation of being; from a tough and brutal macho man, he changes into an adoring, gentle, trembling lover who can’t imagine living without his sweetheart. The Roman poet Ovid describes what such a man is up to when, in his *Ars Amatoria*, he writes, “Wear your heart on your wane face; /don’t hesitate to cover your fine locks with your hood [...] If you want reach your destination, try looking so downtrodden that anyone glancing at your face could well say: “So you love me!”³ Don Juan, however, is only play-acting because behind all his seeming fragility and trembling there remain the power and shrewdness of a predator intent on reaching his objective. A man who is truly in love, on the other hand, is afraid and trembles for real because he honestly can’t control his emotions and risks losing at the game of love. Younger women especially are more prone to rejecting a man who is truly in love because they find him timid, and they abhor timidity.. Instead, they’d rather throw themselves at the sort of confident fellow who is good at pretending.

If we take a closer look at this male type, it becomes clear that in reality there are two kinds of seducers. The first sort is only interested in making a sexual conquest. They are physically charming and know how to give an account of the nuances of female desire and love pangs that is so irresistible that women inevitably offer themselves to them. After the sex, however, the art and passion of such men abruptly ends. The spell is broken. More often than not, while the woman is happy with the sexual experience, she senses that it’s all over between them and feels disappointed. The second sort of male seducer is not only incredibly sensual and full of erotic magnetism and hypnotic charm of the sort we’ve just described, but also profoundly loves women. The act of

making love does not appease their sexual desire but stokes it. Their eyes and hands worshipfully caress every part of the woman's body and their words reveal to her all the most secret effects of her beauty, making her feel loved and adored down to her very soul. The spell doesn't break after this first encounter; these men want more. They seek greater and greater sexual and spiritual intimacy. This second sort of seducer is much more dangerous than the first type in that they not only leave a woman with the memory of a fantastic experience but also potentially steal her heart.

An able seductress makes a man feel important, desirable, and unique. But she doesn't stop at that. She also arouses him with her choice of clothes and gestures that accentuate the subtle game of alternately revealing and concealing her body. Because she knows that male eroticism is visual, rather than trying to communicate feelings to him she lures him with evocative images. Aware as she is of the fact that men are competitive by nature and like stealing prey from their enemy, she makes sure he sees her in the company of other men, all of whom are visibly attracted to her, then orchestrates things so that it will seem to him that she is overwhelmed by his seductive appeal alone and turns towards him with adoring or knowing eyes. As Sabrina tells it, "There was always one who drove the others of us women—in this group of friends we had—wild with envy. She wasn't just gorgeous; she also knew how to cast a spell over a whole lot of men who did things for her that they would never have done for any other woman. They showered her with gifts, favours, perks, and administrative transfers. I studied her in action long and hard. I noticed that she'd tell them about the important men she'd met, hinting—but only hinting—that she'd made love with them. Then immediately afterwards she'd turn with bright eyes to the fellow who was listening to her and make him feel like a truly marvellous man. Above all, she would look him intensely in the eyes—with those two big, beautiful eyes of hers—and the fellow was ready to throw himself either on top of her or into the fire for her. There wasn't one who knew how to resist her. If she'd wanted to, she could have gone to bed with all of them."

Unlike a male seducer, an enchanting seductress doesn't need to stage a big falling-in-love act because the man is less interested than her in passion. To be perfectly honest, he is downright afraid of it at times. Such a woman, therefore, needs only communicate admiration, adoration, and praise for his extraordinary sex appeal.

6. Why seduce?

Normally a man seduces a woman in order to obtain sex, which provides him with both pleasure and a sense of conquest. He feels like a skilful hunter who keeps filling his bag with downed prey and feels increasingly proud of his success. Doesn't Leporello in *Don Giovanni* run down a list of the thousands of conquests his master has made? In a similar fashion, in Nick Hornby's delightful novel, *High Fidelity*,⁴ the protagonist counts up the number of women that he's had in his life so far (ten) and is happy to see that this is above average for Englishmen his age. Women, on the other hand, rarely keep tabs in this way for two reasons. First, because the quality of an erotic love relationship means much more to them than the quantity of such relationships summed together. Second, because they tend to forget unpleasant or unimportant experiences, and pure sex usually qualifies for them as the latter.

There are women who act the same way as men, with the difference that as soon as they get the chance they start collecting as trophies famous actors, sports champions, incredibly handsome types or important businessmen. Yet they are not satisfied with the mere number of men they manage to conquer—they are looking for more than that. What women want to gain from their seductive actions is also usually different from what men are looking for. Above all, a woman wants to be admired and to make an unforgettable and indelible impression on a man. She wants to stir up love and passion in him and hear him say, "I love you."

What a man most desires in particular is being appreciated for his sexual ability, for how good he is in bed. Secretly he dreams of being more potent than other men. That silly question, "Did you like it?", that many men ask the woman they're with, means in reality, "Did you like it more than with that other guy, or with all the rest of them?" Heaven forbid that the woman actually tell him the truth or mention some other male. The only thing she can say is that he is absolutely the best, unbeatable and in a class by himself, and that she has never felt anything so wonderful before. A woman usually thinks about the pleasure she actually has felt and not the athletic performance of her partner. She doesn't, furthermore, compare her own sexual skills with those of other women. Obviously, however, there are exceptions to this rule. In Catherine Millet's words: "When gathering material for this book, I interviewed a friend with whom I had last had sex twenty-five years earlier. I heard him say that ever since then he'd never met a girl so good at giving blow jobs, and I lowered my eyes, partly out of modesty and partly to hide my pride."⁵

At times a woman will use her seductive powers to impress and charm a man with quite different aims in mind. In the entertainment world, the entourages of film executives, T.V. producers, directors, and established actors always include young women looking for success and fame and aware of the fact that to obtain that they necessarily need the help and support of one of

these men. Accordingly, they try to act and look as seductive as possible in order to have in exchange for sex the position or job they desire. It would be misleading to think, however, that the young women view this merely as the price that they must pay or as the unpleasantness they are forced to put up with. Sometimes they consider it a conquest or a victorious gain. I have seen numerous women in their twenties or thirties who were very happy to throw themselves into the arms of directors or producers who were sixty or seventy years old.

A young T.V. announcer named Jane told a girlfriend about her experience. “You won’t believe me, I can that from your face and the way you are frowning, but that guy, even if he’s 70, is really fantastically attractive and fascinating. He’s, well, young, young inside. I don’t find it revolting to have sex with him. Frankly, if you really want to know, I really like it. He doesn’t thump me furiously like George does. He doesn’t push and make me jerk up and down, and he doesn’t say crude disgusting things. He’s gentle, nice, and refined. He’s helping me. He even protects me. If only I’d met him before! And I’ll tell you something else— I’d marry him if I could.”

Then there are young women who know they are paying a price but don’t give it any importance. One of these is Judith, who actually said to her lover, “I’ve got to go over now and see, you know, that guy who I hope is going to give me a job. I mean, he promised he would—it’s just that if I don’t go to bed with him, I might as well as forget about it. Bye, babe, see you later.” Judith wasn’t worried about her lover’s reaction to this, and yet, on account of these naïve—more than cynical—words, he won’t in the future believe that she is still capable of being faithful to him. He’ll put up a wall between them to keep himself from falling in love with her. And when Judith realizes how deeply and desperately she really loves him, and how she wants only and exclusively him, it will by then be too late.

CHAPTER SIX

THE LASTING RELATIONSHIP

1. Finding each other

Sometimes a casual encounter will lead to a second meeting and then to a third one. Naturally, it's premature to call it love or even the phase of falling in love, and yet when two people seek out each other to make love again it is always for a more profound reason than mere "sexual pleasure." Even during a first encounter, as we have seen, there are overlapping symbols and meanings at play. And consequently if two people see each other again it's because each one gives and receives something that he or she likes, desires, is attracted to and interested in—something that gives him or her a sense of completeness.

The novel *L'Amant* (The Lover) by Marguerite Duras¹ is about the relationship between a young rich Chinaman and a French adolescent girl. The young man is totally in love with her—in fact *madly* in love with her, as we come to understand at the end of the book. But for the girl, whose encounters with the Chinaman always take place at his house, their relationship is purely sexual. That said, what exactly induces her to go to these appointments? She's not in love, after all. One even suspects that she doesn't feel all that attracted to the fellow. And yet it's a way of rebelling against the prison of boarding school, a way of rebelling against the loss of status and humiliation of her family now fallen onto hard times, a way of getting to know her own body and experiencing a new sort of pleasure—that of sensuality. It is also a way of helping out her family, and in particular her brother, financially, because the Chinaman is very wealthy and is always showering her with presents. Ultimately, this relationship offers her a chance to exert the seductive power of her body on that exclusive, oppressive, and hostile Oriental society from which she wants to and will escape. For the Chinaman things are very different. He is head over heels in love with this white girl and pleads in vain with his father to be allowed to marry her. The day comes for her to return to France, and she does so without regret, having learned to hate that part of the world. All she's gotten out of the relationship with the young Chinaman is sex, and not a single thing more. He, on the other hand, has lost his heart and his soul to her; and decades later, when he goes to Paris and telephones her, he discovers upon hearing her voice that he is as in love with her now as he was on the first day he met her.

There are times—and this happens more frequently than one might think—when the reason why two people end up going beyond that one-night stand and staying together is in essence

because both are getting over a previous love relationship. Such is the case of Hans and Rose. Hans was just coming out of a period of great despondency having to do with his failure to win the heart of the first girl he'd ever, and most intensely, loved. He blamed this on his own inexperience, his not knowing how to go about it, and decided to learn how to have success with women. He asked his more expert friends for advice and observed them in action. Little by little he became surer of himself and of how to deal with the opposite sex. No longer timid and awkward but a pleasantly assertive young man, he happened one day to meet the very beautiful Rose. One encounter led to the next, and for many months the two saw each other continually and had sex. Viewed from the outside, their relationship seemed like a typical one between two young people: he was her "boyfriend" and she was his "girlfriend." But in actual fact it wasn't like that. What made it different was his tremendous desire to prove that he knew how to make conquests; to this end, this beautiful girl was both the perfect prey and the proof of his newfound capabilities.

When I questioned him about this, Hans said, "I was constantly making love to her and finding it incredible, just incredible. I'd look at her spellbound when she arrived wearing that white blouse of hers that stretched over her breasts. But I wasn't in love. I went nuts for her, but it didn't go beyond that. She really turned me on because she was beautiful and had the best tits in the entire city. All I wanted to do was make love with her, just that, morning to night, but I didn't want to be her boyfriend because we were just too different, with really different tastes. She would never have understood me. And the only thing on my mind was having sex with her. She was still in love with some previous boyfriend or lover because while I had it in her she'd murmur, Franz, Franz. Evidently while she was fucking me she was imagining doing it with him, but I didn't care one way or the other—well, actually, no, I kind of liked it, I liked fucking this unknown Franz's woman." When I asked Hans if he would have minded if she had gone off with another man, he said in a less than convincing way that he wouldn't have, adding, however, that the important thing was that she continued to have sex with him.

The same erotic relationship seen from Rose's perspective appears radically different. She, too, had been on the rebound from a relationship, one with a married man. She too felt incredibly attracted the first time they met. She found him very handsome and yet strangely different from all the men she'd encountered before, and she like that. Nevertheless, she also really wanted to feel loved, courted, and desired. It didn't help that he spoke very little and never took her out dancing or to a restaurant or to see a film, let alone for a chat at a café. All he could think about was sex; he seemed starved for it. But anyway, she gave him what he wanted. Then every so often, he'd disappear, and when he returned after some time he never told her what he'd been off doing. During one of Hans's absences, Rose met a rich, older man who treated her in a very refined, gentlemanly

way. He came to pick her up in his car and took her out to dinner and to the theatre; he even took trips with her to new places. Here was a man who was in love with her, a man she would eventually marry.

Let's backtrack for a moment. Why did Hans when describing his erotic relationship with Rose use such vulgar expressions as 'while I had it in her' or 'I liked fucking this Franz's woman'? It's because even though Hans doesn't admit it, he is bothered by her murmuring the other man's name. But he doesn't want to commit himself, doesn't want to let himself go. He just wants to take his sexual pleasure with a beautiful woman without offering her anything in return. He wants to prove to himself that he knows how to seduce a woman. At the same time, he doesn't understand and doesn't want to understand his own feelings, his own need for recognition and a social life. She's only a prey to him—valuable prey because of how beautiful she is. After three months during which he doesn't phone or write her, he finds out that she's got another lover. He was aware that sooner or later that was bound to happen, but it still cuts him to the quick. He really liked that woman, and if he hadn't been obsessed with the idea of making conquests and taking revenge on women, he could have ended up loving her and being loved in return.

2. Being accepted

In order for a relationship to last, we need to feel accepted and desired. Rose gives up on Hans and goes off with another man because she doesn't feel accepted and loved. For Julia, on the other hand, things go better—even though she doesn't have, physically speaking, all the things that Rose has going for her. Julia, in fact, has always had problems on account of her huge hips and the fact of being slightly overweight. She's tried to slim down but she always ends up gaining back those extra pounds. She's had relationships with numerous guys but they always leave her. She's convinced herself that she's ugly, so ugly that she is never going to find anyone to love her. She's taken to considering herself as a useless piece of trash. Things begin to change, however, when she meets a coloured guy who, unlike those from her country, considers her hips and immense rear-end as attractive plusses. If the relationship with him ends badly, it's because he is Muslim and overly rigid. Nevertheless, she gets to know a whole social set of Indian and Arab young people who are much more tolerant and socially active and she feels accepted, appreciated, and wanted in their company.

It was very difficult to get her to open up and talk about her experience because she felt judged and criticized by her old ex-circle of friends. Eventually, however, she confided in a girlfriend about her new life. "One day Allen came up to me at a summer festival party with music

they'd all organized and asked me to dance. I hadn't danced in years, but what an incredible sense of lightness and happiness it gave me! I learned to laugh again thanks to Allen and his friends. And I felt attractive and desired again. I came to realize that Allen is a clean and honest type, not the sort of man who only thinks about making a lot of money. Besides that, he wants to have a family and get married. I discovered that I want to have kids too and I really have to get going on that because I'm already 32... With Allen I also discovered the pleasures of making love. He has got a fantastic body, with muscles that stand out under his skin. As soon as I see him, as soon as he hugs me, I'm already wetting my pants. That never ever happened to me before. He gets me to lie down on the bed and starts kissing me all over, on my stomach, on my breasts, between my thighs. I've always been ashamed of my huge bottom but he loves it. He throws himself on it and shakes it and then he enters me from behind. He eyes me avidly while I'm trembling and thrashing under his strong hands and I have to tell him to wait, that I want to enjoy the build-up and feel every part of me aroused and feel his big penis go limp in my hands or in my mouth or in my vagina. It's stupendous. Once I would have been too embarrassed and ashamed for it, but not now. The pleasure that Allen makes me feel surrounds me, warms me, relaxes me, restores me to health, makes me feel beautiful. Also, the more he likes me, the more I like myself and feel liked by other people. My body seems to adjust and modify its shape. A person who is not loved or desired turns ugly and goes to ruin. I remember how once my limbs felt like they were getting stiff and aging. Not any more, I tell you. Now his eyes seem to push my cells into place, and my breasts expand, my lips grow fuller, my eyes begin to shine and attract. I think I'm going to marry him. So I'll be poor? I couldn't care less."

3. Erotic friendship

He was married to a woman who he didn't love anymore and with whom he didn't even have sex now and then. He'd ended up by surrounding himself with a sort of harem of women who were more or less unattached, whom he managed to rendezvous with fairly regularly. These women were more or less in the same boat as him. Married, divorced, or single (with a boyfriend who was away a lot and whom they weren't really in love with), they were happy to meet and have sex with this educated, fascinating, seductive charmer. If he held such sway over them it was because he really did love women and was gentle with them by nature. He knew how to bring out the best in each one—be that beauty, intelligence, culture, elegance, vivaciousness, or sexiness. He took the best from each and ignored or overlooked the rest. He took joy in making love with them all, and in savouring the particular pleasure or sweetness each one had to offer. He needed to have to do with

so many women precisely for this reason, and it was only the composite sum of all this loving could fulfil his desires. The women's motivations were very close to the same. One was proud of being able to make love with such a handsome, important man whom all her colleagues admired. Another was truly in love with him—even though she knew it was hopeless asking him for more. Yet another felt the two of them were very much like each other. And there was even a woman who found him perfect for her male harem.

If asked to define the sort of relationship he had with these women, this man usually termed them his “lady friends.” Describing a similar rapport, the protagonist of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unsustainable Lightness of Being*, uses the term “erotic friendship.” But does erotic friendship exist? After all, Kundera's character uses the expression ironically, almost as if to suggest it were really a sort of hypocritical subterfuge.

In order to answer the question we should bear in mind that the word *friendship* has two different meanings,³ one quite general and the other rather narrow. The first meaning refers to a person with whom we get along and feel comfortable with, but not someone we love or feel absolute trust in. This explains why we call many co-workers, acquaintances, and important people we deal with regularly our “friends.”

But there is also a narrower or stronger meaning of the word *friendship*. This is that true friendship which we feel for our “best friend.” This signifies that your friend is he or she who cares the world for you, who knows how to read your mood, and with whom you can pour out your heart with the certainty of being understood. To these friends you can entrust your money and even your children, knowing that they will treat it or them as if their own. These friends will console you but also be honest enough to tell you when you're wrong. Such a friend always looks out for your best interest and advises you accordingly, without being offensive or attacking your dignity. Friends like these don't get jealous or speak badly of you but take your part and defend your good name. They are on your side in the hard struggle of life. They want to know how you are even when you are far away, and they are ready to run to your aid if you need it. They can be counted on to do justice to you even when no one does.

We can say that friendship is a form of love imbued with a sense of the ethical. Yes, your friend is on your side, but he also expects from you the same sort of proper and ethical behaviour that he imposes on himself in regards to you. Friends are equals in love, rights, and duties. A friendship between two people is established slowly over time, encounter after encounter, and on the basis of manifested signs and proof. Unlike the process of falling in love, the constitution of a friendship does not require that the two individuals pull free of their pasts and go through a rebirthing process in order to form (by their union) a new social entity which reshapes their

existence. Instead, here each individual remains himself. True, we oftentimes chose our friends on the basis of certain affinities or common values, and in the long run we and our friends end up sharing very similar points of view. But as regards our distinct individuality, each of us remains with his or her private world intact, which the other not only must respect but even protect. This is what makes friendship so free and serene, and not oppressive. On the other hand, it also implies its fragility, and the fact that a friendship needs tender loving care in order to continue.

When a friend acts cruelly towards you, when he deceives or betrays you, when he abandons you in a time of need, or when he directs you on a disaster course and does nothing to help you—when any or all of those things happen, he ceases to be your friend. If all of it is due to some misunderstanding, or some moment of ire which is followed rapidly by a clarification, then there will be no permanent consequences and the friendship will stand. However, if there is no profound explanation given that immediately re-establishes total trust, then the rupture becomes irreparable. The two friends may even eventually forgive each other, shake hands, and feel affection once again, but their relationship will never return to how it was before.

At this point we may be asking ourselves whether this sort of relationship can possibly be compatible with eroticism and sex. The answer is yes, it possibly may be, although it is quite hard a thing to pull off. The fundamental obstacle standing in the way is the fact that friends tell each other everything and openly confide in each other. When you hear about a friend's difficulties or problems your impulse is to run to their aid and sacrifice what you have to in order to help them out. In an erotic relationship, on the other hand, we tend to be trained on our pleasure-seeking and the last thing we want is to be disturbed or bothered by problems or unpleasant things. We don't want the other to ruin that hour of sex by burdening us with his or her conflicts with Mum or siblings or spouse or colleagues, nor with his or her worries over mortgage payments or loan money. We simply have no desire to add those cares to our own. Our reason for arranging a sexual encounter with a lover is to take a plunge into pleasure and forget, at least for a short while, everything bothersome or bitter. This Eros, we can say, is a vacation from daily life, where unpleasantness is strictly forbidden.

Therefore, if one of the two friends—as is his or her right in a friendship—begins to bring these daily cares and worries and anxieties and requests for help into the erotic relationship, it won't be long till the sexual desire and attraction between them fades or even disappears. In order to continue the relationship, both of them must avoid talking about things that might be excessively disturbing. The key is to keep eroticism separate from the rest of life. But in this case are we really still talking about friendship? Yes, we are, though 'friendship' here is something distinct from normal friendship. While the latter runs parallel to everyday life and at any time may be penetrated

by it, erotic friendship, on the other hand, requires more careful management of how and when those two worlds touch. In so far as they are also friends, two lovers can discuss their professional life, their family, and their worries and fears, all the while offering and giving each other support. The trick, however, is to do this in moderation and with discretion. The problems of everyday life mustn't become a burden or a continual source of anxiety or irritation in the sexual relationship itself.

4. The fragile nature of erotic friendship

With respect to normal friendship, erotic friendship is more vulnerable to breakdown. Normal friendship is only in danger of ending when one betrays the other's trust. Otherwise, in a long-standing normal friendship, the exchange of secrets, confidences, and mutual aid are so well-consolidated that the friendship easily withstands the strain of a bad mood or inappropriate comment. On the other hand, even an enduring erotic relationship built on trust and confidences, is necessarily about giving and receiving pleasure, and when that pleasure is missing, the relationship is inevitably damaged. A lover cannot say, "I don't feel like it today." A lover cannot say, "You're tiresome, you've really annoyed me." These are comments that a person in love will put up with, because he or she is willing to overlook anything, from an insult to a row. A husband or wife will put up with this too, if only because it is likely to be perceived as a marital duty to do so. But this isn't the case in a purely erotic relationship. Each of the two lovers here must on every occasion contribute to creating a private erotic world of situations, gestures, symbols, and exciting emotions. If they don't succeed in doing so, and if the problems of everyday life take over, the erotic side of the relationship is destined to vanish, even if the two remain close friends.

Friends don't take the time to get ready or make special preparations before meeting each other. They greet each other as they are, without any problem. That's not so for lovers. Every amorous encounter is always in some way like the first, in that there is always the chance that something might go wrong. She will meet him wearing a new dress and jewellery, nicely made-up and without any telltale perfume that might make his other woman suspicious; he will try to be nice and understanding even if he's tired and to demonstrate passion even if he feels little. As soon as they meet, they embrace, kiss, and cover each other with compliments. And during sex, the two, being lovers, will take turns in satisfying each other.

That said, eroticism as we live it is a capricious and discontinuous experience, and, save for in the falling-in-love phase or in the case of an erotic infatuation, one's sex drive disappears once

it's satisfied. Henry gives the following account: "We had dinner together and really enjoyed ourselves. She made me laugh and we were both in high spirits. Then we went for each other, nearly tearing the other's clothes off. I was really lusting for her, because it had been nearly a month since the last time we'd made love. I'd been fantasizing about stripping her clothes off and squeezing her big breasts, then sucking on one of her nipples and making her shriek with pleasure. I wanted to watch her when during sex she opened her mouth in the throes of pleasure, getting more than any man could, with her head arched back and her mouth half-open and trembling, and with every fibre of her body, breasts, mouth, and sex tensing and twisting in the search for a overwhelming wave of pleasure to sweep her away. And this desire of hers got communicated to me and multiplied my own.

"But, in general, when we've finished making love, and have gotten dressed and said goodbye to each other, I have no desire to see her again immediately. To be perfectly honest, I have no desire to see her, period. It as if I'd eaten my fill for a week. I'm full, satiated. But look, I'm not saying that I've stopped caring for her. She's still a really good friend of mine, but it's just that I no longer feel one iota of sexual desire. Actually, I feel complete aversion."

I'm inclined to wonder whether that woman is really a "close friend" for Henry. Friendship involves reciprocal love and affection, after all. What Henry's account makes me think of instead is something Erica Jong said—that she had never been able to spend the entire night with any of her lovers, but always found some excuse for throwing them out of her bed and her house by three in the morning. This was because they didn't really interest her; she felt nothing for them. And then there's the star who welcomes every female fan that knocks on his hotel room door, only to get them to redress and leave in a hurry once that hurried bit of sex is over and done with. Really, is Henry really any different? Does he really care for his friend as he says and hence it is only his sexual desire to be capriciously discontinuous? Once he's made love, he needs time before he can feel sexual desire again, but not because he needs other women; it's simply because he no longer feels a need for anything.

5. The possibility of falling in love

There is a third element that threatens to make an end of an erotic friendship, and that is jealousy. Friendship must never become an exclusive relationship, nor one ruined by manifestations of jealousy and possession. A friend is always tolerant of different choices, and leaves the other free to do as he or she pleases. This is exactly the opposite of a man or woman in love who wants to

have the other with him/her all the time. When you're in love you want to know what the other is doing at every instant, and reconstruct all the instances of his/her past as well; the possibility that someone else, even for just a moment in a passing thought, should take your place in your beloved's consciousness is unbearable. In an erotic friendship, by contrast, the sexual desire felt by one for the other is there regardless of whether one or both has another sexual relationship going or not. To be perfectly honest, sometimes the knowledge that your lover is sleeping with others can be highly arousing. In any case, what counts is the lack of exclusivity. The focus is utterly on the pleasure one takes in having an erotic relationship with that person, whereas the rest of his or her life belongs to him/her alone.

Let's suppose for the sake of argument, however, that one partner in this erotic friendship has fallen in love with the other. What does the experience feel like? Well, we can say that what began as a love game, and simply constituted a series of adventuresome, exciting, and pleasant intervals in one's daily life, now becomes intense, constant, overwhelming desire and yearning. While friendship viewed from a time perspective is episodic and discontinuous, the time experience of falling in love is compact and seamless. A person who has fallen in love suffers not only out of jealousy but also because he or she can't have the other there whenever he or she wants. They miss their beloved terribly. Moreover, while in a purely erotic relationship an afternoon of sex leaves both people feeling satisfied and satiated, when a person in love has finished making love, he or she craves the other all the more; he or she want the other close by and whispering "I love you, I love you."

"I felt so happy with you, my love," Julia writes in a letter. "I was happier in your arms than I had been for years. You gave me pleasure of the sort I had totally forgotten existed. And I am grateful, ever so grateful, to you for this. But when you left, and the days started slowly passing by, one after another, I started waiting for you, even though I knew from the start that you weren't coming back. And all that desire and pleasure and longing for you became absence and need, suffering, and laceration. Love is the most exquisite delicacy life can offer us, and yet it gives us so much pain. How much I'm paying now for the happiness you gave me!"

There have been instances where a person who once felt unrequited love for another happens to encounter that beloved again and has the chance to make love with him or her. The only remedy, however, for frustrated love is a new, reciprocal love relationship. There is no other cure. This explains why if you encounter the person you once loved you feel that you've been handed an opportunity to finally do something about that emptiness you've been carrying around inside you and obtain what you've been longing for. It's akin to re-finding a child who you'd believed lost forever. Yet if even this time your love isn't returned, the old wound will reopen. You'll feel the

immense anguish you once felt night after sleepless night, each one of which you spent sobbing and asking yourself useless questions. Naturally, having lived through so much pain, you are now more cautious about letting yourself go or dreaming. You'll know how to settle for that little that is offered you without searching for more. But the experience of total, all-consuming desire casts a shadow over all this. That need to have your beloved with you and only you forever is always ready to show its face and become overpowering. It takes quite a lot of wisdom, prudence, measure, and tolerance to construct a love relationship now that can warm your heart, ease your desire, and last.

6. Intimacy

There are cases of erotic friendship that manage to endure over time. This requires both people doing without living together or having an exclusive relationship or getting jealous, and all this in the name of finding profound sexual understanding and harmony. Contrary to what many people think, sexual pleasure and understanding grow in conjunction with a similar increase in intimacy, secret confidences, communicative skills, and a mutual familiarity with their bodies and desires. This is very much the point of what Fiona said while talking with a younger girlfriend of hers. "I had the same experiences as you at the start. I was really quite attractive and all the men wanted to take me to bed. But I only slept with the ones I really liked, who had something about them that I found attractive. Looking back at all that now, however, I realize that what I was feeling wasn't really deep, profound sexual pleasure but rather it was just a pride thing—I liked making conquests. Each time represented a new victory and success. Leading the kind of life where I got to meet a terrific number of handsome and interested men, I racked up quite a number of lays. But I was never able to get close enough to any of them to be able to share intimate things about our past or our fantasies or even our desires—so as to heighten the pleasure. And it went on like that until I met Philip. We became friends while working together. I really felt drawn to him, but he was married and had kids, and he knew what divorce could do to kids. Besides, I have always treasured my freedom. I was born to be single—I could never put up with living with someone. But I just had to have him, and so I started flirting a bit, until one day he gave me a passionate kiss and his hands started touching every spot that there was to touch on my body. From that time on we've been lovers. We manage to be together once a week, or once a month, or sometimes even more time than that will pass. Meanwhile ten years have gone by. I live my life and he lives his, but even so, I can tell you that I love him, I really truly do. I love his body, his smell, his sex. Just hearing his voice on the phone makes me wet and aroused. He loves me just as much. And you should see how he cares about me, how he trusts me totally—the way I trust him. Believe me, trust is an extremely important

thing. We can tell and say to each other everything without holding back, and that lets us find ways of reaching the maximum level of sexual pleasure. There exists between us today a kind of intimacy that neither one of us had ever experienced before. Every time we make love it's marvellous, incredible, heavenly paradise. But this sort of intimacy and togetherness you only reach slowly over time, over years. You can't be in a hurry; you can't rush things along and reach sexual fulfilment by fucking a different man every night. Sure, you'll be proud of your conquests but in the end you'll be left with nothing. And don't think you can take a shortcut to extraordinary sex by using cocaine. In the end, you'll realize how alone and hollow and arid you've become. It's only now that I feel happy and fulfilled and sure that it's going to continue like this in the future."

CHAPTER SEVEN

TYPES OF INFATUATION

1. A brief introduction

Our erotic life is an alternating stream of strikingly different emotions ranging from love to disappointment, anger, peace efforts, lust, tiredness, passion, and indifference. There are those who say it is wrong to try to classify and rank these elements as they incessantly stream by. While that's sensible-sounding advice, there's a more general fact that we need to bear in mind. This is that many of the thoughts, sensations, and impressions that we experience are only what ripples and superficial waves are to the strong currents flowing deep underneath. It's very much like the sea: the waves we see crashing on the shore are generated by the formation of cyclonic and anti-cyclonic zones and by the warming of the ocean sea bed. All this is to say that if we don't identify these phenomena and learn to distinguish between them, we will not be able to understand what is happening to us. For this reason I have in this book distinguished between impersonal and personal sex or erotic attraction and friendship, and explain why now I'm forced to introduce the distinction between feeling infatuation and falling in love. Naturally, over the course of our life we experience both these things; we sometimes pass from one state to the other without even realizing it. An infatuation can lead into the ignition state of falling in love, and someone who is in love may, conversely, after being away for a long while, experience the transformation of his love into infatuation. That said, if we want to comprehend what we are living through and what might possibly happen to us next, we must learn to distinguish one state from the other.

Let's begin then by talking about infatuations. Although these occur with extreme frequency, psychologists and sexologists have never really studied them in depth—and above all they haven't discovered how to distinguish them from the experience of falling in love. If anything, actually, they have tended to confuse the former with the latter. With the exception of Stendhal,¹ we can go so far as to affirm that all the principal theorists who have written essays about the process of falling in love—from De Rougemont to Sartre to René Girard, have in truth never described the true experience of falling in love but have only described and analyzed infatuations, thus creating a tremendous amount of confusion in this field.

Although Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*² describes seduction (the attempt to force the other person to view you as a kind of god) as being typical of the falling-in-love process, it is not so at all. It is instead merely a particular form of obsession, one concerned with dominating another

person, in an attempt to nullify him/her and render him/her a slave. Sartre describes a love that can't last, in so far as love requires that the other person should be able to act freely, and when this person is rendered a slave, this love must necessarily end. The experience of madly desiring another person only to enslave him/her to the point of not being able to love him/her anymore must necessarily be called *infatuation stemming from domination*, which we can term **supreme-power infatuation** for short. It is love that is not love but a longing for illicit possession. This egocentric way of loving was what Sartre practiced with his women other than Simone de Beauvoir, at the same time as he was attributing it to humanity in general.³

Now let's take a look at what De Rougemont has to say. In his celebrated book, *L'Amour e l'Occident (Love and the Western World)*, he advances the argument that two people in love will only continue to desire each other if their love is hindered or made impossible. Tristan and Isolde, and Guinevere and Lancelot, love each other because they have been parted. If they could stay together, love each other, and marry, their passion would immediately fade. Love, in De Rougemont's view (which is simply in this regard a continuation of French literary tradition beginning with *The Princess of Clèves*⁵), needs an obstacle in order to exist and lasts as long as the obstacle lasts, then disappears. For all the author's credentials and celebrity, one must find the courage to say that this type of love is *not* typical of an authentic falling-in-love experience but only stems from the fear of loss, and hence can be termed a **loss infatuation**. I examined how loss or fear of loss affects relationships in two previous books, *Genesis* and *I Love You*. If my wife or my husband is kidnapped I'll do everything in my power to free him or her, even if our relationship has gone considerably downhill. Similarly, in the case of a tired and apathetic couple, who are still together despite the fact that all the passion has gone out of their marriage, the fact of one taking a lover can set off an incredible explosion of jealousy in the other. Someone who prior to a few hours or days ago left us indifferent now seems to be absolutely essential to us and on the verge of disappearing. But this state of affairs isn't the experience of falling in love. All we have to do is feel the other person is safely back with us and that old indifference sets in again.

There's also the sort of love that René Girard describes, calling it "the falling-in-love experience" even though it is not. To Girard's mind, a human being desires what others desire. By consequence, a man in love desires, yearns for, and idealizes that particular woman only because she belongs to another—to a rival. As soon as he is able to snatch her away from that other and she is his alone, he loses interest. Well even Girard is wrong. Girard is certainly a superb scholar and first-rate thinker (who first discovered how human desires are most certainly influenced by the principle of mimesis—or "the copy-cat impulse"), yet paradoxically this principle plays an extremely marginal role when it comes to the experience of falling in love. A person in love, in fact,

has no need of any rival. On the contrary, if love is able to explode in all its glory it's because we feel loved in return, and this in a completely exclusive way. The emotional experience that Girard describes is, hence, not the love we have been talking about but only a case of **competitive infatuation**.

An interesting subcategory of competitive infatuation is **celebrity infatuation**. Young girls especially feel a violent attraction and worship for the up-and-coming star who is likewise desired by all their friends. But this sort of love lasts only for as long as the star remains their idol, for as long as all of them desire him (the fact of which makes him desirable). The moment he declines in popularity or is forgotten, he loses all appeal. The same happens when a woman marries or goes to live with a star and sees him in everyday circumstances—acting childishly, or calculatingly, or being unfaithful or furious or letting his appearance go or becoming full of himself or getting mean or rancorous. He's no longer that luminous being adored by all women. There's an Italian proverb that says, "No man is a hero in the eyes of his valet."

In addition to these four types of infatuation there is a fifth sort, which we will call erotic infatuation, which stems exclusively from the pleasure principle. And what distinguishes this sort of infatuation from the experience of falling in love? It all has to do with the fact that our reality doesn't feel different—doesn't seem transformed—and we don't have continual need of the other or ask ourselves obsessively if he or she loves us. Neither do we feel the overwhelming need to tell her or him about our life and hear all about hers or his in exchange. We don't get any glimpse of how she or he must have viewed the world during childhood; we don't wake during the night and listen to his or her regular breathing. In the end, the violent desire that seizes us in an erotic infatuation ceases the moment that the other treats us badly, hurts our feelings, stops giving us pleasure, or quite simply just comes to an end due to the routine of daily life.

It is at this erotic infatuation that we will now take a closer look.

2. Erotic infatuation

An erotic infatuation makes us feel true sexual bliss. That other person attracts and arouses us. We want her/ his body and kisses; we want penetration and the sort of physical unity that is so intense as to leave us exhausted. We also just like being in this person's company. It makes us feel happy and content. We can work together or amicably converse for hours. We may have friends in common. Above all, the sexual desire and pleasure we feel can be so strong as to make us think that

we are in love and can't live without that other person. In reality, however, too many differences and too much distance remain between the two of us. We aren't overcome by the desire to interweave our life with hers or his, making one story out of our two personal stories, starting from childhood. Instead, the only thing cementing this relationship together is sexual pleasure, nothing but sexual pleasure. All it takes for something to snap is some unpleasantness during an encounter, some offence, an argument, a serious misunderstanding. This end can be explained by the fact that the pleasure principle stands only so long as there is continual reinforcement. We are happy and satisfied in this relationship, and we even experience ecstasy, but we are not at the mercy of a force or drive that goes beyond that of pleasure. Someone in love, on the other hand, goes on loving even if the other makes him suffer, or if he is torn apart with jealousy, or even if he is abandoned. He loves the other person independently of how they act—he loves their essence.

Conversely, this explains why, after becoming convinced during an erotic infatuation of having truly fallen in love and taking the decision to construct a life together, move in together, and get married, we then begin to feel uneasy and bored, eventually becoming aware of the fact that that person just isn't enough for us. Life with her or him doesn't seem destined to be fully satisfying. We cannot imagine it being "forever."

This is what happened to Olaf, who thought he was head over heels in love with a woman who drives him wild with desire. In order to spend the summer with her, he rented a beach place. They spent a very happy period together initially. He would tell her, "I love your graceful neck and your small breasts. I love pushing against your hips and the feel of your thighs when we're making love. I love it when you tell me about your old lovers in that frank way. I love how you're always ready to come when I call. We just lay in bed together for hours and hours, even for an entire afternoon, and I continue to enter you for I don't know how many times. Then we have something to eat and a coffee. We chat for a while, then we stand up. . . .and we start going at each other again. And it's a blur and mix of everything—food, the sea, sand, sex, skin, sun, and laughter. And also a little bit of mystery. Every so often I wonder about who you are and what you did before you met me. About how many lovers you had and what it was like for you with them. I feel a twinge of jealousy, curiosity, and excitement thinking about how with them you must have done the same things you are doing now with me. How you must have groaned with pleasure, and maybe uttered the same words."

This relationship lasted a month. They went walking along the beach together, they went dancing, and above all they continued to make passionate, frenzied love, reeling with a drunken desire for the other's body. Then suddenly one night he became impotent. That frenzied, obsessive sexual desire that had been driving him now all at once vanished. The next day his sex drive

reappeared, but it wasn't nearly as strong as before. And so what was supposed to be a vacation in paradise became a living nightmare. He was ashamed of his impotency and tried to hide the fact by saying he didn't feel well. The truth about what was going on was that his sex drive didn't tolerate everyday life. The sexual desire generated by an erotic infatuation is such that it is only aroused when it seems free and discontinuous. Olaf hadn't wanted to acknowledge the rising sense of inner uneasiness he felt until his body said 'no' for him to the type of life he was leading.

Unlike Olaf, Edgar realized early on that his love had no deep roots to it. He understood this when he thought back over about a truly deep love relationship he'd had previously. Because he'd felt so much pain that time, he was happy about the new state of affairs. Here is what he writes in a letter: "We two never really completely made our way into the other's heart and mind by sharing how things were in our childhood. It was just the opposite with my first big love in that I can remember sharing with her all the pain and disappointments of her early life as if they were my own, and I literally could feel what she was still burdened with. No sooner did I get out of bed or leave the house and I already missed her and wanted to be with her again. Being distant or away from her just tore me apart. It's not that way with you. When you left I didn't feel any pain. I knew that we would see each other again and things would start back up between us. Just as the past doesn't exist for us, neither does the future. We don't care about any of that—we're fine together and that's all that matters. When I fell in love I always felt as if I were on the brink of disaster. And since there were so many obstacles facing me I thought about leaving her, letting her go. But what terrible anguish I went through! Love is 'forever' even when you know that it has to end. Only to make it really end they'd have to cut off your hands and tear out your heart.

"No, my sweet darling friend. My love is sensual, erotic, fanned by the desire to live and be happy, but fortunately it is not that terrible passion that changes your life. I thought I was in love with you, yes I did, but I know that it isn't the case. Thank God! Being in love is not only exquisitely wonderful but also frighteningly different from any other experience on earth—it's a revelation, an abyss, a fate. It's terror. It's madness."

Erotic infatuations are more usual for men, who are used to keeping sex distinct from love. For women, on the other hand, sexuality is usually mixed with sentiment, intimacy, the desire for time spent together, sweet words, care and tenderness, together with music, memories, smells and scents. For this reason erotic infatuations are more often confused with true love. And yet, plain and simple erotic infatuations also exist for women. Here are two nice examples to be found in Ilda Bartoloni's book *Come lo fanno le ragazze (How Girls Do It)*. The first is the infatuation that Carolina experiences with Peter. "I had never seen a man as handsome as that in all my life [...]"

Voluptuous lips, fascinating eyes [...] Peter knew how to treat me right and how to talk to me; he seemed to always understand exactly what was the right thing to say to make me aroused. In bed he sometimes treated me roughly, but at the same time he was also attentive and caring—in short, a mix of brutality and tenderness. I had the most incredible, screaming orgasms with him. It was such an intense experience that it took me a long time to forget him, to break with him completely [...] I sensed that Peter was a destructive man. Being with him made me completely forget about myself, my needs, and my priorities, and this was precisely because there was something about him that in a certain sense made me his total slave. He was able to make me do whatever he wanted [...] What surprised me most was that in part I liked this, I liked feeling dominated and commanded, I liked it when he talked to me in a lewd way that made me feel a bit like a whore. He'd tell me things like 'I can smell it, the smell of your cunt.'"⁸ And yet this relationship precludes any sort of spiritual union based on an exchange of confidences and mutual trust. It is not surprising then that at a certain point Carolina grows tired of it, rebels, and leaves him.

The relationship that Giulia has with a man whom she calls an Adonis is far simpler. "An absolutely gorgeous man who I really felt attracted to [...] Your typical hunk, a muscular jock from the gym, with long hair—the sort they show on magazine covers. It took a lot for me to get him to notice me but in the end I managed it...It was sex with him, nothing but sex from the start [...] Every Sunday evening, with the precision of a Swiss watch, I'd have this Adonis there at my place. Gosh, he was fantastic in bed, [and he could] make me come over and over again just by rubbing my clitoris and moving his penis around inside me. When I would say, "Ok, enough!", then he'd come, too. Otherwise we'd just keep going forever—I mean, even for an hour or so [...] It was five months of hot sex! Sex with a capital S! And I was so proud of myself. So proud!"⁹ After this, things come to a rapid end. It is clearly an erotic infatuation in that they never decide to live together but only limit their encounters to once a week on Sunday evening; moreover, neither one of them makes even a single attempt to go beyond the realm of sex.

3. Supreme-power infatuation

This sort of relationship was first theorized by Sartre and then more amply illustrated by Girard in his book *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque (Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure)*¹⁰, where in analyzing Stendhal's novel *Le rouge et le noir (The Red and the Black)*¹¹, he observes that Julien is able to arouse Mathilde's interest in him only by pretending to be indifferent. The point is that a person who loves another becomes a slave—

slave in the sense of the master-slave relationship as theorized by Hegel and Sartre. Hence a love relationship is always a struggle over who will be able to enslave whom. This struggle ends when one of the couple confesses his or her love. But now the other, who has realized his or her objective of gaining supreme control, no longer loves the first in return. The moral is that each one of us loves only on the condition that we cannot have our beloved, and we are loved in turn only if we do not love; by fleeing, therefore, we arouse desire in others. The moment we let ourselves be overtaken by love, the other person instantly ceases to love us.

A look at one of Alberto Moravia's novels, *La Noia (Boredom)*¹², may shed some further light on the nature and workings of this sort of infatuation. The boredom that Dino the protagonist feels stems from the fact that nothing in life interests him and from the sensation that reality is completely absurd. Clearly, the latter is an idea that Moravia gets from Sartre. Everything seems utterly insubstantial and uninteresting. He doesn't care about his mother or brother, and he is indifferent to work and to art. Nothing, nothing at all, appeals to him.

This overwhelming feeling vanishes, however, when he hears the story of a painter (Balestrieri) who died while making love with a girl (Cecilia). He is immensely affected by this story and tries to find out more. In doing so, he comes to identify with Balestrieri and to wonder what he saw in that young woman and what there was about her that could have made her become so important to him. It becomes essential for him to understand who she is and what in her can arouse such overwhelming, intense and total desire. Even after meeting the girl, he finds himself thinking constantly about the dead painter. He makes love to her more and more often and in an increasing heat of passion, obsessed with the desire to find out exactly in detail what took place between the two. The girl, however, doesn't want to talk about this; she gives him nothing but one-word answers. Dino possesses her numerous times; she's always ready to have sex with him, even when he treats her cruelly. He has gained supreme control over her—precisely as he wanted. But because he now has a slave by the hand, his love and lust disappear. What is worse is that he regains his old feeling of emptiness and futility, and for this reason decides to leave her.

He goes to buy her a farewell gift and then waits for her to show up at the appointed time. But Cecilia doesn't come. She has never failed to come before, but now that he has decided to leave her, she doesn't make her appearance. He continues to wait for her anxiously, feeling even a "stab in the heart" over her inexplicable absence. This fact of her not coming or keeping her promise demonstrates that he doesn't have her in his power, that he doesn't totally possess her. And in the same instance that he understands that she isn't going to come, all his indifference, disinterest in sex, and desire to leave her disappear. Now he wants her, he wants to know where she is and why she hasn't come. If she had come, she would have instantly "withered like a rose"; she would have

stopped seeming a separate “entity.” Instead, by fleeing from him she is once again “a full being” and rekindles his obsessive desire. Dino only lusts after what escapes him, after what he can’t have, dominate or control. What is more, the only reason why he wants to possess and control it is to put an end to this desire of his.

And so he goes in search of Cecilia. After an infinite number of setbacks, during which his desire for her grows by leaps and bounds, he finds out that she has taken a lover. He becomes insanely jealous, and this jealousy is only relieved when he is in the throes of making love to her. This drives him to possess her sexually with more and more frenzy, as if in the sex act itself he can truly seize possession and master her. Yet as soon as this intercourse finishes and she gets up and leaves, he realizes that he hasn’t achieved a thing, that he’s been left with nothing. The only way to avoid this is to continue to possess her, without stop, without even eating or sleeping. Until finally he dies from his efforts, just like the painter with whom he identified.

Dino uses sex as a substitute for the fusion that real love makes possible. That it is impossible in his case has to do with the fact that such fusion implies the existence of two passions and two coinciding personal wills, whereas he only feels passion when the other spurns him. What he feels, therefore, is an infatuation that leads nowhere and which will inevitably destroy the relationship.

4. Competitive infatuation

Girard believes that the relation of desire is triangular (subject, mediator/model, and object). We don’t desire things directly, the way a hungry person desires bread, but rather we desire the objects which are desired by a third party, who is a model or mediator for us. Proust wants to be accepted by the Guermantes, an aristocratic circle, simply because theirs is the most highly desired society in Paris. In *The Eternal Husband* by Dostoevsky, the protagonist Pavel Pavlovic asks the man who stole his first wife from him to help him pick out a gift for his new wife. Why? Because Pavlovic can only desire a woman who is desired by another man. Naturally, this fellow pinches Pavlovic’s second wife as well. Yet Pavel Pavlovic still hasn’t learned his lesson. A short time later we find him in the company of a new beautiful girlfriend; with them, however, there is also a young impetuous soldier who is wooing her right under Pavlovic’s nose. Again, Pavlovic can only desire a woman when he has a rival on hand who is trying to get her away from him, and who thus is making her all the more desirable to him. In Stendhal’s novel *The Red and the Black*¹⁴, two wealthy gentlemen both want Julien as a tutor. It’s not that Julien is so great at the job, it’s just that

each man desires whatever the other one desires, and so they compete and fight over who is to have him. Everyone desires what others desire, and for this reason all people enter into rivalry with each other. It is very important to keep in mind here, however, that they don't become rivals because they desire the same thing or person, but rather that they desire that thing or person precisely for the fact and at the moment of their becoming rivals. Desire aims not so much at ownership of the object as at the being of the mediator (rival). The contested object or person, in other words, only has value as long as the contest lasts. If one rival gives up, even the other will cease to desire that object or person. And the same thing happens when one rival prevails over the other. Having defeated the other, he or she no longer cares about the prize in question.

Does Girard's theory explain what it means to fall in love? We have already established that it doesn't. The type of love that is a consequence of this mimetic character of desire is not what we experience when we fall in love. And the proof lies in the fact that it vanishes as soon as the person who loves is loved in return. By contrast, in the authentic falling-in-love experience, full and total happiness, as well as the transfiguration of the whole world, happen precisely when there is this reciprocated love. What Girard is describing, therefore, is nothing other than *competitive infatuation*, in which we desire another person only if he or she belongs to another; our desire, moreover, lasts only until we defeat our rival and have made that person our own. Carlo Castellaneta's novel *Le donne di una vita (The Women of a Lifetime)*¹⁵ contains an uninterrupted series of competitive infatuations, as lived by the protagonist, Stefano. At first Stefano falls passionately in love with Ida, a married woman who he convinces to leave her husband and come live with him. After a while, however, he realizes that he doesn't love her anymore. He will love her once again but only after she has found another man and remarried. All of Stefano's other love relationships start and end in the same way. After Flora comes Valeria, who leaves her husband and kids for him but whom he tires of as soon as she starts acting like a faithful and jealous wife who waits up for him when he returns late. On the very day that he is scheduled to buy the house where they plan to live together, he meets Giorgina. He goes through a period of wild and ecstatic love with Giorgina as well. This is of course destined to last only until he is certain that she loves him in return. When he is thoroughly convinced of it, he is ready for his next romantic adventure.

In a competitive infatuation, as in the case of other types of infatuation, it is not only love which fades but also all sexual interest in the other. The person goes from a state of obsessive yearning to one of complete disinterest, and in certain cases even experiences impotency.

5. Sex as a way of holding on to the other

We've already taken a look at the subject of sexual compulsion in our discussion of *Boredom* by Moravia. To reiterate briefly: Dino is infatuated with Cecilia because she eludes him and because she has a lover. By contrast, if she loved him and agreed to stay with him, he would stop desiring her and fall back into that state of indifference that he terms "boredom." He has sex with her constantly and obsessively in an attempt to possess and exercise supreme control over her. As soon as this sex act is over and she gets up to leave, however, he senses that he is losing her and so he follows her and has intercourse with her again and again until he collapses. In this case compulsive sex is a substitute for the fusion that occurs between two people who are really in love.

That very same type of obsessive erotic compulsion may, however, be displayed by a person who is really and deeply in love but who knows that he or she cannot fully live this love or else that he or she is in danger of losing it. In *Damage*, a novel by Josephine Hart¹⁷ on which the film by Louis Malle is based, the main character is a man who has avoided passion of any sort for all his life until suddenly, out of the blue, he falls in love. He is swept away by and at the mercy of an uncontrollable desire for the woman he loves; as soon as he sees her and they are alone, he throws himself on top of her in a voracious and unstoppable sexual frenzy. He knows that the woman will never be exclusively his, seeing that she is engaged to his son and will soon be married to him. The woman desires him, but she does not feel exclusive love for him; she has decided to have him as her lover at the same time as she continues the relationship with his son. The man's response to this is to try to bridge this distance between them and fuse together with her by ravenously making love to her over and over again to the point of desperation, in that he knows that he will never be able to have her exclusively to himself as his immense love requires. She rents a studio apartment where they meet in secret...till the day that his son happens to discover them there together. Distraught and overwhelmed, he precipitates down the stairwell to his death. We see how even this love becomes an attempt to achieve through sex the fusion of true love; it is an attempt bound to failure, however, for that sort of total unity is only possible in an exclusive, bilateral relationship such as exists between two people who have fallen in love with each other.

It must be said that obsessive sexual desire appears most frequently in relationships between a person who has fallen in love with one who has not. This, especially in the case of men. Antoine's experience serves as a perfect example. He was aware that she didn't love him—that perhaps she loved another or, then again, perhaps she didn't love anyone. She made love with him and liked the sex, but she didn't love him. Or in any case she didn't feel exclusive love for him the way he wanted her to. And so he just kept pouncing on her—he could never get enough. He had her as soon

as she came in the door; he pulled her clothes off and they made love on the first couch they came to, or on the floor, and then again in bed. And he covered her with his sperm, marking her stomach, her face, her legs, her arms, her arms, as if to signal in this animal-like way that she was his property, the way dogs mark their territory. As long as he was inside her and could feel her responding, he was at peace. But as soon as she stood up to leave, he again felt in a panic that he was losing her. So he'd take her again, just a minute before she walked out the door, as if it might be for the last time or his last chance. He would have followed her out onto the stairs if that had been possible, such was his desire to penetrate her and keep her nailed to him forever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE REVOLUTION: WHEN WE FALL IN LOVE

1. A step in the right direction

There is an enormous difference between sexual attraction and the emotional and physical processes at the basis of the falling-in-love experience. We don't avert that as such at first because when we fall in love our sexual experiences are so intense. Paradoxically, it is precisely this sexual explosion, this triumph of sexuality and Eros, which masks the difference between the two fundamental processes. In addition, in more than a few cases the ignition stage of falling in love receives its jump start from a sexual encounter. While allowing for that, we know very well that two people may be extremely attracted to each other to the point of throwing themselves into each other's arms and living an extraordinary erotic experience, without this giving rise to love.

Another reason why we may not recognize the ultimate uniqueness of this process of falling in love is that it is easy to get confused between it and other forms of attraction and love. Some people say things like, "I'm always falling in love" or "I fall in love with a different person once a month." The term "fall in love" here simply refers to a sudden attraction, a crush, or perhaps one of the types of infatuation that we looked at in the last chapter. At most, it may signal the start of something more profound that has been aborted, brought to a halt. It is a real pity that so many people are superficial in this regard, for their confusion over the real nature of their feelings leads them to make wrong decisions that are oftentimes undoable.

How does the authentic experience of falling in love begin? Any desire—or "decision"—of ours to fall in love counts for nothing; indeed, when we fall in love it is always suddenly and unexpectedly. And yet there are early-warning signs—a state of dissatisfaction and restlessness, for one thing, as well as a mysterious feeling of anticipation. Walking down the street we feel strangely attracted to the men and women we encounter, as if we were looking for something in them. Some detail will catch our eye—a pair of eyes or breasts, or a way of walking. And we experience, whether at sunset or at night or simply when we are alone or in the midst of a throng of people, a premonition or sense of destiny. At times we may also be overtaken by a sort of languor; we feel greatly moved by a piece of music or a poem, or by the sight of a child crying. We may have dreams that seem to us to have some arcane meaning that eludes us. We may be attracted to a complete stranger and feel sorry when he or she leaves.

We fall in love when we are tired of the present and ready to leave behind us a life experience that now shows the wear and tear of time. We are set for a change and have all the vital energy necessary for a new exploration of the world. Or perhaps we are ready to employ skills or talents that we have never put to use, explore cultures or worlds we have never had direct contact with, or realize dreams and desires that we have always repressed. Sometimes this break with the past is speeded up thanks to a lengthy stay in a different city or country—especially when that means spending a long time away from the partner with whom we normally live. This person no longer shares our problems, no longer is there to help, no longer is able to understand us, and no longer is our all-knowing travel companion through life. And so we go looking for what we need to start our life over again, and renew ourselves and our world. Yet because all of our desires spring from the depths of our unconscious we don't know where exactly to search or what to look for.

Then mysteriously one of our casual encounters with others acquires an intensity that makes us sit and notice. This happens when that other person alludes to, indicates, or symbolizes to us an alternative way of being, one that we are beginning on our own to embrace or else aspiring to. He or she evokes what we could have been and what we could become. I might not be particularly sexually attracted to this person, but I am nevertheless drawn to him or her. My fascination is such that I just want to stand there gazing and listening. The minutes or hours fly by without my realizing it and suddenly he or she is leaving and that gets me down. This other person keeps coming to mind over the course of the following days; I intensely desire to see him or her again, and when I finally do, I feel happy all over. I talk willingly about myself, about my likes and dislikes, and I'm happy to discover that our assessments and preferences coincide. I feel the urge to help him or her out and also to organize things to do something together—projects that will lend continuity to the relationship. I start having erotic fantasies now, but I'm not interested in mere sex—I want sweetness, poetry, intimacy. I sense, too, how this longing of mine represents a danger—a dangerous temptation. After all, I realize, I don't really know anything about him or her. This leads me to want to know how he or she lives, what he or she does, who he or she loves and has loved in the past. And as I wonder about these things, an anxious jealous feeling seizes me.

What I am feeling is the tell-tale precocious and unmistakable desire for an *exclusive* erotic relationship. Pure Eros does not require this exclusivity. It's all about finding pleasure in the present. It doesn't matter what one's partner does with others—or, if it is an issue, it may even be a source of sexual excitement. But once the falling-in-love process begins, suddenly we are extremely interested in the other person's past; we want to know who he or she has been having sex with. Even when our love relationship is in its earliest stages, we wish that there were no one else but us. We are shaken up by the idea that this person whom we are so attracted to and curious about and

talking to—this person who sets something deep inside us vibrating, has a more intimate and intense relationship with someone else.

Bear in mind that there is absolutely no guarantee that every time we have this sort of experience we will end up falling in love. I can't underscore enough how this falling-in-love business is not some mere automatic process. Its workings are in fact quite complex. We fight off falling in love because this sort of emotional abandonment and vulnerability is potentially very risky. By consequence we may decide to resist the temptation, or we may make the discovery that the other person has certain qualities that bother us, or realize that our life plans are incompatible. In any case, the symptoms that I've described indicate that something has been set in motion, that we are not dealing with purely sexual attraction here but rather we have crossed over into the territory of what it means to fall in love, albeit in its embryonic form. Above all it signifies that we have become willing to begin a relationship already containing the seed of exclusivity.

But let's stop for a moment here to really consider what this desire for exclusivity is all about.

Does it stem, as René Girard says¹, from the fact of our falling in love with someone because she or he is with another, our rival, from whom we want to take her/him? No, we have come to see that this isn't the case. We can start to fall in love even where there is no rival. Naturally, in so far as any person has other relationships and feels love or affection for others, we are always tearing her or him away from those others when we fall in love. But it is going too far to say that we desire our beloved because someone else, by having sex with her or him, shows us how desirable she/he is. Rather, what happens is that we discover how desirable our beloved is and simultaneously we are forced to wonder if there are any potential rivals that we don't know about. Finally, it bears underscoring one last time that despite what Girard believes, when we fall in love for real, we find that our love grows and solidifies precisely because we are sure of being loved in return; for this reason two people in love are never jealous of each other. If one of them experiences a momentary pang of jealousy, in fact, the other has the power to immediately set her or his mind completely at ease.

2. The phenomenon of falling in love: how love ignites

Even when it gets off to a shaky start, the experience of falling in love is always a life event that revolutionizes our daily existence; it is an interruption that puts an end to continuity, spelling

the death of something and the start of something else.² If this does not take place, it is not the real thing. It may be a fascinating and fun erotic experience, but it isn't the same as falling in love. A person truly in love always (and often brutally) cuts the ties with his or her past love objects in order to create a new and exclusive bond with his or her beloved. This doesn't mean that the person in love stops caring deeply for her/his parents, siblings, children, friends, or even her husband or his wife, but heaven forbid that they stand in the way or obstruct this love! Out of nowhere the falling-in-love experience gives rise to a bond that becomes stronger than any other one, and is comparable only to that which a mother feels for her child.

From a sociological standpoint, the experience of falling in love constitutes the *nascent, or ignition, state of a collective movement consisting in two and only two people*. As a given, each individual has his or her individual history of consolidated social relationships as well as those of deep friendship. When they fall in love, however, the two individuals establish between themselves a privileged relationship that removes them from their relative social sets and provides them with a new set of social and cultural coordinates. This entails the couple's refashioning their individual relationships with or attitudes towards family, friends, work, religion, and politics. In essence, it is a revolution that sparks joy, enthusiasm, and ecstasy, at the same time as it may also unleash desperation, painful ruptures, or violence.

While the falling-in-love process has obviously been experienced in every age and society, it is only in the Western world that it has acquired a precise shape and form, becoming the basis for two people's decision to live together and/or marry. This, because only in the West has the concept of individual freedom come to be recognized on its own, divorced from issues of family or custom. The experience of falling in love is a by-product of this freedom. By contrast, in India the caste system has always predominated, in China social customs has prevailed, and in the Islamic world the position of women in society has always been held to be lower than that of men. This is the tradition that prevails still today.

In the famous book of Arabian tales, *A Thousand and One Nights*, there is not a single love story that can measure up to that of Abelard and Heloise, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, or Paolo and Francesca. Passionate love that stands in the way of marriage is always described as something base that merits scorn and even death. In the story "The King of the Black Islands," the Queen falls madly in love with a man who is disparagingly described as a vile black slave. The King surprises them and wounds the man in such a way as to paralyze him and render him deaf and dumb. The woman, however, continues to love him; she assists him for years and recites marvellous love poetry to him. And yet not a word is said in her favour; there is neither praise nor compassion. Instead, she is presented as a monstrous witch, who in the end will be put to death.

Only in Ancient Greece did the wants and desires of the individual gain recognition, and only in Rome were women granted full legal rights. In addition, only monogamy was practiced in both civilizations; there were no harems. A marriage was always between two people of free will. Christianity re-enforced this concept of individual liberty by affirming that all human beings were equal, that there was no difference between a man and a woman, and that only they could choose whom they wanted as their wife or husband.

When from the year 1000 to the end of the 1200s, the start of economic development began to rapidly transform European Christian civilization, reform movements sprang up which advocated utopian models of a perfect society. The same phenomenon, if you like, also took place at the level of the couple. To fall in love meant—and means—to rebel against a pre-arranged marriage fixed by the family; it is an affirmation of individual freedom. Sometimes it is even a revolt against the constituted order of things, against conjugal duties and feudal-style allegiances. Above all, it always weighs in as a value that exists in contraposition to another value. Tristan and Isolde, Lancelot and Guinevere, Abelard and Heloise, and Paolo and Francesca are traitors and adulterers but---and here lies the peculiar paradox of Western culture—they are also heroes.

The *nascent state* is at the foundation both of collective movements and of the falling-in-love process, which is itself a special sort of collective movement made up solely of two people.

The emotional and mental state that people in love find themselves in is completely different from that of everyday life. It instils in us extraordinary energy and revolutionizes our way of looking at the world, where everything now becomes possible. A new life is about to begin, with a new sky, new earth, and new existence made up of passion, enthusiasm, joy, brotherhood—oh, it is so marvellous! In a collective movement of the many, participating individuals feel like brothers and tend to unite, join together, and form a compact community with a solid sense of ‘us.’ In the ignition state of the falling in love experience, the participating individuals in question are the loving couple.

When in this state we have the impression that a period of imprisonment is now over and that we have been freed of our chains and allowed back out into the open air. We savour our sense of freedom. Until just a short while ago, we were bent in two under the weight of our burdens, unable to shake off our laziness, passivity, and fear. We forced ourselves to do everything others asked of us. We adhered to their rules instead of following our most profound aspirations. We weren’t ourselves anymore. Little by little we’d enclosed ourselves in an invisible prison. Now, however, we have broken through the bars and finally become what and how we want to be.

It's as if a blinding veil has dropped off our eyes by magic. Now we know what our real desires are. Now we know our true nature and essence. We know what is right and what the right thing to do is. And all of this is on account of our love. Love is a marvellous gift, even if it can cause suffering. Losing it means returning to life among the blind, to life as a zombie.

The one whom we love is beyond comparison with anyone else. "The one I love and who attracts me," writes Roland Barthes, "is *atopos*. It's impossible for me to classify him precisely because he is the One and Only, the unrepeatable Image that miraculously corresponds to the special requirements of my desire. He embodies my truth; he cannot be limited to some stereotype."⁴ He is unique—absolutely the only living creature that I could possibly love. Anyone else I may encounter, down to my favourite idol, could never take his place. I'll never find anyone like him or better than him. If I am loved in return by him, I marvel over the incredible, extraordinary good fortune that has befallen me. I sense that something has been granted me that I never imagined I'd ever obtain.

We are able now to grasp the essence of things; we know that everything is animated by an ascendant force that moves in the direction of joy and happiness, rendering each thing harmonious and perfect. This is the profound truth of reality. All existing things, all animate and inanimate beings, have meaning. The fact of being in the world is in itself beautiful, logical, necessary, admirable, and marvellous. For this reason, everything around us—a hill, a tree, a leaf, a wall at sunset, even an insect—appears to us as beautiful and moving.

When we love and are loved in return, we participate in the immense breath of the universe. We become part of its flow and harmony. We feel affected and penetrated by a transcending force. We are like a musical note in a great symphony. We feel free, and it is thanks to our love that we achieve our freedom. No one is a "slave" of his or her love. Rather, it is his or her truth, calling, destiny.

Our falling in love projects us into the divine world and renders sacred even eroticism and sexuality. Consequently, the sex act, inclusive of the preparations leading up to it—the approach and the discovery of our beloved's body, then our making ready to penetrate or be penetrated, all this is in reality a rite, a consecration, a ritual conducted by priest and priestess.

The more we make love with our beloved, the more we want to make love; the more we are with him or her, the more we want to stay forever. The fact of our falling in love, this alone, creates this continuous, non-stop desire and renders impossible any rent in the temporal unfolding of our relationship. The time of love is continuous, compact, and seamless. If we are not with the one we love every moment, if we go away or if he or she goes away for a period, at his or her return we

want to know everything that he or she did in an attempt to stay close, to maintain our sense of being together, even during this absence.

3. 'In a lightning flash': love at first sight

There are numerous steps to the falling-in-love process. This fact, unfortunately, is not reflected in the French expression, *tomber amoureux*, or in the English expression, *to fall in love*, while it is clearly embraced by the Italian word, *innamoramento*. The English and French terms may furthermore create confusion in that they present dual meanings. The first is the implication that this falling in love happens instantly, thus 'in a lightning flash' or *un coup de foudre*. This, however, is not always the case. The second meaning, which is on the contrary always true, is that a person in love realizes that he or she is in love only at certain point and is surprised by the fact; it's as if he or she has *fallen* through a trap door or under a spell that cannot be undone. (Careful to remember here, however, that the entrapment may occur gradually over time, whereas the awareness of what has happened is always sudden.)

We need to bear this in mind in order to understand what happens during *un colpo di fulmine*. This Italian term exists in French as we've seen (*un coup de foudre*) but not in English. The closest Anglo-Saxon expression, *love at first sight*, alludes to something that has already taken place rather than to the special revelatory moment. The stroke of lightning conjured up by the Italian and French expressions, on the other hand, captures that sudden flash of fascinating appeal, that sudden revelation of the other person's beauty and extraordinariness. It is an instant, a click, a flip of a switch, in which we see and feel what we didn't see and feel before. It must be stressed, however, that this experience does not signify that the ignition state of the falling-in-love process is fully underway, nor does it mean that love has fully bloomed, as the English expression 'love at first sight' would seem to indicate. While it is true that there is always 'a lightning flash' during the process of falling in love, this alone does not transform an individual into a man or woman genuinely in love.

In Stanley Kubrick's film *Eyes Wide Shut*, the female protagonist confesses to her husband that one day in the hotel where they were staying she happened to see a naval officer whom she was utterly and instantly smitten with. If he had asked her to, she would have without a shadow of a doubt left her husband, her children, everything. The husband (the actor Tom Cruise) is quite shaken up by this and embarks on the exploration of the erotic realm which constitutes the main focus of the film. If one examines the storyline from the perspective of a social scientist, however, it

is immediately clear that both the woman's emphatic declarations and the husband's reaction are overblown with respect to the real risk at hand. After all, *coup de foudre* or no *coup de foudre*, it would have been enough that her handsome officer turned out to have an unpleasant body odour, or did something uncouth, or chanced to enter the room with another woman on his arm, and the magic charm would have been broken. That bit of lightning only illuminates a door. When one falls in love, however, it is not a question of opening a door but starting down a path.

In addition, when one really is in love this experience of flash revelation tends to reoccur again and again in varying circumstances; this signifies that there isn't merely one particular and unrepeatable stimulus to set it off.

It's Jarry's turn to talk now: "I saw her at a conference. I was sitting there bored in this large room full of men when I saw a beautiful blond girl with a ponytail go by. She was walking in a very proud and erect way, and yet at the same time she looked gentle and sweet seeming. Another interesting contrast was that although she was slim, she seemed extremely buxom. That odd double effect of slenderness and big-bustedness was something I was only able to explain to myself many years later. It's on account of her having small bones, a small nose, and slight wrists and ankles on the one hand, and on the other hand, wide shoulders, a small waist, a fantastic bottom, and gorgeous legs. But I only noticed these things after a while—I mean, I didn't really take it all in right then.

"I saw her again a couple of years after that. She was constantly in the company of important men. I wondered which one had her for a mistress. One thing that I learned back at college was that extremely beautiful women are always the prerogative of rich and powerful men. So I avoided her; she was too beautiful and dangerous.

"And yet destiny had it that I ran into her yet another time. We worked on a project together, and I discovered how thorough and efficient she was. And scrupulous and wonderfully ethical as well. She also had exquisite taste and refinement, together with a knack for making everything and anything more pleasant. She was great at organizing and at treating people patiently and politely, without losing sight of her purposes and objectives. I admired her immensely. There wasn't a man who wasn't attracted to her, but she was unapproachable. She didn't have anyone—no man of any sort, get it? She lived on her own in an apartment to which even I was only admitted when in the company of someone else. It was her natural way of defending herself against that horde of suitors without actually having to refuse anyone. I worked closely with her for more than a year without ever having a single erotic thought. I didn't even perceive of her as being female.

"Then the project ended; the job was finished and we were all about to go our separate ways. She threw a big farewell party at her place. I remember there were a lot of sullen men with the kind of ugly faces that politicians have and equally ugly wives. And there she was, in a long skirt and a

blouse, offering drinks and hors-d'oeuvres to them all. At a certain point, while she was bending over, I was dumbstruck by the realization of what gorgeous legs and a beautiful ass she had. I gazed transfixed at those incredible curves of hers and wondered how I had ever managed to avoid seeing them all those years. Man, if that was some incredible set of blinders I'd placed over my eyes to 'protect' myself from her!

"My emotional life at that moment was in total shambles. Physically I was feeling worse and worse, too. And even though I had plenty of women, there wasn't one who in fact interested me. Even today I am positive that I would never have fallen in love with her if I hadn't known her so well—if I hadn't seen and admired her honesty, professional skills, moral standards, and courage. But first I had to also become aware of her beauty and desire her sexually. And this, despite having done everything to defend myself from her. What broke that spell? I think it was the sight of her sweetly, patiently, and humbly serving those worthless ingrates. That scene symbolized everything that I'd seen for over a year—I mean the injustice that can be done to an extraordinary woman by the low-minded and crass. This triggered in me the spirit of a knight from the Middle Ages, the kind who defends the weak, rights all wrongs, and rescues the maiden being offered in sacrifice to the dragon. My fear of beautiful women and of her in particular vanished because all this beauty needed me. It was my duty to run to her aid, help and support and defend her, and shield her with my body and my love.

"As I said, morale-wise and physically I was a mess. I was at wit's end and looking for the right road to take. That woman was the ideal companion for me. I knew this from experience, and rationally I knew it was true as well. Before, however, there had been a piece of the puzzle missing, and that was the thing I desired more than anything else in life—I mean to say the incredible, unsettling, unforgettable sort of beauty that leaves you spellbound. The kind of beauty that I'd always denied myself contact with. Now I had it there in front of me and I wasn't afraid anymore. The last piece of puzzle fell in place. There was no need of anything else. I was ready to start a new life. I was in love."

4. A flash revelation and then?

Let's go back to Jarry's story. He said that at a certain point, and after coming to appreciate the intellectual rigor and ethical conduct of this woman, he suddenly noticed that she also had an incredible body, legs, and derriere. It was a flash revelation to him. Now he was madly attracted to her. And yet, should the woman have disappeared from his life right then he would, yes, have been

left with an indelible memory and a nostalgic yearning for what might have been, but he wouldn't have been torn apart and devastated by heartbreak.

But things were destined to turn out differently—meaning for the better. Jarry then confessed that after this revelation of her beauty, he told her that he loved her and she embraced him. They made love regularly and started going on trips together. One morning during a trip, they had a fight over some small trifle. He stormed out of the hotel room and went downstairs to the conference room where they were waiting for him. All of a sudden, terror and panic overtook him. Had she left? Had she disappeared, never to return? This mix of terror and panic is much more than fear, mind you—it is a total loss of self, the dissolution of all sense and meaning, and hence an experience of divine truth. Jarry runs out of the room like a man gone berserk to look for her, and finds her sitting calmly in the hotel bar, with a smile on her face. Trembling and shaking, he goes over to her, crouches down to take her hands and buries his face in them at length, without speaking. Now he knows that he loves her with his whole body and soul, without reserve. But what would have happened if he'd found her chatting with another man, or if she, even just for spite, had told him that she didn't love him anymore? A man like Jarry might have run away yet another time. And would she have gone looking for him?

Even the greatest of loves are extremely fragile at the start.

5. He loves me, he loves me not

At the beginning we don't know if we are really in love or not. Take the case of the main character of *Un amore (A Love)*, a novel by Dino Buzzati. He finds himself falling in love with an 18-year-old girl he met in a brothel. He begins to think about her constantly and to search the areas where he thinks he's seen her. It's not enough having sex with her in the brothel; rather, he wants to know who she is as a person and what kind of life she has. He seeks her out at La Scala where she is a ballerina in the corps de ballet and trails her when she goes on trips. He is astonished at himself and his own interest. After all, she is just a girl like others—a little slut who you could have if you paid her. Every so often he leaves town and forgets about her, but as soon as he comes back he starts thinking about her again. He wonders about who she is with and what she is doing; he imagines her making love with boys her age, or with the wealthy young men who dazzle her with their fancy sport cars and yachts, or with any of the men who approach her—rivals that he, a bourgeois, shy, bookish 50-year-old can't compare to or compete with. He can't wait to see her again at their appointed time; he keeps looking at his watch and obsessively counting the minutes.

Then suddenly it again seems like an utterly stupid thing to be engrossed in—a mere fleeting infatuation.

It's the phase in which one is assailed by doubt—a period that lasts all the longer when the other person is vastly different from you and extraneous to your world, and when these feelings of love arise unexpectedly, incredibly, in the most improbable fashion. This sort of thing tends to happen more frequently to men than to women, and this because men always are thinking about sex but not usually about love, and so when they fall in love they are usually caught unawares. And things continue that way, until—in Buzzati's words—"suddenly he realized what he probably already knew but had never wanted to believe before. Like someone who has experienced the unmistakable symptoms of some horrible disease but doggedly manages to interpret them in such a way as to continue with life as he knows it." He realizes that he now thinks about Laide ceaselessly and that he "loved her for herself, for what she embodied of femininity, whimsy, youth, lower-class authenticity, guile, shamelessness, cheekiness, freedom, and mystery. She was the symbol of the nocturnal, gay, depraved, wickedly bold and self-confident world of the poor, seething with insatiable life on the other side of the social barrier from the dull, respectable bourgeoisie."⁶ He realizes, furthermore, that he has an absolute physiological need to stay with her, for only when he is by her side does he feel happy and at peace; by contrast, the very moment she leaves or goes off, he becomes obsessed with waiting and tormented by jealousy. He understands that what he feels is "not carnal infatuation but a much deeper sort of bewitching, as if a new fate—one he had never considered as a possibility—was calling him, Antonio."⁷

Naturally art (here the art of fiction) is at once truth and mere fancy. In order to explore the psychic zone of doubt and uncertainty, Buzzati has his inhibited, middle-aged protagonist fall in love with an unbridled young prostitute. The result is a state of pure torment. By norm, however, this period of mutual testing of the water—this time for picking a daisy and asking whether 'he loves me or he loves me not'—this time for jealousy is far shorter and often culminates in the happiness of mutual love.

6. Why that man or that woman?

We fall in love when, dissatisfied with the present, we find the inner energy to begin a new stage of our existence. We break with our old social ties and construct a new personal and social life. We can't do this on our own, however; at the very least there needs to be two of us to bond together and form a living collectivity. But who is this person with whom all this is possible? As

we've said, before falling in love we go in search of something or someone. The falling in love occurs if we find what we've been looking for. It's as if we had a puzzle in front of us and at a certain point this other person is revealed to be the missing piece, and boom, the entire picture appears—and this is our possible future. And just as with a puzzle, when we realize that the other person really is that missing piece, we experience marvel and exultation. When we meet the man or woman who corresponds to this missing piece of the picture or pattern, we have the curious and disconcerting impression of having been made purposely for each other and now finally we have met. Falling in love is not something we chose to do; rather it is our destiny unfolding. And since we don't know the design or pattern to our lives, and even less so what particular piece is missing, this other person might turn out to be the most incredible, strange, or surprising type of individual. What happens might be something that we never could have imagined in a hundred years or simply pure madness.

“But how did you manage to fall in love with a woman as crazy as her?” I ask. The man in front of me is around the age of sixty. He's amassed a large fortune over the years and is an important businessman, one who is clearly astute, clever, and vigilant. “You know that my theory is that we fall in love when we are ready for a change and we meet a person who indicates the direction our change should take,” I remind him. “In other words, when we meet someone who somehow symbolizes an aspect of our future.”

The man nods. “It was like this. At that time I was completely under my father's thumb and, I might add, suffocated by my mother as well, since she always took his side in everything. It was as if they'd enclosed me in this cage on the basis of their religious convictions. I was supposed to marry my second cousin. They had decided this a long time before for a number of complicated reasons, and I had never rebelled against this plan. Or rather, only my body rebelled, in that I was terribly allergic to dust, to cats, to everything. I didn't have a girlfriend; I only went to prostitutes. I'd take the car out in the evening and drive around for hours eyeing them on the sidewalk. I'd circle around until I finally found one I liked; then I'd get up my courage and invite her to get into the car. There was a small young thing who I liked most of all. We'd be in the car and she would mount me like a horse. We'd gaze into each other's eyes while having sex. After some time, I started going on business trips in place of my father and so have to do with hotels and with other people. That was how I met her one evening. She was small and vivacious and witty; she delighted in paradoxes and made me laugh. We went out to dinner together and I told her about my life. I told her about my cousin, and she described to me a couple of boyfriends who she'd gotten bored with. Afterwards she practically dragged me to a disco, where she introduced me to her friends—I

remember there was a big fat girl with huge breasts. She told me that she had lots of lovers. Her world was completely different from mine—very liberated and anti-conformist. They all thought of sex as something natural. They considered themselves very avant-garde, and perhaps they were. Anyway, I was a bit frightened and a bit fascinated by all this. One night, driving home in her car, I embraced and then kissed her. Without saying a word, she proceeded to get out of the car and took off her panties. Then she got back in and straddled me—like a horse, the way the little prostitute I mentioned had, only she was a normal woman who was doing something that she considered natural. I was stupefied, and, though this might seem strange to you, grateful. It seemed like an extraordinarily generous act to me. I made love to her, gazing into her eyes as if hypnotized, and I fell instantly in love. I fell in love because she did and decided everything—all I did was to kiss her and then take her home.

“Not long after that we went off to a hotel together and locked ourselves in the room and made love non-stop for a week. I had never experienced anything like that; it was beyond my imagination. Pure and simple pleasure and bliss and happiness, that’s what it was. But also I had this incredible sense of freedom, wild abandon, the end to every constriction, the escape from the cage, the end to being dominated by my father and mother. I wasn’t afraid of anyone anymore. When I got back I thought about her incessantly. As she did me, for she kept phoning me up and writing me every day. She kept talking to me about freedom and adventure and our succeeding at anything we set our mind to. Sure, she was a bit deranged and crazy. But those exaggerated things she said were an invitation to me to free myself from my parents and take my life in my own hands. And that’s what I did. I saw that my father wasn’t cautious and prudent as much as afraid of change, so afraid that he couldn’t even see a good opportunity when it was there in front of his nose. I had some money that my grandfather had left me, and I got up my courage and made my first investments, which turned out to be right on the mark. My father didn’t want to join me, but I managed to convince my uncle to do so. In short, I made it. Even my parents were forced to admit it. Then I told them that I wasn’t going to marry my cousin. I wanted to marry someone else, a woman I really felt attracted to. And that’s what I did. I know, my wife doesn’t understand a thing about money or finance or business, and she’s a bit off the wall, even crazy, but she was the one who pushed me into getting up my courage and acting. And she’s always stuck by me and been on my side about everything. Nowadays I’m not all that attracted to her anymore—she hasn’t aged well, let’s say. Even back then, in all honesty, she was no great beauty. But despite all that, you see, she was the one who made it possible for me to escape from that cage I was in; she was the one who gave me strength. It’s totally crazy if you stop to think about it! I mean, it all began when she

removed her panties and mounted me, like the little whore had done!! My new life started at that precise moment. Crazy, just crazy!”

7. The falling-in-love process and social change

In times of social change, people tend to become enamoured of the leaders who symbolize or head up key collective movements. How many people probably have converted to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Marxism because they have fallen in love with a militant, believer, or leader of that sect? And, inversely, how many have fallen in love with a man or woman who is part of the movement they have chosen to participate in?

Let’s consider the case of the young girl who at age 16 leaves home to follow a young hippie and join a commune, where she dresses in long robes, takes up basket-weaving, smokes pot, sunbathes in the nude, and lies on the floor to listen to music in a trance.

Many years previously, one of her great-grandmothers from New England also left home to become part of a religious community that wanted to save humanity—the Salvation Army. Part of the reason for this decision was that her great-grandmother was similarly attracted to the tall, thin man with athletic shoulders and long dark beard, who became her great-grandfather. Together they went to places where people lived in misery or where vice, drink, prostitution, and corruption were rampant. With their little band, they drew a crowd to whom they preached about the need to leave lawlessness and sin behind them and follow in the way of the Lord. She wore a floor-length grey dress with a high collar and a hair cap that she only took off at home. She gave her husband five children without him once being able to see her body—something that she herself had never done either since gazing at oneself in the mirror was a dangerous form of vanity.

Unlike her great-grandma, our young hippie hasn’t yet given any children to her man, but certainly could decide to do so in the future. In one way she is the complete opposite of her ancestor, however: she has no qualms at all about walking around in the nude, and if some other young man from the commune asks her nicely if she would make love with him, she will no doubt do so—for theirs is a community based on the principle of brotherhood and fraternal sharing, and love is not something selfish or exclusive. There is plenty to go around. Love means caressing one and other, giving each other sexual pleasure, sharing a joint, and helping each other out in general. No one approaches her to ask her such a thing, however, because they know she is Ananda’s girl. Did she follow that lanky youth who looked like an Indian beggar out of love, or did she fall in love

because he showed her, by his example, how the world of the future could be, the world of peace and flower children? No doubt it was a little bit of both.

And what about this other girl, on the other hand, who goes to the shooting range everyday to learn how to use a gun, wears a black pullover, reads the axioms of Marx, and who now is in a relationship with this young bearded guy—does she see him the way he sees himself, as a potential guerrilla leader, out of love, or has she fallen in love with him because he represents in her eyes the future Che Guevara?

We fall in love with the future; we fall in love with what symbolizes our possible destiny. The object of our desire is not what we want as isolated individuals separated off from society, but rather what we want as individuals immersed in a social and historical context. For this reason we fall in love with a millionaire during an era when millionaires constitute the collective ideal of society, or with a hippie or a revolutionary when society seems to be glancing approvingly in that direction. It doesn't matter if what we feel or think doesn't work out as planned. Every generation has its dreams, opportunities, and failures. During the 1950s everyone wanted a steady job; in the 1960s they wanted to change the world; in the 1980s they all were anxious to become stylists and advertising executives.

Today it's Islam on which the attention of the Western world is riveted. Many young people are attracted and fascinated by this religion and culture; they see salvation and the future in it, the way others in the past saw salvation and the future in communism and Nazism. Some of these young people convert to Islam, while others, for the same reason, fall in love. It's more difficult, after all, converting to another religion by yourself. It's easier when you've met a mysterious, fiery imam, who talks to you about a return to a heroic past and about an invincible God who is leading his followers to world dominance and who, by means of his prophet, had laid down the law that all must follow. He has flashing dark eyes, a fervent voice, unshakable faith, and superhuman courage. How insignificant, empty-headed, and drab the hometown boys look to her now, all focused as they are on things like digital cameras or sailboats, without believing in any values or ideals. They seem lifeless to her, dying members of a dying civilization, incapable of love or passion. Whereas that man with the flaming look and his sense of history and destiny—he even knows how to love her, ardently, passionately, and with infinite tenderness. And she is happy to give him children—one, two, four, as many as he wants, and to cover herself with an impenetrable veil so as to be seen only by him, as is right by divine law and by the law of exclusive love. For this, she has given up her mini-skirts and designer clothes; for this she has stopped revealing her cleavage and her buttocks the way she used to do. Out of love, in order to be exclusively her man's woman. How can she love a man completely if at the same time she likes feeling desired by others? Isn't that in itself an act of

betrayal? By contrast, the veil that renders her invisible is in essence their house, their fortress, their inviolable intimacy. It is also the law that separates them from the infidels.

8. Why such a thing as falling in love exists

Two people in love want to *fuse* together not only their bodies but also their souls; they want to unify their lives and their worlds. A person in love wants to show his or her beloved the world as he/she sees it, and see the world from the other's perspective in turn. This is because everything that the person we love shows us has meaning and value—it seems a revelation. Yet it isn't enough for us to share only the present; we want to also share our past in this way. I not only want to see the world as my love sees it today but also how it was for her when she was a child or a teenager. I want to relive her childhood along with her, enter her house with her, see her parents, siblings, and school; I want to share her joy, pain, sorrow, and fears from long ago. And if our love is reciprocal, she wants to do the same with me. This is why we tell each other the story of our life and listen spellbound to what the other tells us in turn. Re-interpreting our lives for each other, we are in fact rewriting the past and beginning to write our collective story. This is a process known as *historicization*.

It is a fundamental instrument for the construction of a new social life. My past also consists in my emotional bond with my father, mother, sibling, friends, ethnic group, religion, and country. And the same is true for the person I love. By falling in love I am not committing myself to a single, isolated individual but also to all those people she or he loves and all the things she or he believes in. During this process of fusion and historicization, I become part of her tribe or people and she, part of mine. If I fall in love with a Japanese woman, in so far as I live and participate in what she has thought, felt, loved, and believed, I also make a part of myself her people and her culture, becoming Japanese myself. And she does the same with me. By reliving my childhood and adolescent experiences, she participates in the social world that I knew, as if she had lived in it herself as well, becoming an Italian woman with the feelings of an Italian woman. And meanwhile the two of us are also critically reviewing our past experiences, making choices, and building something new together.

Out of this emerges a couple with double roots. And if the process of fusion continues, it creates strong, tenacious bonds that last through time. In addition, the new couple constructs around themselves a new community made up of people they have conserved as friends from their pasts as

well as new acquaintanceships made together in the present. Over and beyond this, it is clear that our human nature in and of itself leads us to fall in love. Compared with other animal species, human babies are always born premature. If a baby bird is already capable of flying and feeding itself in a few days' time, and if other mammals can see to their own needs after five or six months, the newborn human being only becomes autonomous after a minimum of thirteen or fourteen years! During that long period he or she has absolute need of assistance from his or her parents and from the community. The falling-in-love process guarantees that the child will be supplied with both. This is the true, profound reason why we fall in love: this process has consented and continues to consent the survival and evolution of the human species. And I am convinced, furthermore, that its great importance in Western society has contributed significantly to that society's rapid development as well as to its capacity for change while at the same time safe-guarding its fundamental identity.

For a long time Anglo-Saxon experts and scholars considered the process of falling in love as a specific historical phenomenon, commonly referred to as "romantic love" as if it had been invented in the 1800s. Nothing could be more absurd, in that both the Bible and Roman history are full of passionate love stories. In the end, in fact, these experts were forced to change their mind. Helen Fisher observes that "even the populations that deny having a notion or concept of 'love' or 'falling in love' in reality behave and act precisely in the same way. [In Polynesia] if a young man is not permitted to marry the girl he loves, he might very well kill himself out of desperation [...] In research conducted on 168 cultures, anthropologists William Jankowiak and Edward Fischer were able to find direct proof of the existence of romantic love in 87% of populations extremely diverse one from another."⁸ When my book *Innamoramento e amore (Falling in Love and Loving)* was translated into Japanese, I remember that there was the problem that no corresponding ideogram for this falling in love existed; yet it was common knowledge that young people in love who were betrothed to those they didn't love, sometimes were desperate enough to commit double suicide, or *shin ju*.

CHAPTER NINE

LOVE EXPERIENCES

1. Sexual bliss

Hélène says, “I was twenty and it was my first love. It was magnificent. I felt so much joy and fulfilment that I’ll never be able to forget it. It was bliss, pure bliss. It ended—very badly—because he didn’t understand me or believe what I told him. After this, I had a long number of sexual relationships with men. I was quite pretty, you see, and I just attracted them like flies. And I liked this, I wanted to feel that they were attracted to me, I wanted to have lots of sexual experiences, and above all I really liked feeling desired and lusted after. There were times when I made love out of curiosity. Other times it was because it was a sort of game, or because I wanted to lord it over someone, or because I decided to nab the handsomest man at the party or a star I’d admired at the cinema. But I didn’t ever experience again that intense pleasure and sexual bliss which I’d had with my first love. It’s only now, after years, that I’m in love again and feel that sort of desire, excitement, and then full satisfaction and ecstasy—maybe even more than before. Getting laid means nothing. I’ve screwed so many men in so many places—men I was attracted to and men I wasn’t attracted to. But nothing comes close to what I’m experiencing now. I melt at the sight of him, even just hearing his voice on the telephone. And in bed I don’t want to come right away—nor even all that often. I just want to savour the sense of arousal and mounting sexual tension and pleasure that keeps building and building, until I’m drowning in bliss. The way it was the first time. When my first love ended I thought that sexual bliss like that wasn’t anything unusual, that I would certainly feel it again with other men. Instead, it never was mine again for years, decades even. I didn’t realize that it is a gift that you only rarely receive. I’m so happy now to have experienced it again. I realize that it alone is worth living your life for, and that a life without it is worth nothing.”

René’s story, on the other hand, is the following: “I was deeply in love but I didn’t want to acknowledge it. I fought it because I had a wife and kids. I even went so far as to go abroad to get away from her. I thought I’d managed it, that I had regained a hold on myself. Then one day she phoned me up and told me that she was at a hotel there in town. At first I refused to see her, then I thought it was best to explain to her in person that it was over between us and that she should leave and go home. I remember that it was towards evening, and that the little hotel was pretty much dark. When I knocked, she opened the room door. I don’t remember anything about how she looked, or

what she was wearing, or what the room was like. All that hit me was that it was Her. It's all pretty much a blur to me after that. I can't tell you anything about what I did or what she did. I don't even recall putting my arms around her, or if I said something. But I must have taken off my clothes, and she must have too, or maybe she was already naked—anyway, I must have got into bed with her. Then, and this I remember vividly, I felt the most incredible wave of feelings. All that tension, all the 'no's' I'd repeated to myself, those obsessive get-away trips, the fear and shouts and tears and desperation which I'd shielded myself with, all that melted away. I don't even remember entering her, though I'm sure I did, and for countless times and for who knew how long. But in reality, her body didn't exist nor did mine anymore. Everything just converged indistinctly into infinite bliss and peace. The way it happens for someone who returns home after a thousand years of exile, or for a child who, terrorized and howling, finally finds shelter in his mother's arms. Infinite sweetness and endless calm, and I could feel my entire being melting like liquid, becoming something that was also her, and the two of us, and at the same time, the entire world. That was my greatest experience ever of sexual joy and happiness."

2. Energy

Evans confesses, "It's strange but I never get exhausted and neither do you. The more I make love, in fact, the more rested and relaxed I seem to be. Maybe it's because we have something to eat, then lie down for a nap and when it's over slowly wake up together. But that's not enough to explain it. I think it's really because making love isn't a way of burning up energy but of accumulating it. You give me energy, and I give you energy. According to Taoism you are not supposed to give away your semen but retain it as long as possible in order not to become physically weakened. Meanwhile, the woman is supposed to try to rob you of your semen—or your energy—as a way of safeguarding her strength. You aren't suppose to let her get away with it, but rather try to take her liquids, her yin, to build up your own strength.

"I think that's quite a strange way of viewing a relationship, actually. It seems like each of the two people is stealing something from the other. Fortunately, you and I have been having the completely opposite experience. I stay inside you for hours, and every so often I give you all I have. I make the biggest jet I can manage. It's as if I can see it flow through your body and into all your extremities. I know you even like the taste. You lap it up and claim it's good for you. And I don't feel the least bit deprived of anything. On the contrary, I feel an incredible sense of power, pride, and fullness. That's right, fullness and not emptiness. And while I'm resting against your shoulder and holding one of your breasts, I feel at peace. Eventually, as I gaze at the curves of your thighs

and caress them gently with a sense of proud possession, desire starts slowly stirring inside me again. You are my concubine, my mistress, but also my earth. I understand those erotic images in *The Song of Songs*—the cedars of Lebanon, the gazelles, and young stags. And why not also add in some cows and foals?—after all, they too were once a measure of wealth and possession. And while I'm living this fantasy scene of possession, I start wanting you again. I want to give you with joy and all my strength everything I have inside me, filling you like a jar of honey.

“And you experience the same thing when you give me your secretions that cover my sex and nourish it. When you give me your saliva, which nourishes my mouth. When you give me your breasts, which fill my hands, or the nipple that I suck like a babe does its mother's. Why should you have the impression of losing something? A woman who gives and who nurses feels all the richer for it. She feels proud, strong, and triumphant. And so, my love, let's make love endlessly and without holding back, for it isn't true that there are limits. It depends only on what you feel, what you give of yourself, how you love, and how you live this marvellous thing. Let's spend all afternoon making love, and at the end, when each of us has nourished the other, we will both feel stronger. And when we go out this evening, we will run with a sense of lightness and happiness, and the last thing we will be is exhausted.”

3. The essential

When we fall in love we have the impression of having found the essential thing in life. The only other situation comparable to this is when, to her immense joy and happiness, a mother gives birth to the child she's always wanted. This birth signals the start of an ecstatic symbiotic relationship. She has all that is essential in life now, for that baby that has come out of her body is not only the most precious thing in the world but also more precious than even herself. The essential provides us with a glimpse of the Absolute. The same thing occurs when two people truly fall in love, in that our lover represents and embodies all that is delightful and perfect, and we feel with absolute certainty that being with her and kissing her and making love with her is the greatest happiness knowable on earth.

In a letter Vincent writes: “You ask if I miss my lovely home with all the luxuries and comforts that I was used to. You ask how I can possibly manage to adapt to this attic room with its awful cheap furniture, where it's cold and there's nothing but a trickle of tap water. You wonder how I can adapt to this poverty. But there is no need to make any effort to adapt because I feel absolutely fine here and have no desire for anything else. Maybe some day I'll change my mind but

for now all this is great by me. I don't have a car anymore—I do without one. She accompanies me here and there, and I couldn't ask for better company than that. We often go to eat at a little trattoria near the beach. Most of the time I order red mullet. I've never tasted better food in my life, and while I'm eating I get to look at her sitting across from me. Yesterday she was wearing a black top that accentuated the form of her breasts and that she had jazzed up with a gold chain necklace. I could have stayed there all night just taking this in. Her face was so sweet and radiant. I guess we must have been there for three hours or so, talking about I don't know what, about everything, because it doesn't matter what you are discussing—when you're in love you're always talking about Everything in life. And the restaurant, the lighting, those red fish on my plate, the black she was wearing, the gold of her necklace, all this was better than in my wildest dreams.

“The other day we were sitting along the side of the road. In front of us were mounds—dunes—of golden wheat stubble. Believe me, that room that you call miserable, the little beat-up car, the trattoria, the fields of stubble, all these simple, humble things were perfect. Our love had the power to make every single thing perfect, even the faces of other people. Do you know that I never once saw a man or a woman who was ugly? I took a long train trip, where I looked constantly around me and always thought that all those faces were, without exception, beautiful, kind, and good. An illusion, you say? Perhaps so. But isn't that the way it's supposed to be in the Kingdom of God that we read about in the Bible? Love has enabled me to see the world, all people and things, in their full splendour—and without evil, the way they will be in Heaven. Do you realize just how extraordinary a gift I've been given, that we've been given? Think how this sort of experience could enrich the life of every man and woman! I feel immensely sorry for those who have never been through this; it's as if they haven't ever seen the light, haven't ever experienced day or night or the sea. They just haven't seen the world. You say it's an illusion. To be honest, it seems that everyone is saying that. And you even go so far as to say that it is a rather dangerous illusion to have because the world is full of nastiness, pain, and death. It could be. But what if, instead, all this were reality, and yours the illusion, due to the loss of the kind of light that only love can provide? Anyway, I've made my choice. I'm taking my chances with this. I'm not one bit afraid to do so.”

4. Transfiguration and the sacred

In their great, profound love, two lovers not only experience extraordinary happiness and sexual pleasure in being together but also feel connected in their relationship to the origins of life and live a sense of communion, fusion, immersion, and identification with Mother Nature. Even the

novelist Erica Jong, who tends to describe sex in derogatory and vulgar terms, is forced when she talks of love to recount an experience that transforms—or if you will, transfigures—not only one’s lover but also the world. When describing how the protagonist in the novel *Any Woman’s Blues: a novel of obsession* falls in love with Dart, she writes: “Nights of constant crazy love-making, where it was impossible to count how many times we fucked because they had no beginning and no end. I glanced at his buttocks and saw eternity. Nights could seem incredibly long, like eras measured in geological time, or else like minutes. It was impossible to know which beforehand. And while we were having sex, mountain ranges would emerge from the earth’s crust and then collapse; rock outcroppings would form from fused lava; hot springs would bubble up from the ground; extinct volcanoes would suddenly become active again.”¹ Jong suggests that during the act of lovemaking there is no longer any separation between self and cosmos. One’s sense of inner renewal parallels the terrestrial upheaval of the world during its creation.

Put in other terms, the personal experience of each of us, together with what may be culled from literature and love poetry, demonstrates how without a shadow of a doubt the experience of falling in love—or rather the ignition stage of this process—is an extraordinary state in which not only the person we love but also the entire world appears transfigured. This includes even the most common actions or gestures of everyday life—eating together at a restaurant or sharing a sandwich, observing the landscape alongside each other, or even simply waiting for the one we love to get off the train. The action or gesture loses its ordinary contours, stops seeming insignificant or profane, and becomes infused with yearning, joy and magic, leaving us marvelling and grateful. It is permeated and diffused with the divine, with what Rudolf Otto² calls the “numinous” (a non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self), the “mirum”, and the “fascinans” (fascinating), which summed together constitute our concept of “the holy.”

What a person in love feels at the mere thought of the one he or she loves and is loved by extends far beyond joy. That person feels full of a mysterious strength, fortune, and sense of being blessed; one is tempted to say that he or she feels “full of grace.” Religious language alone allows us to describe this experience. Every other sort of language is inadequate and desecrating.

Mircea Eliade, in his celebrated *History of Religious Ideas*, maintains that contemporary man has lost the capacity to live the organic life provided us by Nature—and above all as regards sex and food—as a sacramental or religious experience, the way it was in archaic cultures. Instead, sex and eating are for us merely physiological actions. Only for “primitive man [did] these elementary actions represent religious contact with the cosmos and the divine—that is to say, the reactivation and replica of “the sacred time of creation.”³ It is impossible to argue with what Eliade

says. Yet one thing in the modern world constitutes an exception to this rule—the experience of falling in love. We have already seen how two lovers experience as something extraordinary and sacred even the fact of eating or walking together, or sitting by the side of a ditch, or waiting for the train.

I developed this theory in detail in my book, *The Mystery of Falling in Love*. “The genuine, profound experience of falling in love provides to everyone in the modern world the unique opportunity *to experience the omnipresent sacred in daily life*. [An erotic experience becomes] a relationship with the origins of life—a sort of communion, fusion, immersion, feeling at one with overflowing, life-giving nature. The union between two people in love is *a hierogamy*, the marriage between heaven and earth, the primordial joining together, the archetype for the beginnings of life, *omphalos*, the centre of the world and source of all fecundity, the substance of being present in every thing. This joining together is a celebration in which we are the celebrants. [...] The sacred and divine is revealed through the celebrants and bestows its beneficial powers on all surrounding things and humankind. By means of their uniting, the two celebrants light the sacred flame, making of themselves that flame, rendering manifest the divine, which in turn pervades them. It is through their union that the sacred reveals its presence, and it is in them that the *hierophany*—the appearance of the holy—takes place.”⁴

The ancients had no need to distinguish between the sacred experience of falling in love and the experience of the sacred deriving from the rites or rituals that reactivated the divine time of life’s beginnings. Today, with few exceptions, we have lost this pathway via ritual that leads to the sacred. We can only find the experience of sacred eroticism in the nascent or ignition state we go through when we fall in love, which provokes a unique and unpredictable explosion that cuts through all profane banality and reveals the extraordinary and divine. In the modern world, therefore, *this nascent state is the divine time of life’s origins*.

5. Faithful body or faithful heart

Every person in love wants to be loved totally and without reserve by the other. Every person in love wants an exclusive relationship.

Let’s be careful to bear in mind, however, that this process of falling in love does not demand sexual fidelity when one or both people are married to or live with another. In this case, the exclusive aspect of their union slowly works its way into the maze of consolidated habits and pre-existing relationships. What really counts during this phase is being faithful in your heart. I’d like to

relate here the interviews I had with two individuals who were profoundly in love in someone and yet able to accept that this person was sexually unfaithful. The first interview is with a woman, Eve, while the second is with a man, Simon.

Eva was strictly monogamous by nature. Many years previously, she'd broken things off with her fiancé shortly before the wedding because she realized that he had a relationship with another woman and had lied to her about it. After being alone for ten years, she began a relationship with a married man whom she greatly admired and was in love with. For a certain period of time he remained with his wife and children, and so she adapted to the role of the mistress who must share her man with another woman. I asked her if she was jealous during this time, and here is her answer.

“No, I wasn't jealous because I knew that he didn't love his wife anymore and he hadn't loved her for quite a while. I'm certain about this. He hadn't left her because they had a small boy whom he adored.”

“But when he left on long trips with his wife, weren't you even jealous then?”

“I suffered a lot, but I wouldn't call it jealousy. I knew he was wrong to do that, and yet I understood how hard it was for him to separate from his family. Also, I knew that as soon as he got back he'd come running to me and everything would be exactly as it had been before. I knew that he loved me. I knew that I was the right woman for him, just like I knew that his wife was not.”

“But if he had other lovers as well?”

“Do you mean in the sense of sexual adventures?”

“No, more than to an adventure I was referring to sexual relationships with other women whom he'd known in the past. If a man no longer gets along with his wife, and if everything has really been over between them for some time, he always goes looking for other women. Surely he must have done the same. And he most likely continued with these relationships even after meeting you.”

“I knew that many women had gone after him.”

“And weren't you jealous?”

“I was sure that he loved only me, and that was what counted.”

“Were you really so certain?”

“Absolutely, dead certain. I was his only salvation.”

Any jealousy she felt disappeared in the face of this certainty of being the only person that mattered, the only one he would also come looking for because he would be lost without her. And her choice of words—saying that she was “his salvation”—is emblematic of that.

Simon had an analogous experience. Here is an excerpt from his interview.

“Were you in love?”

“Yes, I was, very much so.”

“And yet you knew that she was involved with another man. You told me that you’d never met him but knew that she was still going to bed with an old boyfriend or lover.”

“That’s right, in the sense that she gave me to understand this.”

“And didn’t it bother you?”

“No. She told me he was old.”

“Are you sure that he was?”

“I think so. Anyway, I don’t believe she got much pleasure out of going to bed with him.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Because when I was around she’d come running to me immediately. She was with me all the time. I knew that she preferred me to him.”

“However, when you had to leave, she went to him. Did you think about what the two of them were bound to be doing?”

“Actually, I thought about it a lot. I think she gave him a blow job. I imagined that he was old and semi-impotent, and that was the only way she could get him to come.”

“Never in any other way?”

“I didn’t dwell on it, but maybe yes, they also made love.”

“Did you find the thought of that arousing?”

“No.”

“Did it at least bother you?”

“No. He was nothing to me. What concerned the past didn’t matter. Besides, I myself was living with another woman. We were equal—me with my woman and she with her man. I came and went—sometimes I even disappeared for a while—because I had made her no promises. I gave her no security of any sort. I understood very well that he provided her with a fixed point of support and security. She loved me, she immediately came running to me, but since I had a wife and I never asked anything of her, she needed an anchor. I realized that was right.”

“But when you were away, did you think of her?”

“Always. I missed her every hour of the day. I wanted her like crazy. At night I’d go out to a phone booth to call her. I felt breathless but as soon as I heard her voice I felt incredible happiness, and then a sense of peace. I always found her at home, and this reassured me.”

“And if you hadn’t found her in or if she’d gone to bed with someone else?”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I loved her and knew that she loved me, and that I would find her at home sooner or later. We couldn’t be together; we weren’t ready for that, but we loved each other. I started feeling torn apart, I cried, I wrote poems to her. I didn’t care who she was with. I knew that the only thing holding us back was me. If I’d called and asked her to come at once to live with me, she would have come and been faithful to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure of it. All I had to do was call her.”

CHAPTER TEN

OBSTACLES THAT KEEP US FROM FALLING IN LOVE

1. When there are no words for it

We can't fall in love if there are no words for its expression or if the community in which we live is contrary to such a thing as falling in love. Specifically, this means that society refuses to recognize the value, dignity, or existence of this love experience and chooses instead to deride or deny it. A very interesting case in point can be found in the depiction of Italian society in the 1970s, as experienced by young Italian leftists, contained in the novel *Porci con le ali (Pigs with Wings)* by Lidia Ravera and Marco Lombardo Radice, who were themselves two adolescent members of an extreme left-wing movement.¹ There are four factors in the novel that stand in the way of the young couple in love. All four have an historical basis. The first is the cardinal importance that the youth rebellion of those times gave to infringing all taboos, sexual or otherwise. The student movement in Italy had by then, for example, adopted blasphemous ("filthy pig of a God") or obscene language. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the first words of Ravera's book are: "Prick, prick. Prick, prick. Cunt."² The second factor hampering the two lovers is the critical view that popularized Marxism took of love, falling in love, and the monogamous couple, considering such things to be degenerate bourgeois conventions which needed to be substituted with love for the proletariat masses. The third factor daunting the pair is the sexual revolution imported from America, which demanded absolute sexual freedom, promiscuity, and—between couples—totally open, non-exclusive relationships. In many communes, there was the mandatory practice of sexual communism. In numerous social situations, moreover, bisexual practices were openly encouraged. The fourth factor hindering the protagonists of the novel is the feminism of that time, which viewed the couple as an institutionalized form of male dominance.

The only language that the two young people, Rocco and Antonia, know and use is sexually obscene. This language, summed with the Marxist jargon that refers exclusively to collectivism, proletariats, social class, the bourgeoisie and the people, puts great limits on what they are able to say or express. Their erotic language, consequently, is along the lines of: 'the first time we fucked,' 'the second time we screwed,' 'then she gave me a blow job,' 'I gave him a blow job,' 'I stuck it up her ass,' 'he stuck it up my ass,' etc.

Both Rocco and Antonia have homosexual experiences. Then one day, they notice each other for the first time, and this after two years' vague acquaintanceship as students at the same

school. Now, however, they discover each other in *un coup de foudre*, in ‘that lightning flash’ we discussed in an earlier chapter. They don’t term it as such, because any mention of love at first sight would be unacceptably bourgeois. Instead, Rocco says, “I had a sort of fit, a raptus, a focus, a motus. I guess I mean that I went up to her and took her hand [...] and she turned to look sideways at me and smile, and then she madly threw her arms around my neck and started crying.”³

The boy tries with approximate, inadequate language to say that he is experiencing something extraordinary. “Exactly because it was such a different kind of thing, I didn’t do anything or stay in contact. There was one thing, in a certain sense; well, it’ll sound strange, but it kind of scared me [...] And then it was so funny, knowing each other for two years and not having the foggiest idea of who you are. Right, I mean, for me you are really just a girl in the movement, one who they say has already made love, and so for that reason more of ‘a cool chick’, a feminist, I don’t know, whatever that means.”⁴

Differently from him, the girl has sexual fantasies of making love to characters from films or novels. She knows what love is and feels a need for it. “But what’s called for at this point is a clear declaration, done in a low voice the way they used to do but don’t anymore because no one can get up the courage—not one guy out of all the ones I know is capable of telling a girl the things that she hears at the cinema because.....maybe it’s because he’s been told that ‘a cool man’ doesn’t get into that stuff.”⁵

The irony is that the girl is just as much trapped in purely sexual talk as the boy. She doesn’t have words for expressing any other sensations or desires. When she masturbates, she is astonished to find that imagining Rocco as he really is doesn’t arouse her at all. “So, does that mean I’m forced to imagine him as Count Vronsky, as handsome, cruel and heroic as that, and covered in as many tassels as a birthday cake? Vronsky, Vronsky godfather of all my revolutionary orgasms, then officer in the Czarist Guards, then painter, musician, swordsman, assassin, and finally a defender of orphans.”⁶

The boy, who is completely incapable of fantasizing, hasn’t the faintest idea of how to talk about love. He uses the political language of the Marxist ideology that he is absorbed in, and so utters words that leave Antonia disappointed and dissatisfied. “He’s one of those guys that keep referring to the cultural revolution as if it were the Bible...[He says that] we mustn’t isolate ourselves. You and I are perfect together, but we’ve got to be careful not to separate ourselves off from our comrades. Because that sort of thing is bourgeois. This for him says it all. And so I immediately become the female-who-wants-her-man-all-to-herself, whereas he, Monsignor Revolution, wants to discuss everything with everyone, go to the cinema with the urban and rural

masses, go to bed with the Abortion and Birth Control Committee, and maybe even find time—why not?—for a long walk with a delegation of steelworkers.”⁷

Then one day the girl gets up the courage to take things in hand and tell him that she loves him. He reciprocates with a kiss: “It was, more or less, the first really-felt kiss of my life.” Then ideology casts its long shadow over everything. “For almost a year now it’s become just about mandatory to proclaim the end to the notion of being a couple. This means that as soon as some guy tells you, ‘I love Pollyanna’, you can bet that he’ll follow that up with some comment along the lines of, ‘Naturally, I don’t want to get into any kind of relationship with her that would define us as a couple.’”⁸

The end result of all this is that the two get together for the sole purpose of making love, or “fucking” as they term it. And they fuck constantly and everywhere; this, until she finally realizes that it isn’t enough for her, that she can’t take it anymore. She puts it like this to him: “And you, so full of yourself, you want more and more, forward, backward, sideways, and thank goodness you only have one prick because otherwise you’d stop up all the holes in my body and I wouldn’t know how to breathe, sweat, or take a pee. No, seriously, Rocco, things can’t go on like this. It’s getting to be a bore. I don’t feel like I’m living my life anymore but just getting a lot of physical exercise and collecting orgasms.”⁹

And so the two of them split up. Subsequently, she will make love to—sorry, I mean to say that she’ll fuck—an older and more experienced man who is a teacher, and after that she’ll go to bed with another girl. He will have sex first with another guy and then with a girl. It is with the triumph of a chaotic sort of bisexuality that their story finishes and the novel ends.

2. Fear of jealousy

No one in a casual sexual encounter or in an erotic friendship asks the other to be sexually faithful to him or her alone. We have seen, however, that at the first sign that these two people may be falling in love, the desire overtakes them to get to know everything about each other, and along with this desire comes a curious feeling of jealousy. Individuals of both sexes tend to react to this feeling in one of two radically different ways. Some people can’t stand feeling tormented by this jealousy and if there is a rival standing in their way, they fear they are not the one who is loved in return and suffer so much from this doubt that they avoid competing with the other in any way and choose rather to retreat or run away. By contrast, however, there are other people who are stimulated and aroused by this obstacle and rise to the challenge.

Let's take a closer look at the people with the first type of reaction, the ones who can't stand their own jealousy because it makes them miserable; these people want to be sure immediately of being loved in return, and of being the top choice, if not the one and only, for the other person. Although in any case of two people falling in love there is always an initial exploration phase during which each one wonders if the other is truly in love, people with this jealousy intolerance are so wary of suffering that they will, yes, make an effort to fight off a rival but at the same they are always ready to throw in the towel if this effort begins to cause them too much pain. Usually, these individuals have had previous bad experiences where they have been let down or jilted. Fighting with another over their beloved is such an unbearable experience that it might not be worth even attempting. In Alain Elkann's novel, *Una lunga estate (The Long Summer)*,¹⁰ the main character, Leopoldo, goes off to Greece with the beautiful woman whom he is falling in love with. He begins to realize, however, that she is also attracted to other men, and that perhaps she hasn't yet ended things with her old flame. Gripped by jealousy, he disappears from her life for a while, only to return to seek her out time and time again. Each time he finds there is another man who also wants her, and in the end he gives up and decides to go his own way. The tactic of holding on to a lover by making him or her jealous just doesn't work with this kind of person. If you love this individual, if you want him or her to stay, you have to reassure him or her in every way possible, and provide them with the immediate certainty of being your own and only true love.

At times feelings of jealousy cause budding love emotions to cool; the risk of indifference setting in is especially strong during that phase when each person in love tells the other about his or her past.

"You didn't realize it," says Berenice, "but every time that you told me about one of your sexual adventures, thinking that it would excite me, in reality it was like a stab through the heart. I was falling in love with you, and I was really taken with you, and yes, it's true, I was kind of proud and aroused by the idea that you had had so many women in your life and that so many were so willing and eager to go to bed with you. But it was enough my knowing this, without you spelling it out in such graphic detail that I could picture them there in front of me and easily imagine all the cheating you would do on me in the future. By telling me—who loved you and was jealous of all other women—what you did with them ('then I said this to her,' 'then we fucked', 'then I met that other woman and we fucked'), you seemed to be unfaithful to me right in front of my eyes. It made me think that you would carry on in a similar fashion, that you would be unfaithful to me forever. Because, listen, you idiot, you should have added—added every time without fail—at the end of each of your stories, "But now of course, there's you and only you, my love. I went out with them because I didn't know you. If only I'd met you sooner, I wouldn't have felt any need to keep

looking for adventure.” But you never said this. And the reason why you never told me this is because you never understood me, never figured me out. The result, however, was that each time you launched into a detailed account of an old relationship, instead of making me feel closer to you—as you imagined you were doing—you were in fact driving me away and taking something from our relationship. I didn’t want to be one among your many women; I couldn’t accept becoming one of them. So that’s why one day I just up and left you for good. Yes, I know that you looked desperately for me everywhere and that you almost lost your mind at one point. Still, I never answered you or got back in touch.”

At the opposite extreme we find individuals who are aroused by jealousy, who feel intense desire when they are not sure that they are desired in return or when they encounter some obstacle, such as a serious rival. Previously we mentioned Dino Buzzati’s novel, *Un amore (A Love)*.¹¹ Here the protagonist, Antonio, falls in love with a young prostitute, and even if he never owes up to the fact, he only desires this girl because he can picture her going to bed with other men. When in the end she gets pregnant and starts staying at home, she ceases to be of erotic interest to him. Their love is over.

Back in Chapter Seven, we also mentioned Carlo Castellaneta’s *Le donne di una vita (The Women of a Lifetime)*, in which the protagonist stops loving a woman the moment she falls in love with him. The same author in his novel *Passione d’amore (Love Passion)*¹² offers an account of how a man who is sexually aroused by his own feelings of jealousy can remain trapped in that condition. The main character is a womanizer who is skilled at the art of leaving a woman as soon as he manages to seduce her. Nevertheless, this Don Juan remains immensely infatuated with a woman named Leonetta for fifteen years running; the reason why Leonetta has such a grip on him is that while she continually tells him that she loves him, she makes no move to leave her husband, with whom she periodically goes off on long vacations.

3. A life of ease

We have likened the process of falling in love to those “explosive” collective movements which cause the disintegration of social structures which have become suffocating and unbearable. This explains why one has more chances of falling in love in a society with rigidly fixed roles which you must make a tremendous effort to break out of than in a society with flexible and fluid roles with no barriers to speak of.

Towards the end of the 20th century and into the start of the 21st century, a profound change took place as regards work and social relationships. Previous to that, farmers were used to spending their whole life working their land, factory workers had a similar lifetime connection with their factory, and office workers and managers had a similar uninterrupted existence inside a given bureaucratic organization. Starting as of ten years ago, however, technological progress, the globalization of the business world, the strategies of political leaders and the world of finance, the changes in the supply and demand of labour, and the shifts in consumer trends have had the effect of loosening these ties considerably. Zygmunt Bauman sums this up very well in *Liquid Modernity*. “Flexibility,” he writes, “is the buzzword of the moment, but when it is applied to the job market it is interpreted as foretelling a work life imbued with uncertainty.”¹³ In a general situation of temporary and precarious employment, without any real prospects (and so necessarily episodic in nature), where the rules governing the dynamics of promotions or firings are reduced to ashes or else mutate before a worker gets to make his or her career move, it is highly unlikely that loyalty and team work will ever germinate and take root.¹⁴ And this is one of the fundamental reasons why it is so difficult to find a basis for long-term collaboration and planning in life, seeing that no one is in any condition to set even individual plans and goals. As Bauman puts it, “one’s job is like a campground,” where one pitches his tent for a few days. One could even say that this fated passage parallels that of the socially consolidated trend of two people living together instead of getting married, for in both cases the relationship can be terminated at any moment and for any reason.¹⁵

In addition to this precariousness, there is another factor to bear in mind, as evidenced by Ethan Waters.¹⁶ He observes that young people born between 1990 and 2000 make up what is probably the freest generation to exist in history. Their parents, who rebelled during the 1960s and 1970s and then lost all their illusions, have refused to give them either orders or advice. What with their failed marriages, they haven’t offered any role models either. On top of that, they tend to see their children only rarely, at most a couple times a year. This meant that these young people have had no family obligations to speak of. Most of them have had no financial obligations, seeing that up till recently everyone had a job and if you lost the one you had it was easy to find another. They have had no need to have savings because their parents have already done that for them and will leave them in inheritance both money and housing. No one has had to fight to survive. No one has had to do backbreaking work or toil under a despotic master. No one has found it difficult to lose his or her virginity; sex was and is easily available to all. AIDS is no longer a concern because condoms provide sufficient protection. No one has any desire to get married and then work and toil to raise children. Groups of friends have begun living together. They have found they can have a

good time together without bothering with ideologies or experiencing ideological or religious crises. Why do anything to change?

Clearly, such circumstances are not consonant with rigid cultural, ethnic, political, or religious obstacles that require breaking down. There is no need for any sort of revolution, and consequently there are not the right conditions conducive to the violent eruption experienced in the falling-in-love process. To put it another way, if and when one goes through the experience of falling in love, it is not accompanied by any passionately-felt need to form a stable couple; there is no project, therefore, of living together, battling the odds together, and bringing children into the world.

Back in 1931, Aldous Huxley in his novel *Brave New World* described a future society free of all forms of struggle for survival, where the heavy work was performed by slaves, conception took place in test tubes, total sexual liberty reigned, and the desire to fall in love satisfied with an injection of “violent passion.” The female protagonist falls in love when in the wilderness she encounters a survivor from our times, an outsider with genes for authentic, violent passions, for whose sake she rebels and changes.

The wanderings of generations from the last decade of the 20th century onwards, together with the flexible nature of social rules and the fact of an easy life, explain why there have been so many separations or changes in partners among the young. Let’s not forget that in order to get to know each other inside out, and to embark on a true life project together, two people in love must grapple with real problems arising from specific situations and implicating concrete choices. In the past, young people concentrated on working, getting married, and having children. Today, on the other hand, many of them continue to attend institutions of higher learning without any clear idea about their future. In Italy they continue to live at home with their parents until the age of twenty-five or thirty. Even in countries where this doesn’t happen, young people—albeit living on their own or with friends—don’t oftentimes have a real job but rather are still “students” of some sort, and on the lookout for new experiences. As a result, the love affairs they go through during these years are not those that lead to anything concrete as far as life projects go. Two such young people in love don’t know what sorts of problems lie ahead, nor do they care. Their temporal horizon isn’t completely in place. There may be one or more things about them that are incompatible, yet, if their love relationship continues on, they stand to realize this only later, when for example they decide to buy a house together, find they are expecting a baby, or embark on their careers.

A good illustration of how this incompatibility may emerge is to be found in the movie, *L’ultimo bacio* (**The Last Kiss**), by Italian film-maker Gabriele Muccino. The main protagonist is a young man in his thirties who has recently gotten married. The problem is that he never in his life

imagined married life would be primarily a matter of baby care, nursings, night-time colic, and where to buy a stroller. When his young wife begins to put together all the clothes and paraphernalia for their baby about to be born, he panics. This is not the life he expected. His wife, on the other hand, has spent years dreaming of just this. As an escape from this reality, he falls in love with an 18-year-old schoolgirl. He is anxious to return to the lifestyle he has always known. But his wife discovers the relationship and kicks him out of the house in the rage. At this point, the terror of losing her sets in. Since he's always felt deeply about his wife, and that love has not yet deteriorated, he realizes that what he feels for the young girl is merely infatuation. He returns home crying to his wife and accepts her dream of joint maternity and paternity as the most important thing in life. The movie goer, however, has the lingering impression that he has given up his freedom. The flip side to this situation is represented by another young couple in the film who have just had their baby. The man here isn't able to come to terms with the new state of affairs and fights with his wife over just about everything. In the end he goes off on a long trip with friends. Their plans for parenthood, to be entered into together, have failed. Their love is finished.

4. Relinquishing your hold

Even when it's a question of deep, sincere love, a relationship may be hindered by obstacles that lead one of the couple to spurn the other and break off the love affair.

In my book *I Love You*,¹⁸ I describe two ways in which someone might let his or her beloved go. I term one an "*altruistic relinquishing*" and the other a "*selfish relinquishing*." The altruistic variety serves to keep people whom we love—our husband, wife, children—from suffering. After all, when we fall in love with someone, we don't for this start hating the people that we've loved and treasured up till then. If anything, it's more common for a person in love to want to have their approval, and even their help in realizing this dream of new love. In any case, a person in love does not like to make anyone suffer on his or her account, which means that when a man who loves a woman falls in love with another woman he finds himself faced with a terrible dilemma—for no matter what choice he makes will produce suffering and hardship.

It's rather like asking a mother, whose two children have been kidnapped, to decide which of the two is to be killed. Either one's old love or one's new love must be sacrificed. The person in love who decides to do without his new love for others' sake (an *altruistic relinquishing*) is, however, headed for emotional disaster. After atrocious suffering and reaching the point of an irreparable split-up, this individual will no longer feel any emotion of any sort but just a painful

aridness, as if he or she has been turned into stone. Such people wander about like phantoms. The husband or wife who has gained back a spouse in this way is merely taking home the ghost of the other's former self. A ghost that has killed off his or her own capacity for love. Irony has it, however, that this haunted ex-lover will eventually go desperately in search for new love again. Some people in this situation may even have the impression of finding such a thing. But the love that they made die inside them is like an invisible illness which suddenly gains potency again, bringing on a sense of disenchantment, bitterness, and emptiness. Igor Caruso describes this ever so well in his book.¹⁹

Quite different from this, on the other hand, is the experience of a *selfish relinquishment*, which is to say when a person in love relinquishes his or her hold on the other in order to ward off personal suffering and pain. It might be, for example, because he or she is not sure of the other's love and believes that this beloved is being unfaithful. Or it might be because it is impossible to envision having a future together, because the other is too passive and unlikely to be able to contribute to the realization of a life project. At other times, the reason may have to do with a person's inability to tolerate feeling jealous, or with his not being able to bear being physically far away. Even this sort of self-centered process of letting go is accompanied by suffering and pain, but that experience of 'turning to stone' isn't there. In place of absolute loss, one undergoes a wrenching sensation of limited loss. By breaking off the relationship, in fact, one is freeing oneself of a burden and source of anguish, not to mention a sense of torment which over time would have been destined to grow. Clearly, one feels love and desire still for that other person, and the mere thought of him or her and of past happiness brings on a painful attack of nostalgia. On the other hand, one feels also a strong urge not to turn back because one has no desire to sink back into a state of resentment, jealousy, and doubt.

As always, the situations that present themselves in real life are often more complicated and hybrid than in theory. In the film "The Horse Whisperer" with Robert Redford, the female protagonist is a woman from New York with a severely traumatized daughter who has lost a leg in an accident while on horseback. The mother brings the girl and her equally injured horse to Montana to recuperate at the ranch of a 'horse whisperer' (Redford), a horse healer of mystical talents. The mother proceeds to fall in love with him. Since he loves her in return, she even contemplates leaving her husband. If she doesn't do so, it is only because her daughter cannot live, study, and receive proper medical care in such an isolated place; she must necessarily go back to New York for that, and her mother feels emotionally compelled to go with her. Her leaving her horse whisperer is hence altruistically motivated. At the same time she knows too that the man she loves will never leave his ranch and his horses. She is sure of this because he himself has told her

that he has already ended a relationship with another woman for their sake. She wonders also if she herself is really prepared to spend the rest of her life in the middle of the wilderness, giving up not only her daughter but also her job as a journalist. Perhaps not. And the fact of her thinking this means that her leaving him is also for partially selfish reasons.

The decision to terminate a love relationship for altruistic reasons is becoming more frequent today among men. By and large, they tend to prolong any sort of official love relationship they are involved in. This can be explained in part, at least in the Western world, by the well-established historical practice of monogamy, which has engrained in men a sense of duty towards their wife and children—a sense of duty that continues to be felt even though the historical circumstances have changed. Consequently, when they fall in love with a woman other than their wife or go to live with their mistress, they feel—especially if they have children—a terrific amount of guilt. Only if the woman pushes them with determination to get a legal separation or divorce do they actually do so. For women today, on the other hand, the decision to terminate a love relationship for self-centred reasons is becoming more frequent. Historically speaking, women have always been raised to believe that they need to sacrifice their own needs for those of their men, and to accept or at least tolerate their defects. For this reason they tend to stay longer in a relationship and work to make it last. That said, when they no longer feel loved or when they decide that this love is impossible or mistaken, they know how to break things off in a decisive manner, without looking back. And they have yet another source of strength to help them when they decide to sever these marital ties: they know that they will almost certainly be granted custody of the children.

5. The seductive power of those who have made a selfish relinquishing

Those who have ended their love affair out of altruistic concern for others are bound to feel hollow, empty, and listless. Those who have made a *selfish relinquishing*, on the other hand, continue to feel love and desire, and often become *seductive to an extreme*.

This can be seen most easily in men, for whom the experience of splitting up as a couple is more difficult than for women, and who continue to carry a torch of desire in their hearts for their ex-love even when the relationship is over. On some level they usually start looking for a substitute; this oftentimes means that they turn on the charm with every woman they are attracted to,

displaying all the emotional and erotic intensity of their former great love but without any of the fear, anxiety, and heart-patters that went along with it, seeing that now they are risking nothing (there is nothing important at stake). The assertive ardour such a man displays in how he touches, looks at, or talks to her, is in reality directed at the woman he loved and left behind (and still loves). The woman whom he is seducing, however, is under the impression of having aroused wondrous lust and passion in him, and she is thoroughly convinced that he loves everything about her—every inch of her body and even every flick of her finger. She feels penetrated down to her soul by his gaze and mesmerized with his sublime, irresistible, and tenderly poetic words. He makes her feel not like a woman but a goddess. But this man, remember, is not in love, nor could he possibly be in love with her. He simply is acting “as if” he were in love. And this sort of behaviour causes countless misunderstandings and a tremendous amount of pain in affected relationships.

At the same time this behaviour also helps us to gauge the tremendous seductive sway of certain men. We don't want to confuse these, however, with lady-killer types on the order of Casanova or Don Juan, for the latter are nothing but hunters intent on adding yet one more downed prey to their sack or another notch to their rifle. They do not fall in love but only go through competitive infatuations. They tremble and pine for a woman just so long as she belongs to another or continues to spurn them. They fight to conquer. Yet, once their victim yields to them, their lust and longing for love immediately disappear.

Exceptionally, there is always the Great Lover who is capable of bonding passionately with a woman for a limited amount of time. In Italy, for example, the poet and writer Gabriele D'Annunzio was such a man. As might be expected, women found him irresistible. At the same time, his various love affairs often lasted over time and were of great intensity. As D'Annunzio got closer to a woman whom he was attracted to, he made every attempt to find in her his one true love. He dedicated his existence to her, took care of her, assisted her if she fell ill or needed something. Yet once a certain amount of time had elapsed, his love faded and he passed on to a new love that was destined to be just as intense and short-lived. We can make sense of this behavioural pattern if we bear in mind what we've learned about individuals who relinquish their hold on the person they love for selfish or self-centred reasons. If he left each woman he loved, it was because he realized that she no longer spoke to his most profound wants and needs, and simply did not want to wait for disgust and repulsion to set in. This way he could continue to feel affection for her at the same time as he could nurse his desire for a new love.

D'Annunzio never let a love degenerate beyond a certain point. He always ended things when he realized that the relationship was no longer feeding his creativity. In this lies the difference between him and Don Juan (or Don Giovanni). Whereas the latter is concentrated with racking up successes among the ladies, the former depended on any given love relationship as a source of creativity. This was the sole criterion for proceeding with the relationship. Once that creativity was no longer being stimulated, he broke off the relationship and went in search of a new one. The swiftness with which he did this helped to successfully transfer the desire and magic of the ended relationship to the brand-new one. His new love object appeared all the more fascinating and stimulating by consequence. Yet, at the same time that he was throwing himself body and soul into this new relationship, he never lost track of the fact that the ultimate purpose of this love was not to merge with his beloved as a couple or to form a family, but only to fuel his vein of creativity. He lived love for art. Thus, when World War I broke out, it was not surprising that D'Annunzio committed himself to the cause as if it were a new love—and his last.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FROM FALLING IN LOVE TO LOVE ITSELF

1. Tests and covenants

We've already said a number of times in this book that the process of falling in love occurs in stages over time. The actual amount of time involved may be very short, but even in that case the same sequence of extraordinarily violent and complex psychological processes are destined to take place. I am going to take a very rapid look at this sequence here and leave it to the reader to consult the other books I've written on this subject.

I'd like to start by reiterating that when two people fall in love they put each other, and themselves, to the test on more than one occasion. When these tests are self-directed, they can be termed **truth tests**. These arise from the fact that at the same time that we are falling in love we are also simultaneously resisting the very process; we are unwilling to take the existential risk of putting ourselves completely in another person's hands. For this reason we struggle with ourselves at first, yielding to passion one minute and trying to mentally scale down what we are feeling the next. During this initial phase of falling in love, nothing we feel is constant, but rather we undergo dramatic swings between periods of tremendous desire and magic and moments of doubt and detachment.

Sometimes we might say to ourselves, "Maybe this is just a crush, a brief infatuation." Or else we might wake up one morning feeling that we have fallen out of love all of a sudden. "It's all over," we think. "It was just an illusion." All it takes, however, is for the person we love to return vividly to mind and we realize how desperately we want him or her; we rush off to phone or look for him or her, and if they are nowhere to be found, we feel anguished.

It bears remembering here that during the initial phase of our falling in love, and before our giving in to our feelings, we might even back away from our beloved. For instance, we might return to an old lover or continue with an affair that began we started up just before meeting our new love. We are unsure of ourselves; some of us might think that we are in love with two people at the same time. Slowly over time, as we proceed with our explorations, adventures, uncertainties, and attacks of jealousy, our love—if it is real—will grow, and we will leave behind all three-way relationships. Above all, if we want to know whether we are truly in love or not, there is only one thing to do: put distance between ourselves and our loved one and so try to do without him or her in order to see

what happens. If we really can't live without that person, to the extent that we feel utter *despair*, then we can be sure that we are truly in love. We have passed our *truth test*. It is potentially a dangerous tack to take, however, in so far as the other person may interpret our dropping out of sight as a refusal.

While all this is taking place, we are simultaneously nursing the fear that our special one doesn't love us in return. Seeing that we take his or her love as a beautiful, unmerited 'act of grace,' we are terrified that that love will be denied us in our moment of greatest need and desire. This signals that we are ready to administer (and undergo) a second test—**the test of reciprocal commitment**. Their purpose is to ascertain whether the other person really loves us with the same intensity as we feel. At the start, we have our doubts; we evaluate all those little 'she/he loves me and loves me not's. The trouble is that even when the relationship has become a settled matter-of-fact, those doubts remain. Everything gets analyzed in light of this question, starting with the smallest details. Every action or gesture performed by the person we love is full of significance and symbolism. We study, analyze, interpret, and decipher each one. "She was supposed to be here by seven, and she's a half an hour late," we think, then launch into conjectures on what "this has got to mean." Similarly, we might wonder about why she didn't choose to wear the necklace that we gave her. "And this other necklace that she's wearing? Who gave her that?" we want to know. Finally we get up the courage to ask her about it. Her answer—that it belonged to her mother, who gave it to her when she turned 18—provides us with a strong blast of guilt-laden relief. Naturally, we should try not to let our imagination run too rampant. There are people in love who actually invent situations or make up facts in order to test the other to the test, at considerable risk to their relationship.

Both people in a love relationship want to realize their own potential and see the other realize the same; both also want to **plan a life together**. A life together does not necessarily imply getting married or even living together—though it is obvious that the two lovers will want to spend as much time with each other as possible. Nevertheless, there are cases where certain obstacles, represented by distance, jobs, or personal preferences, mean that this life plan will take into account the need for maintaining separate homes or living in different cities. There are countless complications possible, but the only thing that matters is whether the two people in love are in full agreement or not. Not being in full agreement means there is a serious conflict. Each of the two wants the other to recognize his or her life plans. The question "Do you love me?" also signifies "Do you accept being included in my life plans?" And when the other person asks "Do you love me?" in turn, it is a way of saying, "And do you accept being in mine?" By consequence, each time one of them replies "Yes, I love you", in reality he or she is saying, "I am modifying my

desires, I am meeting you halfway, I accept your requests, I am giving up something I want, and I want—together with you—what you want.”

That said, there are things that a couple may find it impossible to want or to incorporate in their life plan together. In giving up something essential, a lover stands to renege on those values which made it possible for him or her to fall in love in the first place. This may be a question of religious or political beliefs, or the desire or unwillingness to have children, or a conception of what is an acceptable or unacceptable way of life. These all are examples of *a point of no return*, the existence of which poses a very serious threat to any couple.

The covenant.¹ The experience of falling in love becomes enduring love only when each lover imposes a limit on his or her demands and sincerely accepts the other person's desires as his or her inalienable right. In order to make this covenant sound and functional, the two lovers need to tell each other all about their past and their dreams; they need to gain a perspective on how the other sees the world, not only in general but honestly and candidly in everyday life. From this lovers' pact comes the certainty of mutual trust; this is an integral part of the couple's reality—we may even say it is so set in stone with this covenant as to be “institutionalized” within their relationship. It renders possible a life together and a common vision of the future.

We mustn't think, however, of these tests and this covenant as rational things. In reality, they take place during the passionate, tumultuous ignition phase of our falling in love. And it is precisely the scalding nature of this initial state that stamps them so indelibly in the hearts and minds of the two people in love.

2. The pact of reciprocal commitment

The process of falling in love is characterized by a spontaneous tendency towards faithfulness. The road to faithfulness, however, is strewn with difficulty on account of the extreme intensity of the emotions one goes through. Although a person in love desires his or her beloved above any and all else, at the same time he or she is bombarded with doubts and faces hesitation and fear. If the one in love has the impression of not being loved in return or of being cheated on, he or she will attempt to deny or suppress that love. And if his or her beloved goes away for a long period of time and is convinced of not being loved in return, he or she will be tempted to find a substitute in order to forget what has happened between them.

Oftentimes the falling-in-love process is preceded by an exploration phase during which a person tries out many different relationships. Erica Jong offers a disparaging account of this period in her novel *Parachutes and Kisses* (1984): “Most of the divorced men who Isadora went out with

seemed to have various other women whom they could fall back on in case of failure—as if, having been wounded in the bitter martial and divorce battles, they had decided never again to risk putting all of their eggs in one basket. This meant that at the same time as they were swooping down on the most appetizing prey, they were also (so as not to be left empty-handed) playing with their women the way the sports-minded do at bowling²—in other words, with phone calls, appointments to see each other at fixed times on fixed days, cancellations, and denials.

The protagonist of the novel *A Spy in the House of Love* by Anaïs Nin³ stays involved with a number of men at the same time in order to avoid becoming tied down to one in particular. This illustrates from a slightly different angle the basic point that it is only when a person is certain—dead certain—of loving and being loved that he or she stops exploring or having other relationships.

People who fall in love with someone who is already involved with another are pretty tolerant by and large. A man in love with a married woman will pretend not to know that she has sex with her husband; he'll believe her little white lie until the moment of truth is at hand, and then he will ask her to choose between the husband or himself: it must be all or nothing.

Because the falling-in-love experience intrinsically leads into an exclusive and faithful love relationship, both people must necessarily want such a thing. With respect to the ignition state of falling in love, the stable love relationship that results is set in stone, or 'institutionalized'; as such it must be a matter of choice and desire. In other words, the spontaneous tendency for people in love to want an exclusive, and mutually faithful relationship will be transformed into effective faithfulness only if the two people make this a part of their pact of reciprocal commitment; it is an essential desire that represents one of the points of no return, in the sense that a place in a couple's life plans must be found for it.

This is a very important point. The couple's pact of reciprocal commitment is set in place at a time when the process of fusing together as a couple is still on-going, and by consequence their emotions and promises are like flowing lava or liquid metal being poured into a mould and about to acquire a definite form.

Like all other mutual commitments and pledges that a couple makes, this pact of reciprocal commitment also must be renewed over time. This effective renewal leads to the 'institutionalization' of the pact. If this happens and the pact is subsequently maintained over time, a profound change will inevitably occur in the couple's erotic relations. Little by little they will both begin to stop indulging in lustful fantasies involving third parties; steering away from the temptations that once interested them, they will learn to seek beauty and pleasure in the other's body alone.

Some people claim that what I've just said is impossible. But this simply isn't true. It *is* possible provided that both people first feel a desire for it and then explicitly insert it in their mutual pact and love commitment. Doing so allows a couple to set limits on their sexual desires—it is the sole motivation for doing so. And since this desire for limits stems from the passionate love inside them and from the terror of losing the other, the limits themselves seem utterly natural. Granted, in some people this limiting of sexual appetite is easier and most instinctive than in others, but all people who are truly in love come to embrace this in the end. When it is true love, there always comes a point where the body of our lover is the only one we care about, and we feel we can't find time enough to discover and explore all beauty and infinite variety of his or her shape and flesh.

"I confirm what I said," Carlos tells me. "I've been married for fifteen years, and I've never cheated on my wife. I'm head over heels in love with her—she's a fantastic woman. In the first place, she's gorgeous...and not just to me but it really is the case. She's got a great body. I mean, she's thin, but at the same time she's full of curves, and she's got the softest and silkiest skin. She's smart, sensitive, and knowledgeable. We talk about and over everything. She's loyal. I've never seen her not keep her word. And she's been right there by my side through thick and thin. She's created a beautiful home for us. She always wears perfume, even first thing in the morning. You smile when I say that, but believe me, little things like that are important to me. A woman who lets herself go and dresses like a slob—now that would really bother me. I just love watching how her body flexes as she walks. I love gazing at her little round breasts, and I adore watching her when we make love. I'm always amazed at my own good fortune, and I don't feel any need for other women. I went out with a ton of women before I met her, but when I realized that she was the love of my life, the woman I would always adore and the one I would live the rest of my time on earth with, she had already monopolized my attention and erotic interest. I am faithful to her because she is all and enough for me, and I am all and enough for her. I don't have to work at it, you know what I mean? Sure, I've had to do at times with other beautiful women, but I have never felt the slightest temptation to start an affair or a relationship with any of them. Now don't go thinking that I'm cowardly or righteous or something. I don't have any moral hang-up about sex. It's just that it would be an absurd complication. It would upset the harmony and the sense of fullness that exists between us."

3. A stable institution

Every collective movement runs the risk of dissolving or else manages to create lasting and solid social and cultural structures. Large-scale movements may generate cults, sects, unions,

political parties, or nations. The collective movement of two people which we term “the process of falling in love” has the power to generate a stable couple in a lasting relationship, who live together, face the difficulties of the world in a united fashion, and have children, whom they raise and educate. To these stable formations that withstand the test of time and adversity we usually give the name of *Institutions*.⁴ By definition, an Institution alludes to an entity that is desired, instituted, and founded with the intention that it will be lasting, and this in order to achieve given objectives or realize dreams or projects.

The simplest objective that a couple evolving from a falling-in-love experience may give themselves is to live their love fully. And since the person who is truly in love believes that his or her love will be forever, that person commits him- or herself to love for always only that special other. The world today tends to deride the promises that true lovers make each other, which is to say those on the order of “I will love you forever, no matter what happens, in sickness and in health, in wealth or in poverty. I love everything about you—your body and soul, what you are and what you will become. As I love you now that you are strong, I will likewise love you when you are weak. I will love you when you are happy but also when you are sad. I will love you even when you aren’t as thin as you are now, or when your breasts are no longer full and your hands smooth and tapered. I will love your white hair and the wrinkles on your face. And this because I don’t just love your appearance, the way you look today, but also whatever shape and form you may assume. I love your profound, immutable essence, your very being.”

And yet it is wrong to laugh at these words because they are the only possible foundation for love. There is a very important concept to grasp here: those who want to construct something permanent need provide a very solid foundation. Only in this way will their edifice last. The Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans all honoured this rule when they built something, and the proof is that their monuments remain with us even today. Other peoples and civilizations did not go at it in the same way, and consequently they left behind nothing—not even a few tablets to try to decipher. The same goes for their social formations or their cultural objects. The Buddhist sects of Tibet fashioned marvellous mandalas out of coloured sand, which they then erased in order to remind humanity of the vainness of all things. Yet, on the other hand, they left us hundreds of temples and the Potala; and this, furthermore, was because they wanted it to endure through time. In a similar fashion, for centuries in all of Europe, feudal armies formed and defeated each other in mortal campaigns. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, endured. And why? Because the faithful wanted it to be eternal.

Now let’s apply the same lesson to the couple: for no matter how fragile, precarious, and ephemeral the entity of the couple may appear, it follows the same rule. This endurance of the

couple faces nevertheless serious challenges. For instance, when a society ceases to believe in the couple, or in the importance of its lasting nature, the couple as a unit becomes fragile. Furthermore, whenever two people in love choose not to desire that it last, it will not last. From such facts we may conclude that any given human formation exists because there has been a meeting of a spontaneous event with an act of human will. If one element is missing, the other alone will not suffice. The tiny collective movement of two carries inside it the seeds for the creation of an Institution, but it also needs the willpower of the two people to bring it about. The flame of the ignition state of the falling-in-love process burns bright inside the instituted love, but this stable relationship must continue to keep it burning ardently over time.

We must necessarily distinguish between a collective movement and an institution, just as we do between the process of falling in love and the fact of stabilised love. There is, however, no contrast or conflict between the two elements of each set. Hence, the experience of falling in love leads in the direction of mature, certain and perennial love. At the same time, however, love will persist only as long as it conserves in it the fire of the ignition state of falling in love, with its hope, enthusiasm, and dream for an ever new and wonderful existence.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN SEX CONFLICTS WITH LOVE

1. Erotic utopia

In any work of erotic literature, sex never meets with obstacles or is hampered by problems or conflicts. In pornography, all men and women are eager to go at it and copulate without uttering a word; after a moment's hesitation at the start of their first encounter, everything flows naturally, and they end the session or start back up with the sex effortlessly, with never a problem. Pornography for men ignores the issues of feelings, offering purely sex—copulation—without complications of any sort. Female writers of erotic works, however, often do the same. Even an author as famous and talented as Anaïs Nin gives the reader the impression of going from one love to the next without any real conflict, guilt, or fits of jealousy, and without ever causing pain, a fuss, or a tragedy. (This makes me suspect that even in her *Diaries*¹ there is probably a fair amount of literary manipulation.) By far one of the most complete female depictions of erotic utopias, however, is Arsan's *Emmanuelle*². Right there in the opening pages, our protagonist offers herself without a word to the man sitting beside her on the airplane. There is never a doubt, hesitation, or a feeling that goes beyond that of immediate pleasure—which, moreover, is always immense. Emmanuelle's eroticism is promiscuous by definition. Be it with the man on the plane, Marie-Anne, or her husband, she is always—totally and unconditionally—ready to give and receive pleasure. But Emmanuelle's eroticism is not limited to sex only; it also involves love. Emmanuelle is in love with Marie-Anne, just as she is in love with her husband. When beautiful Bee arrives on the scene, she falls in love with her as well, and immediately: "She had the impression of having ended up in this remote district for the sole purpose of making her acquaintance. And she recognized her at first glance as being the one whom she had always been waiting for."³ In Emmanuelle's world, there is room not only for deep, lasting love for her husband and for those whom she calls husbands, but also for lovers, friends, and children. No individual in this world ever tends towards sexual exclusivity or dominance. There are no manifestations of jealousy, conflict, or suffering.

I am using the term "erotic utopia" in order to underline the utter lack of violence, conflict, jealousy, doubt, regret, or sorrow, all of which are to be found in real life. Because human beings are complex by nature, there are, alongside an innate sex drive, also other fundamental needs such as the desire for dominance and exclusivity, as well as the impulse towards aggression. And while sexuality is a fundamental and sustaining part of love, in the context of social relationships it also

produces jealousy, conflict, suffering, rancour, and a desire for revenge. It can be no coincidence that for Schopenhauer the essence of life does not lie in Eros, which is to be considered a simple trick of Nature to get us to procreate, but rather in acts of Will. For Nietzsche, the principle becomes Will to Power, which incorporates sex. Freud put Eros as his starting principle, then later felt the need to add Thanatos, or violence.

A person in love hates his or her rival and also hates his or her beloved for preferring another instead. When two people who have been in love divorce, they fight each other like two ferocious beasts, egged on by their lawyers; they use their children as weapons for inflicting as much pain and injury on the other as possible. Even in the case of a couple still deeply in love, there is always the imminent possibility that they may quarrel, cheat on each other, or split up; it's all "oh, God, how beautiful you are" one minute and a rain of insults and poisoned words the next. This dissociation is rendered graphically as a tremendous paradox in the film *Basic Instinct* starring Sharon Stone, in which there is the scene of her making passionate love to a man, only then (just as he is about to ejaculate) to stab him in the chest in order to have an orgasm provoked by his convulsive death.

The most usual conflict between sex and love, however, involves the desire to hold on to one's loved one in an exclusive, privileged relationship and the opposite desire to go roaming and exploring—in short, between monogamy and polygamy, exclusivity and promiscuity, and faithfulness and betrayal.

2. Polygamy and monogamy

Helen Fisher's book *Anatomy of Love*⁴ not only examines the sexual and marriage customs of all populations and ethnic cultures throughout history, but draws the conclusion that over the centuries there have always been men who have had multiple wives at the same time, and that all married women have tried to prevent their husbands from taking another wife. Furthermore, seeing that men are just as jealous of their spouses and don't want to have to face rivals, it is necessary to conclude that there is in our species a marked tendency towards exclusivity in love and sex. Be that as it may, in all societies there is always a certain degree of adultery, both for men and women. This practice is always officially outlawed, and yet it continues to flourish in secret. Since everyone knows that it exists, it is a continual topic of gossip and confidences; the only thing is that it must never become too overtly public. Even when viewed from inside a marriage, unfaithfulness

—aside from special agreements or pacts deriving from an open marriage—is tolerated only when it isn't talked about.

The universality of this behaviour indicates that human beings are characterized by two diametrically opposing desires or tendencies. The first is a desire for another person who is unique and unforgettable, with whom we want to establish a lasting love relationship that is totally exclusive and as such will cause us to feel jealous on occasion; the second is an exploratory impulse that drives all of us, male or female, to seek out new encounters, acquaintanceships, and erotic relationships with new and different people. It was that first impulse—towards love that bonds together a man and a woman and generates children, which over the course of human evolution led to the institutions of marriage, childcare, and family. Yet hand in hand with this, there has always been that other exploratory impulse, constantly at work to undermine these institutions.

It is only during the process of falling in love that these two impulses stop competing with each other, for this is the only time when that other person is simultaneously unique and the embodiment of all others to us. Our beloved is invested with all the memories, and even all the fleeting impressions, we have of our past love desires. He or she represents the synthesis of all encounters, movie idols, photographs, protagonists in films and novels and plays, dreams, loves, lovers, men, and women that we have ever admired, dreamed, or longed for. There is no need to go on searching or exploring because we are engrossed in exploring our beloved, who continues to reveal to us new facets, faces, or personality traits. The experience of falling in love, and it alone, is a continuous process of searching, discovering, and finding.

The two impulses tend to separate again when one is not in love, the result being that both go ahead in time indefinitely. Clearly, the bonding impulse might prevail for a certain period, whereas in a following period it might be the exploratory impulse; there are also those phases when both are present in our life. What are we to conclude from this? Does the interweaving of these two impulses happen, then, in erratic fashion? If we base our answer on anthropological data, we can generalize in the following way: statistics suggest that in almost all human societies marital relationships tend to be extremely stable for the first four years, only then to wane and eventually end in divorce. Or, if not that, then the marriage tends to continue but the exploratory impulse makes itself felt again.

In the case of this second scenario, it is evident that we do not feel completely bonded with (or bound to) our partner. Sure, we are very attached to and love him or her, with whom we want an exclusive relationship (not permitting our spouse to have sex with others), but at the same time we want to be at liberty to have extra-marital sex ourselves—in short, to continue with our exploring

and experimenting. We want, on the one hand, to have a faithful and loving wife or husband, and, on the other hand, to indulge in our desire to make a sexual pick-up or take a lover.

This, in my opinion, is the most common form that on-going marital relationships take today. It is, however, ethically very lop-sided in that we want rights for ourselves which we deny to the other person. If our partner embarks on the same path, we will inevitably find ourselves in a face-off. In every place and age, society has tried to regulate this conflict or prevent it from taking place all together. In the Eastern world, men have traditionally allowed themselves numerous wives and concubines, while denying women the same in turn. In the West, up until recently both sexes were expected to be strictly monogamous, although in practice men were allowed a certain amount of sexual freedom. Thanks to the sexual revolution and the feminist movement, however, Western society now recognizes that men and women have the same rights and responsibilities. There is, however, no set of moral norms or laws, mandatory or otherwise, for everyone to follow. Instead, our society offers us a wide range of choices. As regards our subject at hand, this means that every couple faces an increasing chance of experiencing firsthand the clash between love (of the exclusive sort) and sex (of the exploratory type).

3. Exclusivity

Jennifer wonders: “But why do I want my husband to make love only with me and not with any other woman, if I myself have been to bed with other men? Why can’t I stand the idea of my man fucking another woman, and why would his doing it necessarily destroy our marriage for me? I know that going to bed with someone once doesn’t signify the start of a new relationship, I know that he’d still love me, but I just can’t accept it all the same.

“As I said, I’ve cheated on him. I’ve been to bed with two other men—one is a friend of his and the other is a guy who I know at work and attended a conference with. Both times, it was just a sudden rash decision of mine, coming during a period when we’d been fighting and necessarily spending days apart on account of work. I think—I mean I’m sure—that in all these years that we’ve been together he’s gotten in a lay or two as well. I’m equally sure that he wouldn’t be able to bear knowing that I’d gone to bed with some other guy. Actually, I would never dream of telling him that, or of asking him anything about himself for that matter.

“The bottom line is that we are two cheaters who are lying to each other. I thought you were supposed to tell each other everything in love, and be utterly sincere and devoted to each other—or not? But, you know, in reality we *are* devoted to and truly close to each other. I really love my

husband. I made love with those other two, but I would never trade my husband for either one of them for all the gold in the world. I would never dream of it. I know him inside and out. I know how honest, principled, and generous he is, and how he'd do anything for me. Besides, I like living with him and talking to him and sleeping with him and making love to him—and I believe he feels the same way. We have a good marriage. But this means we both have to keep things to ourselves or lie so as not to destroy our life and our relationship. It's funny, but just as long as we keep quiet or tell our little lies, our love will continue to function as if it were an exclusive commitment. We mustn't ever run a check or test on that, however. If we did, it would destroy everything."

All human relationships are in reality made up of things that can be said and things that cannot be said. One woman that I interviewed, who had had a very unhappy love life before deciding to live with a much younger man, told her new companion, "You can do whatever you want, but just do it in a way that I don't see or find out anything. And don't get the bright idea of coming to me with things to confess."

Silence is golden not only in love, but also in politics, negotiations, or parent-child relationships—there isn't one that isn't founded on the unsayable. We cannot express thoughts, facts, or feelings that would hurt the other person or reveal things about ourselves which would upset him or her. We are not even to say such things to ourselves, for otherwise our life would become a chaotic mass of contradictory emotions without coherence and order—without a centre to tell us when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no.'

Human relationships are governed by the same uncertainty principle as quantum mechanics. You only know how things are going when you have done something, intervened as regards the phenomenon, which is consequently altered in some way. In a parallel fashion, the mere right to know, or to ask the question, alters the relationship. In any case, the truth is always the artificial construct that your action, which has forced things to be "either this way or that," has given rise to.

4. Everything like before?

When the great Japanese painter Shinichi Kadowaki, who is today about 90, invited me over once to see his paintings on the theme of love, he also handed me a piece of paper with the following written on it: "While male sexual desire is directed at many women in general, female desire is directed at a select number of men in particular. Sexual desire in males is all about either obtaining sexual desire or killing. In females, it aims at happiness and a gentle relationship of mutual commitment. Once the sex act is over, men lose interest. In women, on the other hand, the

fact of having had sex increases their desire to stay with that man.” I wonder if these observations are still true today. In all honesty, my initial response would be that they are not. Over the last few months I have read about ten novels written by more or less youngish women. Whereas Erica Jong once had it in for men for their not knowing how to love and be faithful to a woman, which consequently induced her in turn to try to adopt their same attitude towards sex, in these more recent novels there is the utter absence of any desperate search for a man to love; in its place, the female protagonists regularly indulge in emotionless sex, drugs, and bisexuality. Recently as well, I’ve watched numerous episodes of the TV series “Sex and the City”, which I would term a genuine cult show for Western women, offering as it does a faithful rendition of their behaviour as well as their sexual or power fantasies.

On the basis of these cultural forays, my first inclination would be, I repeat, to conclude that Kadowaki’s description is true only for Japanese women of the past and no longer applies today. The fact is, however, that I have received numerous confidential letters, and conducted many interviews with young and not-so-young women on the issue of love and sex, which seem to confirm this conclusion only in part. True, many contemporary women have had sex without any sort of emotional involvement, and some have even during a certain period of their life seemed to regard sexual promiscuity as a means for exploring the potential capabilities of their own body. A sexologist friend of mine told me that although the hundred or so young women he’d seen had no need for sex education (for they were just about as well informed as he was), what they really needed an emotional education, in the sense that they understood nothing of their own emotions nor those of their man. In short, they were “emotionally illiterate.” And this led them into disastrous experiences, conflicts, and the experimentation with drugs, and eventually into psychological therapy.

In contrast to this, I have personally found that many women that I have interviewed insist that they desire—if not absolutely need—tenderness, love, and intimacy in a sexual relationship. Some of them actually go so far as to decide at a certain point of their life that if they can’t find this then they would rather refuse to have sex. I have met beautiful single women who, after a devastating experience and unable to find a man worthy of their love, decide on a life of chastity. They tell me that they have only met men lacking in passion, commitment, and romance, and without any ability of really give of themselves or love with all their heart. I have met still other women whom one might be inclined to judge as the tom boy type in the way they dress, act, and talk, and yet when one gets to know them well, one realizes that they have been harbouring in their hearts for years painful and immense love for one man.

And I have encountered, too, many young men who are astonished at and baffled by the self-confidence displayed by women their age, who have no problems about having sex and who seem to care little about love. After observing them attentively, deciphering their words, and mulling over their observations, I have the clear impression that they, not the women, are the ones who get sentimental and feel the need for love. Is this really anything new, however? Who used to sing serenades—women or men? And who over the course of history has talked more or written more poetry about love? Back during the Roman Empire, when rich noblewomen were going to bed with slaves or gladiators, they were not the ones writing sweet love poems, but rather Catullus and Propertius—who were then followed in the Middle Ages by Dante, Cavalcanti, and Petrarch. It isn't until the Renaissance that we find women writing about love. What I am suggesting is that perhaps nothing has really changed and that the eternal clash-and-unity between love and sex continues on in ever-new forms.

5. A man

Sometimes a desire for aggressive or crudely impersonal sex explodes in a man in reaction to a deep sense of frustration or need, and to the sensation of feeling neglected. A woman may feel basically the same way, yet in particular avert more keenly her lack of emotions and her need to be courted and loved.

I'm going to relate now the words (though deleting the most crude or obscene language) of a man in the grip of such desire. "You're my wife," he says in such a low voice that he can't be heard...and maybe he is just thinking aloud. "You're my woman. Why don't you undress and lie down beside me? Can't you reach out tentatively with one hand and take hold of my penis as if you're been wanting it badly for some time now? And then without saying anything, why don't you slip down and lick me like a tasty ice cream cone? Isn't that the way a mistress would do it—a mistress who's been waiting a long time for this moment? So why not you? Why don't you strip and strut around in front of me the way you used to do, with your nipples erect and those buttocks that resemble ripe melons, just so proud and thrilled to be so enticing and to arouse me, so that all I want to do is eat and drink you up until finally I feel satiated? Why don't you go round the house in a lovely robe, one of those that are half see-through and that'll make me want to kiss you and have you? What's the reason for not doing all this? Are you bored? Uninterested? Some new sense of modesty? Of course, as you say, you always have things to do on the job or in your study, books to research, meals to cook, activities to do with your girlfriends. You're a busy woman. So when I

come up to you and caress your bottom or put my hand up under your skirt and into your panties, you pull away and say, 'Don't start that, don't be silly' or 'Not now, I'm busy.' And you're right, of course, you are effectively always busy with something. But to be perfectly honest, do you know what I think? I think sometimes that you don't really care much about sex; certainly, you don't give it the importance that I do. But what can be more important—I ask myself every time—than feeling pleasure, and at the same time giving and receiving it?

“Do you know what? What I'm really dying for is a lover who can't wait to see me, who the moment she sees me is all ready, all wet and panting. I can tell that she is oozing wet even though she still has her clothes on. I can tell from the way she comes over to me, from the way she moves, the way she sits down. I can sense that she is trembling between her legs, that she is trembling with desire. She's on the verge of tearing off her clothes. I embrace her and kiss her; she kneels in front of me and takes me in her mouth. You don't know what an incredible gesture that is for a man, how much it means. Especially when it's a proud beautiful woman. It's something that a man can't do. If a man kneels in front of a woman, it's a sign of worship or adoration, not an erotic gesture. At most, he can kiss her belly, which always has something sublime, and naturally maternal, about it. But that flower of flesh and desire stays hidden between her legs. If a woman wants to be kissed there, she has to lie down.

“You might not know or understand just exactly how important it is for us men, but I want a woman who lets me explore her like a tunnel or a house. I love women, every single one of them. I love what is hidden, what I can't see; when they walk by me in a mini-skirt, my glance obsessively goes to the tops of their legs, searching for even I don't know what, but whatever that something is what I'm after. I'm only doing what all men do. The mini-skirt was invented precisely for this purpose; it induces us to try to get a peek at that space which remains covered. The male desire to see is never-ending. This thirst for voyeurism translates into the tens of thousands of erotic websites—do you realize how many there are? And they all show countless variations of the same thing. In one imagine it resembles a large orchid, with swelling outer lips and long inner ones. In a close-up shot, it looks like a petunia on the verge of blooming and bursting forth with life. A third one is small, modest, and delicate-looking. Then there's yet another on the order of a teasing mouth sticking out its tongue from a pink shell. Every one of these is different and as inviting and seductive as the next.

“Good lord, when it comes down to it, I'd just be happy if you came over here next to me right now, my love. It's not important if at the start you don't feel in the mood. Leave it to me, I'll take care of everything. I know how to touch you. But please let me do it, don't say right off that you have things to do. And then, after a bit—you know, after I've knocked at your door—please,

love, do something for me with your hands and your mouth. Just for a minute. It's no big effort. But you don't want to? Then just undress and lie still. I'll gently get you feeling aroused. What's that I hear you say? Who's just arrived? Where are you going? Christ, don't you understand? I want a woman who wants to make love and who wants the thrills and pleasure of sex. I want a lover who is there waiting for me, who comes running to kiss me. I want to know that she feels strongly attracted to me and to sense that she is longing to make love with me. Yes, a lover—a mistress. No, two lovers, seven-five lovers, even a hundred lovers, all of them aroused and ready. That's enough of lean times, I've had it with having to go without. But try to understand—wait, come here! Don't be a bitch. Why are you leaving? Where are you going?"

6. A woman

"Even after all these years, I am still very attracted to my husband," Katia says. "There are times when I see him walk with that springy step of his that he reminds me of a boy. But he's always so busy with a thousand commitments, travelling, constantly on the go, running from one meeting to the next. Even when we're alone, he isn't really focussed on me. I know that he thinks that he's dedicating his attention to me because he's solicitous and considerate, and always has a kiss for me when he arrives or leaves. Every so often we do make love. But what I want is to be noticed, made to feel special and desired, fondled and caressed. I want to be seduced. That's right, seduced. It's fantastic. You're smiling at the idea that I want to be seduced by my husband. But believe me, all women want to be seduced. I spent half the day yesterday at the hairdresser's; I know I look great, I know I'm attractive. And so what am I doing today, you wonder? I'm stuck here at home, worrying about my father's health, thinking that I have got to get the pergola in the garden fixed; and while I'm at it, I'm already thinking about tomorrow and what housework chores to take care of and what problems I'm likely to have at the office. Does that sound that a very fun life to you? It's not fun at all. Being seduced by a man means having to do with someone passionate who will take you away from all this—who makes you tingle and tremble all over with desire. It makes me start thinking, 'to hell with the pergola, my father, and the office! Over and above everything else, I am a woman—a woman who needs to be embraced, desired, loved, and who loves in return. How wonderful it is to love, to love passionately. You are looking at me in amazement, I see. But you're a man, you don't understand.

"Meanwhile, my husband is shut in his study, intent on his work. If I go up behind him and put my hands over his eyes, he turns round in irritation and asks if I can't see that he's busy.

“And that just makes me feel an overwhelming desire to be out somewhere, like at a party at a girlfriend’s place, where I can meet a man who’s good-looking and interesting and, above all, looking at me with avid interest, as he talks to me, makes me laugh, and dedicates all his attention to me. And as I start imagining this scene, the ice-block that I seem to be frozen inside of begins to melt, and I feel my body relax. My limbs become agile, languid, voluptuous. Or maybe I start fantasizing instead about meeting a strong, tough, foreign man who I know nothing about. He’s not the type who talks much about himself. But he looks at me with his intense eyes, and suddenly I feel on fire. He steps closer and takes my hands; it’s dark and I can only see his eyes. But his strong hands are gentle. My belly is ablaze. He leads me by the hand into a small room with a bed. He murmurs sweet words in my ear and slowly undresses me. He has a light, delicate touch. He lies down next to me. His body is strong and dark, and I like his smell. He has me on that bed. The next morning I drive him to the airport. He’s a pilot. I drop him off at the entrance and he waves goodbye.

“There, you see, I’m starting off on one of my usual fantasies, but that’s just because that idiot doesn’t understand. It’d be absolutely wonderful to go back to the way we were before we got married, when I was his mistress. I’d phone him at night, hoping that he was back but never sure if the moment was right for him to be able to answer the phone. I’d dial the number with trembling fingers and wait in excitement and fear, my heart beating frantically and my arms and chest shaking. Then I’d hear his voice. What joy, what happiness! Then that elated feeling, and a terrific desire to say a thousand things at once, in a storm and a whirlwind. And it was just a phone call. Then there were the times we managed to see each other, when we’d tear each other’s clothes off and unite our bodies together, straining to go deeper and deeper and ending up drained, exhausted, and happy. Who says that that exhaustion from love-making isn’t happiness? It certainly is! It’s what life is all about. Even that brief exchange, that short telephone call, was life itself. Sure, today we live together in our nice house, but I miss that most important element, that feeling of life. The pergola, my dad’s health, work—who the hell cares about those things? I’d give anything to experience again the excitement of that phone call. But he doesn’t understand this. Months pass, years pass, and he still hasn’t a clue.

“It makes me want to scream! And I still want to someone to whisper to me about love; I still want to be caressed and to toss and roll naked in a bed with a man I love—a man who loves me back—and then just enjoy it all, every bit of pleasure, for as long as it lasts. Won’t I ever be able to have that again with my husband? Will I ever have or feel that again with anyone? Could a lover give me that? Or would it just seem something sordid, or at most a way to escape? Well, why not an escapade? Just for a week or so. But what am I saying? I’d settle just for one night.

“I mean, even a one-night-stand would be better than this total void. He talks a bit about business, then we discuss my father and the pergola which needs fixing. Is this a way to live? What happened to life as I once knew it? Where has it gone?”

7. Sex as life

A conflict between love and sex can crop up in the most consolidated and lasting love relationship, even one that is not facing any real threat. This stems from the fact that the desire for sex and the desire for love are never one and the same, especially in the male half of the human species. Love becomes a question of dedication, responsibility, tenderness and care. And when that happens, the sex drive reappears in all its crudeness, manifesting its nature as a vital, elementary impulse in life.

Ivan writes the following: “I love you, and I love you above all else. You have been and are the great love of my life. If you were to die, I wouldn’t—I know this for a fact—have the strength to go on living. I don’t even want to think about such a thing. It would be as if suddenly all my air and light were cut off. Our house would be my tomb. When you arrive home at night, I recognize the clicking noise of your small steps as you approach the door, and sometimes when we are out on the street together, I purposely walk a little behind you just to gaze at you and think how beautiful you are and how lucky I am to have met you.

“And yet right now, as I lie in the bathtub, submerged in hot water, I feel a desire to slip away or vanish. I chose to say “vanish” and not “die” because there is something terrible and frightening about death. You aren’t afraid of death, I know, but I am. The mere idea grips me with anguish and terror. Who I’d really like to be is that fellow on whom the gods bestowed the gift of never dying but only sleeping for all eternity. Anyway, there in the bathtub, I would have been content with just not having to go out anymore, or go to work and battle to stay on top of things. I start thinking about how all my desires are gone. I have nothing left that I want to achieve. Although I’ve managed to accomplish next to nothing in life, I know that I can’t give or try any more. All I can feel is how weary I am of living. I know that you are tired of it all too, perhaps even more than me. I think that perhaps you also would like to vanish, to cancel out all trace of yourself.

“Then all of a sudden, I start imagining that a woman has just walked into the house through the front door. I fantasize on how she walks through the living room, comes into the bathroom where I am, and sits on the edge of the tub. Without saying a word, she touches the water with her

fingertips as if to see how warm it is, and as she bends over to do so, her soft, attractive breasts become visible through the opening of her partially unbuttoned shirt. In that moment the overwhelming sense of problems and weariness suddenly melts away, and I feel full of life again. And I feel desire again too, in its simplest form—I just want to reach out and caress that breast—and then desire for a new sexual experience. Why die when you are pulsing with life and desire? Life itself is desire. Sex is desire, and so sex is life.

“If I were to tell you these things, your immediate reaction would be to say that I don’t love you anymore and that I want some other woman. Then you’d add, ‘so go and have her...I’ll leave, I’ll step out of your way.’ But you’d have it all wrong. I mean that. If you were to leave me, I’d never be able to feel desire for anything ever again, let alone sexual desire for a woman! That imaginary woman isn’t a substitute for you but your complement. Do you know how in food there are substances like vitamins and certain minerals, which we need in some infinitely small quantity like a milligram? For example, we can eat a ton of food but if we aren’t getting any Vitamin C in that food, we’ll get a disease which I think is called scurvy. That was what sailors in past centuries fell ill from when they spent months at sea. Then they started taking crates of lemons on their voyages. Because lemons contain Vitamin C, and with just a few milligrams of that, scurvy disappears. If you don’t get any, on the other hand, you die. What I’m saying here is that the woman sitting at the edge of my bathtub, who showed me her inviting cleavage and put her hand in the water in order to caress my naked body, was like a bit of Vitamin C for my utterly depleted organism.

“Human beings have it in their genes to be full of contradictions, I think. We need a lot of very different things which our mind considers as incompatible. The contradiction is there and it’s not eliminable. We have to accept that. I believe in love and monogamy, but monogamy is bound to self-destruct if it doesn’t contain the seeds—or perhaps a better word is ‘particles’—of polygamy within it. And if that isn’t possible in real life, then at least in one’s fantasy life. When you watch a film and then tell me that you found a certain actor incredibly sexy, you are just doing the same thing I do with the woman in my fantasies. Clearly, the naked woman who in my fantasy slips into the bathtub with me and rekindles my energy and sense of life and youth can’t be you but only another woman. Or else you but not the way you are now—a you full of life and desire. Sublime love isn’t enough for me; I need sex, plenty of wild and even crude sex. For life to exist, it’s got to be there; even if in the smallest amount, it’s a necessary element. Sex is at once both the sublime and the obscene. You can die from the obscene, just as you can die from the sublime.

8. Sex as betrayal

Here is Janette's account. "You term it 'purely sexual' and 'utterly insignificant.' But what do those words mean? Any encounter, even just a simple conversation or a dance with someone you find attractive, changes you in some way. So how can you stand there and say that the fact of having made love to that woman is irrelevant, that it hasn't changed anything, that it hasn't robbed me of something? No way, buddy. If it'd been with a prostitute, I could accept it, but don't try to make me believe that with such a beautiful, poised, intelligent woman, so full of vitality and with such an interesting life to date, you merely ended up in bed by chance or in a moment of distraction. I'm quite sure that you realized that she was interested in you; she probably trained her attention on you and maybe admired something that you were doing. We women, believe me, know how to attract a man. She must have sent some signal your way, and from that moment on—don't deny it—you started thinking of her. Did you know that it happens to women, too? Even I many times have been quite taken with a man who then, I find, keeps coming back to mind. There have been times when I was aware that a man found me attractive and I found a way—there are thousands of ways—to make him understand that he interested me, that I very much wanted his company, and that I very much wanted to talk to him. This is exactly the same as what happened to you. You kept thinking about her, and maybe straight off you started imagining her naked. We women mentally undress men in a similar way, and even though we are usually more interested in other things, in certain cases we mentally yank a man's clothes off. But you men are incredible; your eyes can bore holes in things. Your gaze dives into low-cut necklines, penetrates between crossed legs, gets under skirts, and manages to roam practically anywhere. So let's say that you mentally undressed her and sexually desired her. Maybe you sought her out; certainly you two saw each other again. You talked and you realized that she wanted to be with you as much as you did with her. You started having pornographic fantasies with her in them. You men can't get away from pornography. You knew that the next time you two meet, you'd be alone, it would be somewhere intimate, and you and she would be able at last to make love. The prospect made you excited and anxious, and you put a lot of time and effort into getting ready for the big event. We women are experts at this but even you men, although you deny it, have a knack for it. Back during your first encounter, while you were both pretending to have utterly no thought of ending up in bed together, God only knows what you conversed about. About art or cinema, perhaps, or even philosophy. The preparatory conversation is distilled with eroticism; every word uttered is a sexual invitation, allusion, or lure. Already this first conversation between the two of you robbed me of something that up to then had been mine exclusively—meaning your erotic interest and desire. The chit-chat was already an act of betrayal.

Oh I know, you hadn't as yet done anything wrong from a purely sexual—or physical—standpoint. But a few minutes later you kissed each other, and a kiss profoundly unites. In fact, prostitutes never kiss a customer. All the rest—your taking off your clothes and embracing, then the joining of your two bodies, was only a continuation of what was already taking place. True, you didn't love her. But during the waiting and preparation phase, as during the sex itself, she provided you with infinitely more sexual pleasure than I did. However, you say that you love me and not her. And I believe you. You do love me. And if I were to leave you for real, if I were to ask for a divorce, you'd feel utter despair; and if I were to actually go through with it, you'd fall apart completely. That said, this love that you feel for me isn't complete any more; half of it you've given away to another woman. Granted, not forever, but still, during that period when you were giving this love to her, I constituted nothing but an obstacle, a hindrance. Only now that I have threatened to kick you out of the house have you realized how necessary I am to you. But if I hadn't said anything, you would just have continued on, thinking of me as a hindrance. Sexual encounters between a man and a woman always count for something. And that something is a poor imitation of the kind of love which is only complete when it is total and exclusive, where each person is really everything to the other—lover, friend, brother, father, mother, the greatest gift you've ever received and which suffices because it utterly fulfills you. If you want to preserve it, however, you have to guard it like the most precious treasure.”

9. Monogamy and fantasies of being unfaithful

“Monogamous?” the sexologist asks Joseph with a smile. “But how can you call the relationship you have with your wife monogamous? Granted, you've told me that you have lived together for ten years, that you love her and have never been unfaithful, and that you feel sexually fulfilled. But it's also true that starting with the very first times you made love with her, you've imagined doing it with other women that you'd had in the past. And it's always a fantasy with a story line, whether based on a real memory or simply invented. For example, you might imagine that you're making love with a girl that you once were in love with. Or else, you might fantasize about being in a hotel, where a group of men have hired a prostitute—an episode that you heard an account of once—to fuck with each of them in turn, and then at the end, with even the porter. And as you penetrated your wife you imagined being one of those men.”

“Well, I didn't say that every time I make love I feel I have to make up a story or invent a fantasy. And as far as that last story is concerned, I want to make it clear that my wife wasn't the

prostitute but herself. I love my wife. She's not merely the only person I could ever live with but she's also the woman I prefer to all others. My wife is the most beautiful woman in the world to me. I wouldn't trade her for anyone, not even for Nicole Kidman. In the fantasy I imagined that she took that prostitute's place."

"What I'd like you to reflect on," says the sexologist, "is that, if the only way for you to have an orgasm is to put your wife in the place of the prostitute and then imagine being one of the men who possesses her, it would seem to mean that your wife, as she is, isn't enough for you. And therefore your mind might insist that you're monogamous but deep down you're polygamous, and in order to satisfy that desire you have to transform your wife into other women. But tell me something—where do you get the ideas for your fantasies from?"

"From all my past experiences—well, no, I mean only from those that have some special significance that has remained with me. For example, once a girl told me that in the summer she liked to go out dancing and to meet men. When she saw that they were getting sexually aroused, she'd invite them outside, where she'd try to make them happy—that's precisely what she said, 'make them happy.' And so I imagine going to dance at that place, where I see her and get her attention, and then she touches me, gets me all aroused, takes me outside, tells me she wants to make me happy, and then starts to...."

"And meanwhile you penetrate your wife."

"Yes, it's my wife's body. I adore her body. Who knows how attractive or unattractive that girl was naked."

"Still, you would have liked to live that experience."

"I have never thought of looking her up—assuming such a thing were possible. But, yes, if I had happened to find myself in that place, I admit that I would have wanted to have that experience."

"So you see? You have this unfilled desire for that woman and that experience, which you find that you can achieve thanks to your wife's body. You're using that body to satisfy and live a desire that has gone unrealized. In essence, you desire that other woman."

"No, I don't desire that other woman. She's just something out of my past, she no longer interests me; she's purely a fantasy. Really, let's stop it with this nonsense about unfulfilled desires. I fantasize around three kinds of things—experiences that gave me a lot of satisfaction, completely imaginary scenes, and situations that I have heard about. It's as if I were getting my wife to play the roles of all the women I've ever known or am able to conjure up in a fantasy. I'm like a film director who has made a lot of movies all with the same actress. I carry around with me everywhere this collection of erotic stories, real or fantastical, in which she always has a part."

“And in this way you are always unfaithful to her.”

“Yeah, all right, it’s true that I am always unfaithful to her, but at the same time it’s true that I am never unfaithful to her, but rather to all other women. Because I live everything with her—I put all those other women whom I’ve had or imagined having, into her. I might not be the only one doing this, I suspect. I mean, I read a book by an American woman which claimed that even women fantasize about the most incredible things while they’re making love. Like being raped or being possessed by a throng of men.”

“That’s because they are sexually frustrated. A fantasy is the hallucinatory fulfilment of a desire.”

“Well, then, I guess that means that I’m incredibly unfulfilled and sex-starved; I must have an enormous amount of frustrated desire because I have always felt this tremendous need to see, imagine, and fantasize. Maybe it means that I truly desire all women on earth, at the same time that for some mysterious reason I love only one of them. She’s the only one who appeals to me and without whom I can’t live or even breathe. The mere idea that she could leave me or die all of a sudden makes me go crazy. And that’s the reason why I mentally play out everything that comes to mind, without breathing a word about it to her because I’m not so stupid as to risk losing her. Maybe in the love of one’s life, there’s to be found a bit of everything, down to polygamy, or down to the contradiction I’m talking about...”

“Well, try imagining now that every time you make love, your wife too is imagining that’s doing it with some other man. Physically she’s there with you, but she’s focussed on another; she’s having intercourse with you but in reality she’s fucking another man. Think about that and tell me how it makes you feel.”

“It’s embarrassing. Anyway, I guess that I’d want to ask her angrily, ‘So now who are you fucking, you little whore?’...She feels so distant and absent to me, it’s as if I were losing her...But hey, look, that’s all wrong. You know what I really think I’d do? Knowing what she was thinking would get me started on my own fantasy about her making love with one of her ex-husbands or boyfriends or lovers and about my taking her away from him...Yeah, like that. One moment I’d be the guy fucking her and then, or at the same time, there’d be only me, and the other guy wouldn’t exist anymore. And do you know how come I manage to come off as the winner? It’s because I love her and she loves me. I know that my wife had other men before me because she told me so. But at the same time she also said, ‘I love only you. The rest is in the past. There’s only you and you will stay the only one.’ In that moment, as she said that, I embraced—I took in—all of her past, all of her future, and even all of her old lovers. That’s why I can imagine myself taking their place. I even told my wife once, ‘The love of your life takes in—devours—all the rest. It makes all else its own.’”

The truth contained in Joseph's words also emerges from the following story described by Ilda Bartoloni in *Come lo fanno le ragazze (How Girls Do It)*. Diana has been living with Pino for ten years and is deeply in love with him. When her friends express disbelief at her claim of having a marvelous sex life with the same man after all these years and having no desire of changing anything or leaving him, she replies, 'I just know that the alchemy I experience...with Pino's body is the pinnacle of all possible pleasure for me. Really, making love with him makes me feel so incredible.'⁵ This extraordinary love life is further enhanced by the sexual fantasies the two of them share with each other. 'Oftentimes in my fantasies,' Diana says, 'there's another woman or man present [...] The man puts his penis in my mouth while Pino is inserting his in my ass. Or else, Pino penetrates me while the other is sucking my breasts and running his hands over me. Or if not, then I'm the one doing the things and there are people watching us, just men maybe and then...well, if you get tired of a fantasy you can always change it. We tell each other all of them, with all the particulars, in order to get as sexually turned on as possible.'⁶

10. Without the pact of reciprocal commitment

There are certain people who, when they fall in love, decide to do without the promise to be sexual faithful to each other; in other words, they fail to underwrite the pact of reciprocal commitment. There are numerous reasons, both ideological and practical, to explain this, all rooted in prevailing social customs. And what happens to people who opt for this choice? They continue to be in love even while they are at the same time establishing other ties, beginning new love affairs, and having other sexual experiences. They practice a form of polygamy, a system which contains their principal love at its centre, with other secondary ones—the fruit of sexual adventures, infatuations, or erotic friendships—rotating round it.

Once again, we can turn to the life and loves of Anaïs Nin to get a clearer idea of how this works in practice. At the age of 29, Anaïs fell in love with Henry Miller in Paris. Although it was the love of a lifetime, both were married to other people; Miller, moreover, refused on principle to see love as monogamous. He was in the throes of a frenzied exploration of all things sexual (it was the heyday of psychoanalysis and its discovery of the importance of sex), and while he was smitten with love for Nin, he refused to recognize it as such. In other words, he lived and felt this love but would not admit to any fanatic feeling of exclusivity. Consequently, Anaïs continued her

relationship with her husband Hugo, whom she still cared for and whose qualities as a man and a lover still attracted her, at the same time hiding from him her affair with Miller.

Some time later, she got involved with her analyst, Allendy—having first gone to him as a patient, then seducing him in a state of infatuation and ending up as his mistress. Actually, this phenomenon frequently regards male psychoanalysts and their female patients, even though the former keep it hidden, preferring to call it an instance of “transferral” and adamantly refusing to admit that such a thing belongs to the same category as the process of falling in love. Be that as it may, in the case of Anaïs Nin, the man she loved remained Miller. “It doesn’t frighten me to know that Henry’s sensuality will inevitably make him unfaithful to me,” she wrote. “It won’t be anything more than a fling, a one-night stand, or at most a phase. I have no fears because I know that even though it may mean my suffering from jealousy, Henry belongs to me alone—and besides, don’t I cheat on him in turn?”⁷

Then she met Artaud, and a relationship began between them. In spite of this, however, the love relationship with Henry Miller, so central to her life, continued. “Henry arrives, and the continuing current of our love remains mysteriously uninterrupted. It flows instinctively on like a river. On a mental level, I can break things off with Henry—the Henry that others see. But I can’t break things off with the Henry whose voice calling from the garden makes my uterus spasm.”⁸

During this same period, she seduced her own father.

Subsequent to this, she became romantically involved with (or, more properly speaking, experienced an erotic infatuation for) another psychoanalyst, Otto Rank. “I feel genuine passion for Rank—a sort of blind, physical hunger. Nothing beyond those moments when we are in bed together is as important as this flaming collision [...] Passion. No words. No creation. No mother. No communion. No tenderness.”⁹ She went so far as to declare that she was ready to live with him, and to leave for New York with him. If she didn’t do so, it was because she was expecting Miller’s child—a baby girl who was born prematurely and soon died.

After this, her love for Miller began to fade, then vanish. A short while later, the same thing happened to her feelings for Otto Rank. Once free of this erotic infatuation, she fell passionately in love with Gonzalo Moré. At this point Anaïs began to realize that the reason for this string of relationships could be traced to the choices and psychic make-up of Henry Miller. He had always stopped short of total love and done without love’s niceties and poetry, all of which had caused her to look elsewhere. “I’ve discovered what it is that you deprived me of—what you prevented me from having—in life,” she told him. “It’s something too subtle to define. It’s death that you spread around you, loving from a distance as you do and not being able to give yourself completely.” Elsewhere Anaïs wrote, “Henry isn’t able to remain constant and true to his passion. He gets

sidetracked by other women and other desires, like an uncontrollably rushing river. The truth is that he has never loved me in real life, in the present or in everyday moments, but only through the filter of loss and pain.”¹⁰

11. Love and sexual freedom

Compared to the work of Anaïs Nin, the novels that Erica Jong has written focus far more on the unresolved conflict women feel between the desire to fall in love and establish an enduring love relationship and the desire to give rein to the aggressive impulse towards men which is historically rooted in the feminist movement of the 1970s. To word it differently, the conflict is between the desire for exclusive, total love and the irresistible impulse of refusing to surrender to love, settling at most instead for a pseudo-experience like that of an erotic infatuation.

Jong is torn between her traditional upbringing, which has instilled in her a sense of waiting for her true love to come her way, and her determination to keep love and sex separate, the way men do. This culminates in the ultimate female fantasy that she calls “the zipperless fuck” in the novel *Fear of Flying*. To Jong’s mind, men don’t know how to love. Indeed, only a man is capable, after a moment’s transport of mad love and passion, of utter detachment and a return to an errant love life, leaving the woman (for women truly know how to love) hurt and disillusioned.

But Jong has got it wrong. Men don’t behave like that. Rather, men tend to keep sex and love separate right from the start. They can have satisfying, happy, and joyous sexual relationships with a hundred different women in succession, and in many cases even simultaneously, without ever, not even once, thinking about love. Sex is just sex, even when it contains intimacy, tenderness, and sweetness—but not love. Certainly, even women are capable of maintaining this distinction, but after a while, they grow tired of it and want something more intense that touches their emotions.

Like Anaïs Nin decades before her, Jong tries to behave like a man; but because she doesn’t understand male nature, but rather imagines men to be something they are not, she ends up acting in a radically different way from them. As soon as one love ends (and attributing it to the man’s unfaithfulness, forgetting that she too has been cheating), she embarks on a promiscuous phase of sexual exploration. She goes to bed with countless men, gives countless men a try. But she doesn’t take any pleasure or feel any joy in the experience, as a man would. Instead, she does all this with anger and scorn. Her very language reflects this; her descriptions are full of obscene, vulgar, derogatory terms. As in: “I’ve learned that pricks vary greatly from man to man. Some bend forward invitingly; others recline backwards reticently; some take the world by storm while others

gradually become familiar and operational, like spies. Some are rosy-pink, some are red, and still others are yellow, brown, or black. Some are veined like lunar maps; others are as smooth as pink marzipan piglets. Some drip before they gush, while others refuse to gush at all.”¹¹

Then, after this wandering “from bed to bed, and prick to prick,” during which everything seems more or less disgusting to her, there finally appears in front of her a man whom she likes—a marvellous, handsome guy who—lest we forget—is also one incredible fuck. The relationship she begins with this man is one of love and frenzied, passionate sex, laced with all the most banal elements of over-the-counter romanticism. The reader is treated to sun-lit beaches, fabulous parties, important VIPs, stunning Venetian villas, starry nights, love and desire and—to use her lingo—endless fucks, mind-blowing orgasms, rivers of sperm, and frenzied encounters between penis and vagina—all this in an intricate blend of sex and love, where the one becomes the other and vice versa.

While this experience (even without the stage scenery of beaches, sunsets, nights, and luxuries) is an undeniable part of the experience of falling in love, and for this reason the reader is led to regard it as such, in reality such divine, orgasmic sex doesn’t last for long, nor does it ever become the daily experience of a shared life together. It never becomes tenderness, tacit understanding, shared confidences, or life battles conducted side by side. Furthermore, it can never become any of that because it exists only as an adventure divorced from everyday life. It is no more than a vacation; it changes things no more than an extraordinary event.

All this explains why Erica Jong never describes male sexuality as something free, joyous, and happy or renders for us the true experience of falling in love. What she calls love, we call erotic infatuation or a sexual love orgy destined to end, without ever becoming profound, enduring love in the light of everyday life. What she describes is merely a series of love affairs that sour into disappointment, give rise to attempts at revenge, then to resentful tries at new relationships, and finally momentarily plateau as a new erotic infatuation. It bears adding that the type of erotic infatuation that Jong presents the reader with is inevitably overblown and artificial in feel. There is absolutely no hint of great passion, of the sort of love that is at once ecstasy and desperation. Real love—in other words, the love of everyday life which consists in acts of gentleness or tenderness, in the pleasure of living together and being able to sleep together, to talk and confide in each other—receives no mention in Jong’s work.

12. Open marriage

“You are caught up in a delirious trap of jealousy fuelled by your desire for an exclusive relationship. You divide your time between husband and lover, or wife and mistress, maybe even ending up with two families, weathering continual dramas, lies, changes of heart, acts of forgiveness, and other such nonsense. What you don’t understand is that living the way you do prevents you from having a full, happy, and stimulating love and sex life! Johnny and I have been married for thirty years. We got married when we were very young, and not long after that we decided that ours would be an open marriage. We agreed that each of us would have all the love and sexual relationships he or she wanted, but on the condition that we had to tell each other everything; there were to be no secrets, no holding anything back. This would safeguard our relationship, over and beyond its sexual side, meaning that it would allow us to keep our profound, sincere friendship going and help each other in a constructive way. There would be no betrayals. Each of us has kept to the pact, not only conducting an independent erotic life but also participating in the other’s pleasures and sorrows—with a sense of unity and solidarity.

“At the start of our marriage we were faithful to each other. I have a vivid memory, however, of the day when Johnny came to me and said, ‘I met a Finnish girl with skin as white as milk and long straight blond hair, who I think you would have found attractive. We both were staying at the same hotel and ended up dining at the same table. We went out on the town the next evening and then she invited me to her room. We made love. It was wonderful.’ For a moment I stood there stunned, then as he went on talking, I imagined the Finnish girl. I decided that Johnny was right—I would have found her attractive. I’m brunette with a dark complexion, while she was pale and blond, and I immediately thought that I would have liked to watch them making love together. Or actually, I wanted to be there with them, lying in bed between them and caressing the Finnish girl’s white skin, while Johnny had her first and then me. When your husband in an open marriage tells you what he’s done with another woman it’s as if you became her as well, while at the same time remaining yourself. What I mean is that there are always three of you there.”

“But has it ever happened to you to fall seriously in love with someone?”

“Twice, actually. And both times I told Johnny about it. I described my feelings, my anxious waiting to see him, and even how my heart would start pounding at the sight of him. Johnny just left me to it and counted on the fact that at a certain point these things end. We stayed close. He was always there for me. We made love sometimes, and I would confess to him that I was imagining doing it with the other guy. But he always smiled and told me to keep on the way I was going with the other relationship, and went so far to say that I should tell him what he could do better. This

made me laugh at times. But it also made me suffer. One of those two times lasted for three years. I basically had two husbands, and I must say that I enjoyed that.”

“Did it ever happen to you that the person you were in love with asked you to chose between him and your husband?”

“Once, yes, but, believe me, men are never as determined or set on an idea as us women. Or maybe it’s that women find it easier to humour them or find excuses for putting off such a decision. Also, you’ve got to remember that in an open marriage you have to tell your husband everything, whereas to your lover you can lie or keep things a secret if you want. Little by little my lover simply got used to considering me as, yes, his woman, but one who every so often had to travel for work, or go see her relatives, or visit an ex-husband with whom she no longer had sex. Sure, if he had really put me to the test and wanted me to chose for real, or if he had left me for good, I would have been utterly crushed because I really was in love with him and wanted to keep living with him. So, you see, not only was I able to have all the sex I wanted but I was also able to live two great passions with two great loves. With the security of having a safe refuge to go back to.”

“Another question. I recently met a woman with three children who has been married for 37 years. She got married so young because she was very deeply in love. After ten years of intense love for her husband, she fell madly in love with another man. But she didn’t leave her husband. She simply enjoyed to the hilt her love affair, which also lasted ten years. Then she fell in love a third time, and lived this passion fully for yet another decade. During all that time, however, she never once said a word to her husband about these two affairs because she didn’t want him or their children to suffer. I asked her if her children’s father was her husband or one of her lovers. ‘My husband’s, of course,’ she replied. ‘I could never had hidden from my children their real father’s identity!’ So there you are—this woman has lived through three passionate love relationships without ever getting divorced and without ever saying anything to anyone, but rather keeping the secret shut up in her heart and body. Her relationship with her husband continues to be one of mutual affection, respect, and alliance. Now tell me, what difference is there, if any, between this and your experience of open marriage?”

Deborah took a minute to reflect, then said, “It’s very different, actually. In our open marriage, we are more united—there are no secrets between us. Each of us experiences the love and sexual pleasure felt by the other as if it were his or her own. The only ones completely in the know are the two of us. Every now and then, each of us brings home a guest who stays for a certain amount of time, or starts seeming permanent, and then the two of us become three, or eventually four. But the hosts and protagonists are us, just the two of us together.”

“If I’m not mistaken, that is what Sartre and de Beauvoir tried to establish with their relationship. However, in their case there was jealousy and hostility. Very often they were cruel to each other, especially Sartre, who ended up transforming his women into maid servants.”¹²

“That can be explained by Sartre’s personality. He was a famous and powerful man who could do as he pleased and be as despotic as he wanted. He had a sort of harem, in which Simone was the first wife and the others, the second, third, or fourth wives if not servants. An extremely strong couple in an open relationship can destroy all others who get caught up in the workings of that relationship and who are naïve enough to try to divide the two.”

“Excuse me if I ask you one final question. Doesn’t it ever bother you having to tell your husband everything, and not keeping anything exclusively for yourself—some intimate erotic secret or a wonderful love that’s all your own?”

After a moment’s reflection, Deborah said, “Even when you think you are telling the other everything, you can never relay it all. A person always ultimately remains himself. If you have a toothache, even if someone else is there who empathizes with you and participates in your discomfort, that pain is something that only you alone feel.”

I’d like to compare further Deborah’s experience with that of the woman who kept the secret of her three great loves. Deborah could never have experienced certain aspects—the fear, thundering heart, shivers—of those love affairs because she would have had to share and tell all to her husband, and when one shares something that is unique, ungraspable, and mysterious, one inevitably destroys it. On the other hand, Deborah was undeniably closer to her husband, and managed to achieve with him—on account of this accorded promiscuity—an immensely profound level of intimacy.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LOVE THAT ENDS

1. There was no experience of falling in love

Many love relationships end because they were founded on the common belief that a couple can make the calm *rational decision* that they are right for each other on the basis of their shared values, interests, and tastes. Most books and quizzes that claim to help a person choose a partner or understand his or her ideal mate are oriented around these elements. Some people even think that when two people have a lot in common, an initial experience of living together may lead to their falling in love. Although this is possible, it is also improbable. If it does happen at a certain point, it is because the two people are suddenly able to look at each other with radically different eyes. We all know, moreover, that a friendship may at a certain point become love. This only occurs, however, when both people have gone through a phase of major changes in their lives and are ready for the passage from grief and mourning to that of reawakening. At such a moment, it is possible that each one may see certain qualities in the other person which will help in that return to life. We have to bear in mind here, however, that what these two people are seeing as they are falling in love with each other is not the good old friend from before but rather a totally different individual. They tend to say things like: ““the revelation dawned on me” or “suddenly it was as if my eyes were opened to the fact that she was extraordinarily beautiful.”

All this is to say that while it is beyond a shadow of a doubt that two people can establish a good erotic relationship and feel immense affection for each other based on shared values, tastes, and interests, this has nothing to do with the experience of falling in love.

There are people who decide, hating solitude as they do, to “become a couple” or get married in order not to be alone. They are content if they find someone nice and good-natured with whom to share an interest or two and in general a serene existence.

Then there are those who get caught up in a love relationship in order to forget a romantic let-down and to fill the void inside themselves left by this unhappy love. In many cases, however, their new partner has not suffered through the same sort of thing in his or her past. This imbalance shapes the relationship from the beginning. If the lover who is trying to forget the past is in essence unable to really fall in love as long as this unhappy, tormented love is still vividly felt, it is also true that at the same time their partner *is* capable of the falling-in-love experience and *is* ready to change and adapt in order to totally dedicate him- or herself to the other. This partner is the one who injects

creativity and energy into the relationship, and he or she also provides the fundamental feeling of security. Because of this, this relationship usually lasts for a long time. The couple may have children, and in any case enjoy a serene home-life together. The other member of the couple, however, continues to feel a terrible inward void. Even though he or she has no conscious intention of doing so, he or she continues to look for a substitute for that long lost love of the past; for this reason, this lover is very likely, sooner or later, to fall in love with a third person. If the two people in love are married and have children, there might be catastrophic consequences. In any case, when the falling-in-love process ignites, the other spouse or family or close friends are utterly disconcerted by what appears to be irrational, mad behaviour. They haven't a clue as to what is happening deep down inside to the person in love. The phenomenon that I've just described occurs far more often than one may imagine. Only a person in love tells the other, in an endless flow of words, what he or she is feeling. Those who are not in love keep it all to themselves.

The basic scenario remains the same when *both* members of the couple have previously experienced a painful romantic disappointment. The amount of surprise and astonishment, however, is less in that the two people tend to confide in each other, seeing that each one is in a condition to understand what the other is going through. They are more cautious and careful in their dealings with each other, and for this reason rarely get caught unprepared.

Finally, there are quite a number of people who decide to "become a couple" because, in addition to having shared interests and liking each other's company, they are really *well-suited to each other sexually-speaking*. This often happens to adolescents or young people in general, who don't hesitate to say that they "have fallen in love." No one can predict what will happen to these young couples over time. The events of life, and the changes they necessarily bring about, together with the inner strengths and weaknesses of both individuals, will determine what turn these relationships eventually take.

2. No contact with the everyday world

Some relationships end early on because the two people didn't bond completely—in the sense that there was no total fusion between them—during the phase of falling in love. Typically what happens is that two people who feel strongly attracted to each other go to bed together almost immediately, have frenzied sex night and day, and move in together shortly thereafter. Completely caught up in this marvellous experience, the two lovers don't feel any desire to deal with real life and all its problems. They want to enjoy the present and forget about the world and its battles,

bothers, and hardships. They are savouring the nascent phase of falling in love, which frees them from all ties and duties and impetuously with its abundant charge of eroticism heralds the beginning of a new life and a world in which all colours, faces, and things suddenly seem transformed and more beautiful. It is as if the gates of an earthly paradise had been suddenly thrown open, and all they want to do is to lie down together on its grassy field, free of all thoughts, questions, memories of the past, projects for the future—and without knowing a thing about each other. They settle into their erotic world and keep themselves, and each other, from thinking or talking of anything else.

By doing so, however, they are short-circuiting the natural process of getting to know each other, which in turn fosters the understanding of what new aspects about themselves are to be encouraged and what old ones are incompatible with the make-up of the other person and so should be discarded. Instead of changing, the two lovers remain exactly the same as they were before—and this, even though they have the momentary impression of being new people. Their capacity for the sort of inner changes that would aid them in moulding themselves to fit the other person and so build a life together, that capacity has not been touched.

Still, they are convinced that the sort of love they are experiencing, which merely signals the start of the falling-in-love process, is the real and total thing. Each one keeps repeating how madly in love they are, and on this basis, they decide at a certain point to live together, or even get married, imagining that this bliss will last forever. They don't realize that they haven't merged together psychologically, that they haven't really adapted to each other and have no idea of the incompatible differences that divide them. By consequence, when this inebriated phase of erotic passion comes to an end, they are surprised to learn about the existence of these differences in everyday real life. Since they did nothing to resolve these differences in the earlier phase when they were completely flexible and open to radical modifications, they regard these problems now with anguish and begin to nurse the suspicion that they've been wrong about the other since the beginning. Each one claims that the other is different from how he or she appeared at first and criticizes him or her for how they are now. Their relationship ends stormily, with incessant fights and tears.

This is the sort of experience that may happen to us when we move to a new city or country for a certain limited period, be it for a long vacation or programmed stay. The fact of being far from our usual environment and daily work routine has a liberating effect on our imagination. The people and cultures we find in these new places fascinate and charm us, and we find ourselves imagining or fantasizing on what marvellous alternative lives these others might be living. The chances are that this will spark the beginnings of a new romance. Unfortunately, however, when we return to our world we realize that the person who seemed so adorable and desirable in his or her context, strikes

us as meaningless in our own. With this, comes the awareness that the life we had imagined is completely impossible.

3. There was no mutual pact established

For the recent generations who have had an easier life, lived through a loosening of traditional moral edicts, and experienced great sexual freedom and numerous less-than-memorable love affairs, marriage and the decision to live together have stopped seeming like a binding contract, or mutual pact to love, aid, and be faithful to each other through thick and thin or in sickness and in health. Instead, they interpret it as a union destined to last as long there is mutual physical attraction and pleasure. The moment love starts to diminish and desire fade—because of some big fight or because you are full of problems and your partner just doesn't sympathize or help you in the way you want or need, you're likely to decide that there is no longer a reason for your staying together. At the same time, life by its very nature presents us with problems, difficulties, misunderstandings, suffering, and times of trial. A couple with a profound, abiding belief in this pact of solidarity and mutual assistance is in position to face all this together. These new couples, on the other hand, often are not prepared to make this commitment and their marriage falls apart.

Individuals who are not used to holding up under frustration and hardship, or those who can think only of instantaneous gratification and pleasure, don't know how to take a stand and fight. If one of the two loses his or her job, the other feels so dismayed and disoriented as to attack with scathing criticism and ire, convinced of not loving his or her spouse anymore. The same happens when one member of the couple falls ill and needs help in his or her suffering. The other, helping partner has the impression of being reduced to playing nurse and nothing more; this requires coming home early, doing double the work, forgetting about dinner invitations or going on vacation. "But is this a life?" the woman asks herself. "Did I get married just to have this? Taking care of a weak, ailing man and administering to him like a mother, servant, and nurse? Why don't I just send this wreck of a husband to hell and go back to being single—to doing as I like and when I like? There are lots of fun, handsome, healthy men around who are dying to take you out to dinner or take you skiing for a weekend, and who are also fantastic in bed!"

After a few experiences of this sort, the person in question becomes incapable of controlling his or her impulses and ends up acting continuously on the immediate-pleasure principle. He or she regresses to an infantile, or in any case adolescent, level of behaviour and often winds up not being able ever again to establish relationships founded on trust.

4. Decomposition

Let's take as our starting point now the case of two people truly in love. They lived together for a while and then got married. Now, however, their dream of love and happiness and their mutual life plans have been undermined by an array of easily imaginable circumstances that constitute objective reality. Most working people today have to deal with a competitive professional world and the lack of job security, factors which give rise to frustration and disillusionment and which, in the case of a couple, may explain the success of one and the lack of success of the other. Another thing that undermines relationships is the fact that although it is true that during the nascent phase of the falling-in-love process it is easy for the couple to modify their old consolidated habits and thus adapt to living together, it is also true that both must absolutely be moved by the desire to do so. Unfortunately, there are ever so many lovers around who think that they will change automatically overnight without thinking about it. They couldn't be making a bigger mistake. We will only change if we desire to change day in and day out, incessantly. If we are not careful to remain willing to change, all the small everyday conflicts that spark arguments and accusations will begin to build a wall between us and our partner of incomprehension and indifference. People just don't take it to heart that words easily become like stones, and accusations, mockery, and insults leave wounds that never heal completely.

Then there is the undeniable fact that the sexual nature of men and women is both different and erratic. If a man may be content to have his sexual needs fulfilled by a mere prostitute, a woman most often feels a hunger for intense emotions and consequently refuses to put up with a man whom she now judges as cold, arid, and incapable of giving or receiving love. She feels that this man doesn't pay any attention to her, that he underrates her, that he ridicules her opinions and beliefs. Over time she becomes more and more irritated and resentful, until at last these emotional experiences translate into a physical refusal. His very presence begins to bother her. He seems to always be in her way or leaving his clothes in a messy heap, or leaving it to her to deal with his smelly socks and underwear. Then there's the fact he never has a word to say, or else he seems to be talking non-stop. Any number of the personal qualities which so charmed her while they were falling in love now seem unbearable defects.

Thanks to the modern principle of equality between men and women, wives who earn more than their husbands are becoming more and more numerous; they also oftentimes lead more active lives and have to do with more interesting people. Yet ancient historical traditions as well as a

certain phylogenetic tendency in human beings have made it such that even today a woman is most powerfully attracted to a man because he's a winner or a leader. A husband who is a loser and who is dependent on her financially, perhaps because he has lost his job and does little else than complain about his hard luck, really begins to get to a woman; inevitably, she loses erotic interest in him. What I have just described are automatic behavioural patterns which we aren't usually conscious of and that even today we don't like to admit to; that said, they are destined to become increasingly important in the future.¹

Here is Bridget's account: "I met him at the seaside. He was a fisherman. He was tall, strong, and as handsome as a Greek god—the kind of guy who all the female tourists drooled after and went to bed with. I fell head over heels in love with him. I mean it wasn't just sexual by any means, although the sex was so great that it sent my head reeling, like as if I were drunk on him. I adored his self-assuredness and the proud way in which he moved. I also loved his tender, gentle way of loving me. When the summer ended, he came to the city with me and found himself a good job down at the harbour. We started living together and were incredibly happy. I'm a dentist, you see, and when I opened a dental office with a colleague of mine, I started making a very good living. He wasn't able to get ahead or even finish his diploma as his employer had requested. On account of that, he lost his job at the harbour and he just let himself go. He took to spending all his time at the bar with friends and running after women again. He'd come home very late at night and stay in bed until late the next morning, then he'd walk around the house half-naked, as if the fact of his cock hanging out made him important. He took to dropping his dirty laundry all over the house and he stopped bathing. He started to smell. I found him disgusting."

Bridget's sexual revulsion was the direct consequence of her scorn for him socially- and humanly-speaking. That half-naked body wandering around the house, his penis on proud display, and then his physical smell, all these things that bothered her so much now used to excite her at one time.

It's the woman who leaves. It's inside the woman that revulsion and refusal ferment progressively over time until there comes the moment of explosion. "I feel a force gaining strength inside me," Catherine Texier writes. "A vibrating force to watch out for. One day I'll decide that it's all over and you'll be caught by surprise. You're not expecting it because I know how to keep my cards hidden. If my anger barely surfaces, it's because I like to keep it under control and not let it inadvertently emerge and cause useless arguments. My anger is what fuels me and keeps me going. I'm letting it accumulate till it catches fire spontaneously. The flames will shoot high into the stratosphere. I may not be the best fighter but I know how to cut the cord and end things. You don't

know this about me; you don't know about this reality. The fact is, though, that I can go from love to goodbye in an instance, and when it ends, it'll honestly be in a second."²

A woman is capable of leaving her husband even when she isn't in love with someone else—something that a man doesn't do. Usually a man leaves only if he's in love with another woman and she asks him to get a separation or a divorce. Women are perfectly aware of this, and in fact a woman not only lashes out with the husband who is leaving her but also with "the whore" who's stolen him away.

5. You weren't the way I'd imagined you would be

The sort of love experienced during the throes of the loving-in-love process tends to end when circumstances in life alter the plans the two lovers have made together as well as their ways of reacting. The Swiss psychiatrist and psycho-analyst Jurg Willi calls this "*divergent evolution*."³ The result of this evolution is the rejection of the other and the realization of his or her failings and inadequacies, which have put an end to attraction and even possibly transformed that attraction into repulsion.

The process of falling in love is always firmly rooted in a specific historical time and place. In other words, you fall in love with a person who indicates to you the way that seems right as far as progressing into the future in that setting and the circumstances of that moment go. In order to get out of the existential trap or groove into which you've fallen or purposely sought out, and in order to free yourself of some enslaving burden that now feels unbearable, you take advantage of—meaning that you lean on—that person with all his or her qualities and ideas, with his or her body, with all that he or she symbolizes or suggests to you. All these things that seem transformed by love help you deal with the obstacles you meet with—indeed, they are what make you into a winner. As time passes, however, you encounter other problems in life, and as you try to deal with them, you find that the person who has been your companion and guide up till now no longer is of any help to you. It's not that he or she is any worse a person, but only that he or she has remained the same. You weren't mistaken about who he or she was or the sorts of qualities he or she had. You haven't been fooled in any way. The transfiguration of reality that the experience of falling in love causes to happen is never pure fantasy; it's never a total invention. It always has some real basis, in the sense that it only accentuates or exaggerates what already exists. And yet these same qualities—not in the abstract but as you experience them concretely in everyday life—stop fuelling your enthusiasm and zest for life at a certain point and no longer seem of any use. Slowly you began to sense that they are a limitation, an obstacle, or a source of uneasiness. Since you yourself have

changed, it is evitable that soon or later you will perceive them as the other person's defects. The end to love is always bitter for both people; although each one apparently is reproaching the other for not being the way he or she had imagined, in reality the other is being accused of being precisely how and what he or she was.

Sasha remembers things in his relationship going this way: "I was madly in love with you. I left my home, my country, and my job for you. I turned my back on the social recognition I could easily have obtained for myself, and I chose the difficult road, with its poverty, risks, and solitude. The main thing was that we were like two warriors fighting side by side. I felt invincible. I was living in a drunken dream state and couldn't have cared less about what other people thought. Everything I did with you seemed so right, intelligent, rational, and important. Everyone who had known me before thought I was crazy. If I myself look back at myself today, I realize that I did a hundred senseless things. At the time, however, those things were what we wanted and what we liked. How many times did we move house? How many times did we start all over again? I realize only now that I was the one who invented, found a new angle on things, found ways to build and create things. They were all *my* projects, *my* ideas, and *my* strategies for how to give our life sense and meaning. You never really understood much—you always did things in a shoddy, tactless, or tasteless way. Then little by little, I guess, I started to see that the extraordinary, dynamic, creative woman who I thought I was living with, was in reality just an eccentric type who made up for her total lack of creativity with improvisation acts and bizarre gestures. I realized that you weren't intelligent but only witty. Instead of coming up with anything new or original, the only thing you knew how to do was to shock or surprise. You weren't supporting me but getting me to drag you along behind me. You didn't have any clear projects or ideas. All you were interested in was how to get by, how to survive from day to day. The ideal that I'd created for myself was smashed to bits, and with it, my love for you."

Sara's reply to Sasha is this: "It wasn't my failure that made you so disillusioned, but yours. You'd created this world in your imagination that didn't and couldn't exist. You were fooled by yourself; you *wanted* to fool yourself. I did take you right up to the brink, but I knew what things were possible and what things were impossible, whereas you didn't. When you realized that you had made a mess of things, you ran off. Granted, from your perspective you did the right thing. You went looking for a different road in life. You turned your back on this defeat. But I had to stay behind and suffer through it. Little by little our existence had become mean, sordid, stupid, and wrong. I had tried in a thousand ways to come up with things that could enhance our life and keep it from becoming a monotonous routine. I tried a hundred of times harder than I ever had before to find new and original stimuli. But it was utterly useless. You wanted something new in your life

and yet you couldn't yet say what it was. Everything I had offered you, and could offer you, no longer interested or appealed to you. You criticized me for being what I was and had always been. You hated me. Dear God, you hated me. I don't think you even realized it perhaps, but you hated me so much that I even feared for my life. Then finally one day you left. Actually, I locked you out of the house. And all I felt was relief."

6. When there are children

Children usually bring a couple together. But this united front depends on two things. The first condition is that the couple must really be in love, and the second is that both people must want to have children. Having kids has to be something they've included in their 'love pact.' This will help them deal with the emotional trauma that the birth of a child always causes. A mother goes through something akin to falling in love with her baby. There is the suspenseful waiting, the fears, and then the arrival on the scene of a small being who is utterly depend on you for his life, the care of whom fills your day and your heart. You continue to gaze at him with spellbound and anxious eyes. You get up at night and go check to see if he's breathing. You feel an immense, blinding love which necessarily overshadows any other love and any and all sexual desire. From that moment onwards, a woman becomes a mother, and as a mother she needs to see that her man wants and loves that child as much as she does. Or better, that he loves her through the child. There are only two cases in which a man will satisfy his woman's request: either he also intensely wants a child, or he is deeply in love.

The explanation for the first case is obvious—he stands to obtain what he himself already desired. In the second case it's because the fact of being in love makes him love everything she loves. Furthermore, even though in our society the prevailing model of a sexy female is that of a woman with a flat or slightly rounded belly, a man in love will continue to love his woman no matter if she gets fatter, thinner, or sick; for this reason it seems the most natural thing in the world for him to love her protruding belly, her labour pains, and the child that she bears him and with whom she is at one. His eroticism, which once was completely channelled into his sex drive, now tends towards the gentle and the tender. Once his wife goes back to looking the way she did before, in any case, he will feel in that old way again.

It may also happen, however, that a man does not want children because he feels that they are incompatible with what he wants out of a love relationship. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that he already has children, and the idea of raising another baby, with it carriage, and diapers, and

nursing and pooping, and crying at night, and daytime responsibilities, and the resulting lack of privacy, all this disturbs him. All this would prevent him from having that intense and passionate love life with his woman that he's always dreamed about. He's arrived at a crossroads—a point of no return, even though his woman may not realize it.

Tecla writes about the experience of this sort that she went through. “I loved you, I loved you so much, and I thought that you loved me. You told me you did, you swore that it was true. You would come running to me like a desperate man and take refuge in my arms. You cried and we make love and you said that there was no way, absolutely no way on earth, that you could do without me. It was just a matter of settling things with your wife first—wife in a manner of speaking, because you two weren't married. It was just that you were anguished by the idea of losing your children. I kept telling you that children suffer when they see their parents fighting all the time, and that it was better to split up and get everything clear and out in the open. No one has ever lost his kids because he got divorced and remarried. But you kept wavering this way then that way. You would disappear for a bit, then re-appear at my door. Then I got pregnant, and I made it clear to you that I wanted that child, I wanted him to grow up to be free and independent. But when I broke the news to you, I could see that it upset you—your entire face cringed, even as you were repeating that I was the one who had to decide. But if two people love each other, they should want things together, and above all a child. Even if you pleaded for time, it was clear you didn't want the child, or at least you couldn't have cared less. If you loved me you should have wanted the child that I wanted. But you didn't love me completely; you'd never completely freed yourself in order to love me. I have never been able to forgive you for not being there to hold my hand while I was giving birth. And that spelled the end of our love—or at least of my love for you because yours for me never really existed. So here I am now, alone with my son, doing menial work for this cooperative of slave-drivers.”

Tecla didn't realize that they had reached a point of no return in their relationship. That was the moment when her man stopped loving her. Subsequently, she was the one who in reality left him.

7. Those points of no return

There can be many points of no return for a couple. The principle ones, however, include strong political or religious differences, ethic conflicts, family clashes, and certain incompatible personal desires. Since our being in love renders us more flexible and accommodating, we are

inclined to believe that our beloved will change or adapt and to hope that something will happen that will make this take place. Two people in love do all that is possible to safeguard their love and continually avoid making any decision that might irreparably damage it. They find ways of putting things off or avoiding certain subjects, and yet the point of no return remains there on the horizon. It looms like an unalterable obstacle, until finally the clash between them happens. In the film *The Horse-Whisperer*, which I have mentioned before, the protagonist (played by actor Robert Redford) is very much in love with his wife, who is a famous musician, and yet the incompatible nature of their life plans has separated them. She goes from city to city giving concerts while he remains on his ranch out in the country because it's the only place for his horses and him.

If that is an illustration of an irresolvable conflict stemming from incompatible personal desires, the case of Brigitta, which I am about to describe, centres on religious differences. Brigitta admits that in the beginning she gave no thought to the possibility that the religious differences between her husband and her could turn out to be an insuperable barrier. He was an atheist with a vehement hatred for all clergymen. She was Roman Catholic and had a strong penchant for religious mysticism. They were deeply in love, however, and each bent over backwards to accommodate and show tolerance for the other's beliefs. Everything went smoothly for a number of years; then the country became torn apart by ethnical conflicts with religious overtones, pitting the atheist Marxists against the Roman Catholics. When her husband's friends, who shared his views, came to dinner or to see him, she kept quiet in order to avoid starting an argument, or else she would leave the table.

Then there was a report of a miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary in the nearby vicinity. Brigitta devoutly began to visit the site and sanctuary regularly, and whenever possible she took her four-year-old daughter with her. Her husband fell into the habit of criticizing and deriding her about this, and would make sarcastic comments about the religious publications and sacred images that she brought home. Above all, he didn't want her to take their daughter with her to the sanctuary. At first, Brigitta continued to be affectionate with her husband and even had normal marital relations with him. Over time, however, his increasing attacks and derision, together with his out-right forbidding her to take their daughter to church with her, made her depressed and withdrawn. The day she brought home a statuette of the Madonna and made a little altar complete with sacred images and a perpetually-lit candle, her husband flew into a rage at the sight of it and smashed the statuette to bits in a storm of oaths and swearwords. Brigitta didn't say a thing, but after collecting the fragments of the statue and the images and candle strewn on the floor, she locked herself, along with her small sobbing daughter, in the bedroom. Her husband left slamming the door behind him and didn't return until well into the night. He found the house empty. Brigitta

had put her daughter's and her things in two suitcases, set the table with her husband's dinner, and gone home to her parents on the first evening train.

Across Europe these days, conflicts of this sort are increasing in marriages between individuals of Judo-Christian upbringing and Muslim immigrants. The reason fundamentally lies in the fact that every person has not only an inwardly engrained religious creed but also such internal baggage as a family, a cultural upbringing with traditions, and a group identity, which he or she cannot shake off but which the falling-in-love phrase hides or relegates to the sidelines. These are, however, destined to re-emerge abruptly and even violently during national conflicts, war, massacres, or even just vehement social debates.

8. A nose-dive crash

Sometimes the evolution that leads to the two members of a couple going their separate ways is the consequence of some catastrophe. Something radically upsets the life plans they have made, not only making them impossible to realize but also changing the two people to the point of transforming each one into an unrecognizable stranger in the eyes of the other. It might be the death of a child or of parents; it can also be a question of sudden economic ruin. Any systematic classification study of this subject certainly goes beyond the scope of this book. We can, however, look at a few striking examples.

Here is an excerpt of a storyline that Ramon came up with for a film script: "I am in a kitchen. There's a man around sixty there with a hurt arm. He's got it half-wrapped in a bandage. You can tell that he's waiting for his wife to start or finish medicating the wound. She looks like a woman of about fifty, who is still attractive but definitely showing all the signs of fatigue and maybe also of illness. She's washed all the plates and pans and now she's carefully cleaning the stove-top and the sink. The man is patiently waiting for her to finish, but from the look on his face you can tell that he'd really like for his wife to stop bothering with her chores and pay attention first to him and his hurt arm. His silent glance communicates that 'there are things that come first and things that come second, and the cut on my arm is more urgent than any spick-and-span cleaning of the kitchen.' But the woman just ignores him and continues until she's finished, after which she offers him the explanation that "tomorrow morning I'll be on my own and there are people coming, and having all this to do would make me go berserk." In reality, what makes her go "berserk" is her suffering and fatigue, the housework, her husband's hurt arm, having to do the shopping, and not

having anyone to help her. She isn't acting indifferent to him out of spite; it's just that her husband's arm is for her infinitely less a source of anguish than this lurking sense of danger to her own mental health. These two people still care for each other and yet each is locked in his or her own desperate battle and feels at the end of his or her wits and strength. Neither one is capable of taking on the other's problems. She is trying to protect herself from her husband's despair and anguish, and on those occasions when she can stand to consider the situation, compares her own strength, intuitive ability, and organizational skills to the far inferior capabilities of her invalid husband, who seems to always be behaving in such a childish, immature, and selfish way. She has been to him a mother, nurse, manager, sister, moral guide, and indulgent lover. Without her vigilant assistance, he would have been taken advantage of by every crook or con man to come along. And there he sits now, with his bandaged arm, looking like a capricious, snot-nosed kid. Does she love him? Of course, she does. But she's disillusioned and tired—with no end to her tiredness. She doesn't see any real joy in their life any more, but just an infinite amount of fatigue.”

Sharon's letter is the following: “It all began with the stock-market crisis when you lost your job as general director. They took advantage of your being ill; they claimed you were on your deathbed. They starting plotting how to do you in, and in the end they got your best friend to join them—the friend who you always invited over to the house, the man who knew all your secrets. You suddenly felt old, sick, and poor. You didn't have the strength or courage to start over again at the bottom and work your way up; you didn't accept that offer to head up the small company you were asked to become of partner of. You would have managed just fine, and you would have been working on your own instead of for others in that hornet's nest. I wasn't all that bothered by our having to sell the big house and the yacht, or by the change in our lifestyle because I was born poor and had even worked as a child; I knew how to start over. It was completely different for you. You came from a wealthy family and you were obsessed with what your relatives must be thinking. You felt judged and even scorned as an outcast. Then, dear God, I remember the whole period when you started to let yourself go and to slip into state of depression. Little by little I saw the light go out of your eyes, and with it all joy and hope. Every day and night, I saw how you were being overtaken by a sense of the futility and meaninglessness of everything. The expression on your face became fixed and immobile. You always had your brows knit together and seemed to be staring fearfully into space. I watched you grow more and more tired and burdened down by life. It was hard for you even to get up in the morning; you found it difficult to answer the phone or see a friend. Any sudden noise—the sound of the doorbell, say—became unbearable.

I struggled in every way to make you trust in the future, to show you that there were a hundred beautiful things worth living for. I wanted you to see that when it came down to it, having less money meant that we had more time to spend together, that we could work together or travel. Also, I wanted you to realize that all it would take was for you to take your treatment more seriously and your medicine more regularly in order to start getting better. But what secret weakness or flaw in you, my poor darling, had come to life and made all this impossible? You live in total isolation at home these days. I'm the one who gets out of the house; I'm the one who's trying to make a go of things. I've started a new business, found new friends, associates and customers. And I travel a lot. It's made me realize that I am still an attractive woman. Maybe it's my energy and optimism that attract men. They say that women are attracted to men who make them laugh and show them a good time, but I think it's also true for men about women. If you look around you with a smile on your face, and show that you're confident and sociable, they'll start fluttering round you like butterflies. Perhaps I've ended up using those skills and talents that I originally needed to develop for you, when I was trying to help and sustain you, but which, when I realized that it was useless to try any longer, I directed at the outside world. I really am sorry, my poor old darling, because I still care for you very deeply. It's just that my heart doesn't take to beating wildly anymore when I see you. Actually, what I feel is immense sadness. And that just makes me want to get away—run outside to where there's life. I'm sorry...”.

9. The insidious workings of infatuation

We have already discussed the different types of infatuation as they exist in their pure and abstract form. But these processes are at work even in a long-term relationship between an established couple and can lead to their break-up.

An individual inclined towards *competitive infatuations* may, of course, get married and settle into a home life with his or her partner, but those competitive tendencies remain; the result is that he or she will most likely be attracted to others or tempted by other sexual adventures. In the case of a man, if his wife is smart enough to keep him on the edge of his seat by flirting with other men, and making him jealously suspect that there might be a rival about to materialize on the scene, then his feelings for her will periodically be strengthened and the relationship is designed to last longer. On the other hand, if his wife demonstrates that she loves him unconditionally and without question, and if she is determined to remain constantly by his side like a faithful dog, he will feel as if she is suffocating him and will be unfaithful to her at the first chance he gets. The same thing also

happens to many women. Some feel attracted to their husband only when they see him surrounded by other, adoring women, whom he is entertaining with his wit and charm and likewise drooling after. This sexually arouses them and makes them want to appear even more beautiful and desirable. In both situations, this dangerous, high-stakes gambling game often ends with a round of extra-marital affairs followed by a separation.

Even more dangerous is the individual who tends towards *supreme-power infatuations*, which make the other person into an intellectual and emotional slave, in that he or she is determined to impose on the other his or her will and opinions, as well as his or her political and religious convictions. This individual derides the other whenever the latter attempts to express a personal point of view. I personally know about the case of an extremely intelligent man who so crushed his wife's identity that he wouldn't allow her to read books or watch films that he judged to be politically wrong or aesthetically flawed. He criticized every thing she said with the severity of a pedantic superior and corrected her constantly like an implacable language professor. Cordial and engaging as far as his social relationships went, he was utterly hard, mean, and ruthless in his dealings at home. This oppressive behaviour of his cost him the loss of three wives and created irresolvable problems with his children. All three of those women had loved him deeply and tried hard for years to adapt to the way he was. In each case, however, the tension and uncontrollable aggressiveness accumulated over time to the point of explosion, and they ended up rebelling against him. One of them was so utterly crushed and also humiliated by his continual extra-martial affairs as to commit suicide. None of these things served to modify his way of interacting in a relationship. Years later, he married yet again, only to treat his wife in the same way. Eventually his fourth wife as well asked for a divorce.

Individuals (especially women) who suffer from the third type of infatuation syndrome, that of *celebrity infatuation*, also may come up against problems when they marry or in any case embark on a long-term relationship. This is because they continue to look up to their idol(s) and make comparisons. They find their boyfriend or husband insignificant and ordinary. They lambaste him for being just an average sort of guy, one who can't get ahead in his career or earn good money. At the same time they themselves are irresistibly attracted, emotionally and sexually, to someone who is a recognized leader or who is more handsome, more charming, more fun, more famous, or simply richer. Oftentimes, they don't act on these impulses for quite a long time; in the end, however, they end up feeling revulsion for their man and going to bed with someone else. They might become the mistress of a famous surgeon, a journalist, or perhaps the local leading businessman.

Finally, there is that type of person who not only possesses an immense sex drive and allure but also manages more easily than others to keep sex and love separate. Although these individuals

continue to love their wife or husband, they have, on top of this, not only sexual affairs with many other partners but also *erotic infatuations* which they term “falling in love.” When forced to choose between their lover and their spouse, however, they always opt for the latter. This, at least until their marriage deteriorates to such a point that their spouse orders them to leave.

10. Leaving: men versus women

When love ends between a couple, men and women tend to react in different ways. Men tend to prolong the situation of living together. Even when they are in love with another woman they try to prolong the relationship with the previous woman via subterfuges and compromises. Women, on the other hand, usually break things off abruptly. Eighty percent of divorce procedures are initiated by women, and the other twenty percent by men who are asking for a divorce because the new woman that they are in love with has obliged them to do so.

From an account of a dream. “From up above, I am looking down at a woman and a man. He kisses her passionately. Then her husband arrives in the place where I am and stops to talk to me. He has no idea of what I have just witnessed between his wife and another man, and yet for some reason he talks about her to me. He says that he loves her, that he wants her, but that she avoids him or runs off. He is looking for her and can’t find her. I can sense in him that there’s a tension inside him—a kind of intense love that could become anger and hatred. He wants all that he wants so badly and he isn’t able to get it. There’s a dangerous void inside him. I am concerned that he wants to kill her. And I realize that he might very well do so; it all depends on how she decides to act. If she rejects and spurns him, his anger will surge and might even become homicidal. It wouldn’t take much, however, to calm him down. All she’d have to do is agree to see him and be gentle with him, caress him, make love with him.

“I tell the woman this. But she rejects the idea. ‘No, no, I don’t love him anymore,’ she says. ‘He disgusts me. I can’t stand even the idea of him touching me. I told him that I don’t love him, that I never want to make love with him again ever.’ Then the woman leans her shoulder against mine and I realize that she’s interested, that she would be amenable to making love with me. I think about how I’m a complete stranger, and it makes me wonder why then she can’t do it with her husband. It would take so little to placate him, to ward off all danger.

“But she continues to refuse. Odd, because just a short while before, I saw her kissing a man. And now she seems sexually willing with me. I figure that this means she doesn’t have anyone who she really loves and wants at all cost to remain faithful to. Why is he the only one she refuses to have anything to do with? I ask her if she loved him once. She admits that she loved him but not any more; now he repulses her. She can’t stand his guts.”

If in the past she loved and wanted only him, and refused to have to do with other men, conversely now she is open to having sex with all men except him. For me, as a man, this is utterly incomprehensible. If I didn’t love my wife any more, I wouldn’t ever get to the point of feeling such disgust as to not be able to have sex with her. Not, that is, unless we really had it in for each other, after a long bloody battle over a divorce or some such thing. But if there weren’t that kind of cruelty and warring and our becoming sworn enemies, I would consider her on the same level as other women. I wouldn’t shun her and her alone.

This seems to me to be the fundamental difference between the two sexes. When they first fall in love, both men and women put their lover on a pedestal and see him or her as being superior to any other, yet when they fall out of love, their pattern of behaviour differs radically. Whereas a man simply lowers his former love to the same level as other women, a woman relegates the man she once loved to a position that is *even lower* than that of other men. This creates an enormous gap between him and other men which, in her eyes, can never be filled. For this reason, she’s open to making love with the first guy who comes along, but not with him. This sexual willingness often gets articulated in many cases. Frequently women in this situation will say, “I’d rather do it with the man I meet on the street than with you,” which is not just a cliché but also signals a real threat and way of acting.

My wife’s reaction to this is the following: “It must mean that the woman has built up so much bitterness and rancour inside her that now she can’t stand the sight of him, let alone touch him with the tip of a finger, because she now views him as an outcast.”

“But what has he done to her to deserve this?” I ask.

“He’s insisted on wanting her at all cost. He wants to keep her for himself. He doesn’t want to let her go. He’s violating her freedom.”

“But no, he isn’t,” I reply. “He’s asking and begging her, that’s all.”

“I know,” she says, “but all this begging and pleading just makes things worse. It fuels her scorn.”

This goes to show that Gianna Shelotto is right—that her theory about leave-taking in couples applies. “Like lost children, men desperately call out to their women [...] and this is precisely what makes the women so inflexible. They won’t stand for being transformed from

disillusioned lovers into merciful mothers. By consequence, the more he calls out, pleads, and threatens, the more rigid and implacable she becomes.”⁴

A man has the opposite reaction. If a woman pleads with and implores him, if she asks him to stay or at least to return to her sometimes so as not to forget her completely, he will answer that even if it isn't possible to maintain their relationship the way it was, he will continue to feel affection for her and will be there if she needs him. In so many words he lets her know that if in the future she should find herself alone and sad, he could possibly come and give her all the kisses and hugs she's in need of, and maybe even make love with her. If she starting crying and begging him, furthermore, he will feel moved and touched by tenderness. Her crying and asking will not seem unpleasant or repulsing to him, but, on the contrary, signs of noble feelings.

11. After the split-up

When a woman abruptly and irrevocably leaves a man that she's grown tired and fed up with, it happens fairly often that she experiences a feeling of liberation, which may even seem like a new return to life—a sort of “rebirth.” It's as if she had become young again: the signs are that she changes her style of clothes, begins to take more care of herself physically, wants to appear attractive, and feels self-confident and strong when she realizes that many men, even rather young ones, still seem interested in her. All of this is logical, naturally, and inherently positive in that it gives her the strength to start over again without having or immediately finding another love with which to forget the old one, and without feeling the need for this.

Things get rather complicated, however, when this abrupt split-up takes place after a long life spent together. In this case, the euphoria and initial vital drive don't last very long and soon are replaced by a sense of arid emptiness. This does not signify regret or an overpowering desire to return to the way things were, but rather it is the awareness of loss—of losing something important. It doesn't matter much how old the woman is. After all, there are plenty of fifty- or sixty-year-olds around who have spend years as happy single women with satisfactory love and sex lives. Rather, this mysterious malaise that we're talking about stems from the long amount of life-time spent together, which now must be driven from one's mind and sublimated. The love one experienced, the emotional upheaval, joy, and pain shared together, the experiences and memories relative to children in their young years, the struggles in life faced together, the mutual assistance during illnesses—all this must be driven from one's mind and sublimated. This process represents an

immense maelstrom, a void that dries up inner desires, dreams, and hopes. It means erasing and forgetting such a large part of our life that our very identity seems threatened.

Alexandra looks back on her split-up from her husband and says, “It’s wrong to break things off totally when the two of you have spent a lifetime together. I’ve seen what happened to me and to many of my girlfriends. You turn mean and bitchy, and you stop feeling anything inside. I threw my husband out because I couldn’t take anymore of his tricks and lies. But then I started battling with him, and all I cared about was finding a way to destroy him. I used the children to get at him. Now, however, I am convinced that it was a mistake. I should have found a different solution. I could have told him to go stay at a hotel. I could have even told him that he could do whatever he wanted with other women as long as he didn’t interfere with my life. There was no need to go through such a nasty divorce. At the time I was so sure that I was right and so full of anger and a desire for revenge that I couldn’t reason otherwise. I carried all that hate around inside me for many years. But today I ask myself if it wouldn’t have been better to be more tolerant and less rigid—and if it would have been possible to show more imagination in coming up with a solution.

“We shouldn’t cut our lives in two with a knife, it’s too mean and cruel. Life is short, and when you look back, you realize just how very, very short it is. And then what you want most of all is have saved a bridge, maintained a connection with all the people you have known and loved in your life. That’s not to deny that we have to be intolerant of situations that are harming up and leading nowhere—and this in order to be able to change, grow, and have new experiences. But, on the other hand, how much life and life-enhancing things we stand to lose. Your Italian director Fellini imagines in his film “Eight and a Half” that he encounters once again all the women he’s known in his life. At the time I remember thinking it was just a clever twist to the story. Only now do I understand what he wanted to say.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ONE-SIDED LOVE

1. Rejection

Love that is worn away by the cares of everyday life, misunderstandings, and conflicts finally disappears for real, leaving behind only irritation and bitterness. On the contrary, love that dies out without hatred, malicious fighting, or any revengeful aftermath, may continue in the form of affection. As a third case, we have that of love that ends brusquely because of the decision of one of the couple to truncate the relationship, even though the other partner continues feeling love. This form of love has an extraordinary tendency to continue on.

At the start of the falling-in-love process, when everything appears possible and we seem to catch a glimpse of the wonderful life and absolute happiness waiting for us on the horizon, the fact of losing the person we love or suddenly being rejected costs us intolerable pain beyond repair. This intensity stems from the fact that we haven't merely lost touch with a concrete individual but with our creative life force and its spiritual pulse. When we are in love, we feel profoundly full of hope; the entire world appears luminous to our eyes and beckons to us with a marvellous gift of hitherto unimaginable joy. We feel we are being shown the profound side of existence, where perfection and divine fulfilment and simplicity are to be found.

When we are spurned by the person we love, this abandonment causes us tremendous emotional and mental upheaval. "A catastrophe in love," Roland Barthes says, "can be seen as resembling what in the study of psychosis has been termed *an extreme situation*, which is 'a situation which the subject lives through while conscious of the fact that it will end in his irremediable destruction.'" Clearly, this image recalls to mind what happened at Dachau. One might very well wonder if it isn't rather indecent to make a comparison between the situation faced by a person suffering from unrequited love and that faced by a deportee in the concentration camp environment of Dachau. Can one of the most inconceivable atrocities in history be compared with a futile, infantile, obscure, and complicated matter that has happened to a person leading a life of ease and no more than a victim of his own imagination? And yet, the two situations have something in common: that they are literally two panic situations, and in both there is no going forward or going back."¹

The world, life, and the very essence of things lose their sense. Our rejection seems incomprehensible and impossible to us. And it appears so even though at the beginning, when we were falling in love, we were assailed by a thousand doubts and literally or figuratively kept plucking off daisy petals and murmuring (s)he loves me, (s)he loves me not. This nascent state contains many contradictions, and as a consequence we feel certain and at the same time uncertain of our own and of our loved one's feelings. At the same time that we are wondering if '(s)he loves me, or loves me not' we are inwardly convinced that 'we are made for each other', and that the other is the soul mate we've been searching for since the beginning of time—that ideal being that Aleibiades talks about in *The Banquet* by Plato.

This mysterious certainty (together with the most total uncertainty) doesn't derive from the fact that we have some special quality that renders us desirable but rather is wholly a consequence of the metaphysical experience of the falling-in-love process. A person in love feels a metaphysical affinity with his or her beloved; their love is part of their sense of being harmoniously at one with the cosmos.

This means that a lover's rejection can only be experienced as a monstrosity, as something in contrast with the laws of logic, justice, and Nature. It seems to go against the fundamental premises of being and against the laws of the entire cosmos. When this rejection takes place, it seems the quintessence of absurdity. The rejected lover has the impression that life, the world, and the universe are governed by irrational or immoral forces, or else by some divinity gone mad, or in alternative by some demon. The person in love doesn't want to believe it's true. He or she goes to the other and begs and pleads to be reassured. In some cases, the spurned lover refuses to acknowledge the reality of loss and goes mad. This is what happened to Victor Hugo's daughter, Adèle, who followed her love, the British lieutenant Pinson, in America for years before becoming insane.²

Most people, however, end up accepting the end as inevitable, in spite of not understanding it. Many contemplate suicide. Others fantasize killing off their rival—should one exist—or even the person they love. There are frequent instances of double homicide-suicides. Still other unhappy lovers lose their faith in God and become atheists. Some become hard and cynical and turn to violence and trickery in order to make their way in a world that they believe to be battlefield of wild forces. Others convince themselves that love is an impossible illusion or a form of mental illness, only to throw themselves then into a series of sexual conquests, in order to dominate the other, or else into a struggle for power.

There are people who tell themselves that the falling-in-love process is madness or a form of illness, and consequently one should look only for a relationship of solid affection founded on

mutual respect, understanding, assistance, and the family (i.e. children). Conversely, there are individuals who go frantically from sexual partner to partner, seducing and going to bed with as many people as possible, in a constant orgy of sex. Yet they continue deep down to grapple with a piercing desire for their lost love, the only one that truly counts for them. This desire endures and never burns out. It may continue for decades, if not a lifetime. It will only vanish for one reason. And that is because the person falls in love with someone else and lives through another nascent state of this process. Only then will the old world of his or her memories disappear and give raise to a new reality. And with this, the moral order of the cosmos will be re-established.³

The loss of the person that we are hopelessly in love with cannot be compared to the loss of a person who is simply dear to us. We remember our lost loved ones and try to picture them the way they were when they were with us because even if this makes us suffer it seems to get us past the pain. Some people manage to feel connected with them still. Others mentally “talk with” their dearly departed. They find pleasure in reliving old memories because they were loved in return and in these memories re-experience this love. This, however, is impossible for a jilted lover; such remembrances cause nothing but suffering. The memory immediately reactivates the pain and misery of his or her abandonment.

By consequence, a spurned lover does everything possible to bury all memories that may cause emotional hurt. His or her mind, however, returns inevitably to the past and, despite all the mental defences in place, focuses on how love and happiness could or should have been possible. He or she can't help thinking that things should have gone differently. When we recall to mind a disappointment in love, we are always instantaneously soliciting the memory of something that should have happened but didn't. For this reason, emotionally-speaking it is always a shout in the dark, a protest, and a refusal to accept, at the same time as it is a hope, an expectation, and a “what if.”

And if the person we love returns to us and demonstrates, if not passionate love, then at least tenderness, intimacy, erotic appreciation, and friendship, then that truncated love may be rekindled and—even if timidly—re-expressed, and the suffering lover may at last feel a bit of peace. This is only possible, however, when quite a long time has passed; otherwise, there is a risk of another explosion and new rupture.

2. Lost love

We have seen that in an erotic infatuation we mistake the dynamics of sexual attraction for the authentic experience of falling in love. In point of fact, however, the opposite may happen as well: true, deep love may be erroneously taken to be nothing but violent sexual pleasure. This is what transpires, as follows, from Giselle's written account. "Almost thirty years have gone by since I just saw you. I sat down next to you and you struck me in the way you appear to me even now: strong, gentle, handsome, and enigmatic. I say 'enigmatic' because it is never clear what you are thinking. If you'd asked me to, I would have made love with you on the spot. I went to bed with men on the drop of a hat back then; I saw it as a matter of sexual freedom and viewed it as a way of getting to know someone, and of challenging the rules. Years later, I came to visit you and found you exactly the same—smiling, gentle, on a higher level, and impenetrable. You gave the impression of being so incredibly close and yet so incredibly distant. I realized that you found me attractive. You took me to bed that time, and for many times after that. I didn't realize that I loved you; I was focussed on how much I liked the sex. I was going to bed with a lot of men, but you were the one I liked sexually most of all. One day you left—you just disappeared for a couple of years. Then suddenly, you came back and looked me up. I remember you asked me to go on a trip with you, and I followed you unquestioningly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world and something that I'd been expecting all along. I told you all about my life, loves, and sexual experiences, down to the most secret or clandestine. I didn't hide anything from you; I opened my soul like my body in front of you. I told you everything I'd done, felt, come to know, and thought. You were as greedy for my soul as you were for my body. I didn't as yet realize how much I loved you. How long did our love relationship last? Two or at most three years. Two years during which we saw each other frequently, two years of wild sex. I thought it was only sex, but in reality I loved you, God, how I loved you. We talked about everything under the sun. I felt alive and happy, and you felt alive and happy; I felt creative, and you felt creative. You felt wonderful—we felt wonderful. How much happiness there was for us in those rooms overlooking the sea or on those sunny beaches. How much happiness it gave me to caress your body—as smooth as that of a woman—and to feel your prick inside me making me shout with pleasure and cry from pleasure, at the same time that I harboured it inside my body as if it were my child. We were actually about to go to live together in that house which I'd gotten all ready for you. Of course, I knew that you were torn because you still had your previous woman. But then it all ended—you got sick and went home to her. You disappeared on me. You never once tried to see me or phone—zero. I left you alone. But I really don't want to think about those years! I don't want to remember all the heartbreak I

never talked about or would ever have admitted to. I don't want to think about crying alone in bed at night, or stifling my sobs as I lay next to some other man. There were always other men, and they were all only you. There were hundreds of times when I hoped to see you, hundreds of times when I came to your city, even with other men, with the inexpressible hope of 'running into you by chance.' God, how I just want to shout it out now that I have always—always—continued loving you! You are the love of my life! You and only you are my one true love! How many men have I slept with? You wouldn't believe how many. It was because I was very attractive and they all wanted me. It was also because sex has always seemed like such a natural, joyous, sin-free thing to me. And you know how often I did it because I never hid anything from you—I told you all of the particulars. The biggest thing I realize now, however, is how stupid and foolish I was not to tell you that I had come to feel immense love for you, that my life as I had been leading up till that moment was over, and that from that moment on I would be yours and yours alone. I should have figured out that you wanted a woman who was faithful and exclusively yours. I would have been ever so faithful to you, my love! To you I would have always been faithful. Why don't we ever realize what is essential in time to do something about it? Even if it is too late now, my love, I need to tell you this—that even after things were over between us, whenever I went to bed with a man I was only and exclusively making love with you. I have always continued looking for you. I have remained yours alone. And no matter where you are, what you do, or who you are with, I will be yours forever.”

3. Adoration

There are women who fall in love for the longest time with a famous celebrity or star; this may go on for years, or decades even, despite the fact that they may receive nothing in return or the star may never love them back. This is the consequence of the deep need women feel to desire and love a leader, champion, or star—in short, a man who excels at something in life. It is what remains of the ancestral desire for prized seed, as we have come to see. And if he responds to their love, if they have sexual relations or the briefest of erotic relationships, these women are willing to do without the exclusive love which they long for in their heart of hearts; not only, but they will go out of their way not to tire, irritate, or make demands on the man they do not wish to lose at any cost. Frequently they do not even manifest jealousy. There are secretaries, for instance, who spend years of their life in love with their boss, who is married and always talking to them about his wife, kids, and other mistresses, but with whom they share the tensions and struggles of every workday—

which is enough for them. They feel a profound love for this man, which does not become erotic only because the man doesn't want it to become such. If one day, he were to ask them to go on a business trip with him and then took them to bed, they would accept it as the most natural thing in the world. Then and only then would this wholly spiritual love become romantic passion.

There are women, too, who remain in love for a very long time, if not forever, with a married man who might even be the husband of a close girlfriend or of their sister. Some of these women don't take things past the stage of erotic fantasies, whereas others establish occasional sexual relations that they keep hidden. In all cases, these women know that their man continues to love the other woman, whom he will never consent to leave. They are content to be the mistress of a man with whom the rules of life and society allow them to enjoy love and intimacy only in this fashion. They are happy to be able to have moments of ecstasy that seem a beautiful gift bestowed on them by fate. And yet, they are not content with mere sex; they want to feel that the man feels desire and affection, and that even if there is not love, there is nevertheless tenderness, esteem, and friendship between the two of them. At the same time, they do not ask him to feel what they feel, nor to be faithful. Such a woman's love is one-sided and unreturned—yet it is enduring.

A full understanding of how this adoration process works requires our going back to the fundamentals of the falling-in-love process. We mustn't make the same mistake as Sartre in imagining that when love begins it is already full and complete, a fact that legitimizes our expectation to be loved in the same way as we love the other. In reality, love is a gradual process. There is a long, preparatory phase during which we slowly get closer to the person we desire. We don't dare think at first that the other may love us the way we love him or her. Our beloved seems like a god to us, next to whom we are nothing. We tell ourselves that we would be content with very little, should he or she choose to give that little to us. We would accept simply being near the one we love, or even just seeing him or her every so often and receiving the occasional caress.

Only when we feel there is the possibility of mutually shared emotion do we let ourselves get caught up in the dynamics of complete, reciprocal love. In the cases that we are discussing here, however, that message is never sent, received, or even imagined. The whole falling-in-love process is halted before this point is reached. The little shepherd girl who meets the king, or the adolescent who encounters her idol, never enters the sphere of reciprocal love. Although she is enamoured and spellbound, she can't even imagine being loved in return. She knows that if she asks for too much, he will disappear. For this reason, she devises a form of love that doesn't ask to be exclusive.

It remains an instable trade-off, however. The process of falling in love always heads in the direction of a reciprocal love relationship. Furthermore, there is always the danger that sexual and intellectual intimacy will unleash a vortex of total desire. Once the woman in this adoration-type of

relationship gets a taste of momentary bliss, she will want this bliss to extend over time. She loves intensely and wants to be loved intensely in return. She aspires to a completely exclusive love relationship. But if the other person isn't in love, he can't give her what she wants. In that case, her joy changes to suffering.

“It would have been far better if I hadn't let you kiss me—even though that was exactly what I'd wanted for years,” Fatima says. “For years I'd been looking at your lips and body without ever letting myself think that I could possibly have you. Why did you kiss me? Why did you undress me, why did you kiss my breasts and my sex? Why did you make love with me and in doing so give me more joy and pleasure than I had ever dreamed of feeling? You gave me back my youth and self-confidence; you made me feel beautiful and desirable again. You infused me with desire, the desire I had once felt, a frenzied desire for pleasure, endless pleasure. But now this need for pleasure, for receiving pleasure and joy from you, has taken over my life. If before I used to savour waiting for the moment when I knew you would phone, now I am simply miserable because you don't phone me when I want you to. And I miss you and everything about you—your saliva, your penis, your smell, your voice, the sound of your footsteps. The very fact that my life has been filled with joy now makes it total agony...No, don't touch me again, don't arouse my desire again—just let it lay dormant. It will fade, don't worry. Let's let sleeping dogs lie. I will go on loving you. I just don't want to get caught up in the frenzy of passion again and feel my entire body crying out its need for you and you not being there. I will continue to love you, but it will be gently and from a distance.”

4. Adoration within a marriage

They had been married for thirty years. He was quite attached to her and swore that he would never do anything to hurt her. That said, he cheated on her all the time. He exerted incredible charm over women. Tall, athletic, and with rugged features, he had a hypnotic and irresistible sex appeal that all women noticed and responded to the moment they met him. When he found a moment in which to talk to a woman alone, she immediately lost her head for him. He didn't so much talk at such times as murmur things, all the while taking the woman by the hand and then caressing her shoulders and breasts as if it were the most natural thing in the world. When he put his hand between their legs and touched their sex, they yielded without resistance. They let him undress them and then proceeded to make love with him as if it were merely the natural continuation of what had led up to that moment. He was generous, sincere, and loyal. The only thing he worried

about was that his wife mustn't suffer, that she mustn't suspect a thing. He was convinced that to date he had always managed to pull this off. I wasn't as convinced as him, if only because his wife was fiercely jealous of any woman who entered their house. Probably she realized from the way that women looked at her husband that they were ready to throw themselves at him; in a similar fashion she must have been able to see from the way that he looked—or pretended not to look—at these women that he had every intention of accepting. It is almost certain that she knew many things—and what she didn't know, she imagined. Nevertheless, she never breathed a word to anyone—not to him, nor to her closest friends. She kept everything inside her, maintaining the utmost reserve and secrecy.

She absolutely adored her husband; it was as if she had fallen in love with him just a few months before. She adored him because he was charming, because she knew (while in fact denying it) that he was sleeping around. She identified with all these women whom he made love to, at the same time that she was proud of being the only one who had him for a husband, who had him legitimately. Above all, she was sure that he would always come back to her—and her alone—in the end. Or to be more precise, she was confident that he wouldn't ever leave in the first place. The others would have his cock, but only his cock, whereas she would have his constant love, gentle thoughtfulness, intimacy, and eroticism. She passionately wanted what he offered her erotically speaking. Whenever he took her in his arms and penetrated her tenderly, she instantly felt once again like the young woman in love who had known how to win out over all her competitors and land herself one incredible man. There had been so many women to prevail over! Yet she had defeated them all thanks to her patience, dedication, passion, total faithfulness, attention, home-making skills, unlimited tolerance, and golden silence. And he, endowed with the virtues of a true wonderful seducer, had remained the lover who courted and wooed her, who pampered her, who aroused and seduced her every time, now as in the past! Nothing had changed. Life had been good to her in giving her this great immense love.

5. Memories from the past

“You ask me how love and sexual desire change as one gets older,” Carol says to me, “but the fact is that you don't realize that you're getting older. You wake up one day and you just find that you are older—or rather, you find you have all these years of accumulated age and you don't know how you got to such a point. Anyway, the desire for love and sex is just like before, or if anything, more intense. The difference between then and now, however, is that whereas before I

liked to go out to parties with friends, and it was fine for a man came over to me and whisper in my ear and make me feel beautiful and happy and eager to flirt and play with, and then I found it fine to spend the night with him and tank up on sex and the smell and feel of him, only to happily take a shower and be done with it, now that isn't something I can do any more. I mean, where can I go? Out to a party? But my friends seem even older than I am to me. As for younger men, none ever give me a glance.

“The past is all that remains for old people. Today I realize that my soul is like a building with many apartments and rooms. Each one contains an experience, a person, or a love that I have lived but which hasn't faded away. It continues to exist; I can visit that room and in doing so experience the same thrills, languid sighs, and excited trembling that were mine in the past. There are rooms in my life full of my first sexual inklings, my first crushes, my adolescent goes at sex, and then my first big passionate love, the man for whom I went to England and then America, for whom I went through a mad whirlwind of feelings the likes of which I'd never experienced before. Then there was the incredibly sensual love I discovered in South America, and following this period, the long line of many men I got involved with, at the end of which came my husband, a talented artist. It was a magical combination of love, sex, and art all mixed together. After his death, love for me became more spiritual than physical; I was inspired by Amanthya, music, and Oriental dance. All this opened a door to a new, unknown, exciting, and marvellous world. At the same time that this was taking place, I was also conscious of the subtle pull of love for another man who had always been there in the background and who, if I'd wanted to understand what was happening when it all started, I might have married and, who knows, loved for my entire life. He, too, occupies a room in my building, and when every now and then I get a postcard from him, I feel gripped by an overpowering, intense wave of nostalgia and by an almost painful longing to feel his hands on my body. I feel that we are all made like buildings, with a myriad of rooms and apartments containing ever-pulsing, integral and whole, love experiences. All you have to do is open a door to be able to get back to it and feel all the pleasure and his embraces and kisses from that time.

“This is why even if you believe that you've only ever had one great, important love, you find that in reality the rooms of the building of your life contain many loves, some of which might be more important than others, but all of which are true and real. Also, these loves become even stronger and more intense over time—more than we might think—maybe because nostalgia transfigures them or maybe because any thing that is ever born in this world wants to live forever.

“Our body tissue doesn't die immediately after our death. Those cells fight desperately for survival and resist for hours without oxygen. This is why organ transplants are in fact possible. In a similar way, I believe, remembrances of erotic love—these vital life memories—struggle to stay

alive when with the onset of old age one approaches death. In this fight to stay alive, these memories not only become more intense and real but also provide us with the impetus to seek out the people we have loved in our life. If you find one of them, that love gets rekindled. You speak German, don't you? Well, there's something that Goethe wrote in the prologue at the start of *Faust*: *Was ich besitze, seh ich wie im Weiten/ Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten*. In other words, 'I seem to view everything I possess now at a distance, and it only acquires reality when it's passed.' When you are young, you don't realize this about the nature of your soul. You don't know that love always is made up of many loves, which remain alive and fight to survive until your body is annihilated by death."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AMOROUS COUPLES

1. Love that lasts

We previously discussed those cases where love lasts because the person one loves is unattainable or elusive. We also took a look at cases where things never get past the ignition phase of the falling-in-love process but rather remain happily suspended there. Now we want to evaluate those mutual love relationships that reach maturity. Do they endure over time? Can such love continue on like a dream that runs parallel to the unfolding of daily-life events? Many people would say it isn't possible. The Princess of Clèves, in the famous novel by Madame de La Fayette, is in love with the Duc de Nemours, who loves her in return. Nevertheless, after the death of her husband, the Prince of Clèves, the Princess decides to end things with the Duc and retire to a convent for part of each year. She asks the Duc, "But do men continue to love even when they are bound to a woman forever? Should I hope for a miracle in my favour, or would it be best for me to arrange things in such a way that I can witness the certain end to this love to which I now entrust my happiness? Perhaps the Prince of Clèves was the only man on earth capable of continuing to feel love inside marriage. It was my destiny not to have been able to take advantage of this happy fact. On the other hand, who knows if perhaps the reason why his love endured was because I felt nothing similar. Because I can't say the same thing about you, I am unable to employ the same strategy to safeguard your love. I furthermore think that the existence of obstacles in the past may perhaps explain your constancy."¹

The Princess's words foreshadow what would become the dominant theme in literature—the absolute antithesis between passionate love and martial love. The former endures as long as it is thwarted, whereas the latter ceases because it is satisfied.² The last advocates of this theory date from last century and include Jean-Paul Sartre, Denis De Rougemont, and René Girard. But is it really the case to believe what these men expound? Is it really true that there is no couple for whom the fervour of new-found love, while lacking its passionate fury, nevertheless continues to exist? Is it really impossible to found an established "couple in love"? The general theory that I outlined in such books as *Movement and Institution*, *Genesis*, and *Falling in Love and Loving*³, postulates that, on the contrary, such couples exist. The theory says that the collective movement of two and only two people (the couple) becomes an institution, and that a well-founded and functioning institution guarantees and safeguards all that has come out of the original falling-in-love process.

The real issue thus becomes the following: can a couple who has gotten past the ardent, initial phase of the falling-in-love process continue to feel love and erotic desire even when they are married and have been living together for a long time?

All the fairytales that narrate the trials that two people in love go through before they are finally able to live their love, end with the phrase, “and they lived happily ever after.” No one, however, has ever tried to describe or analyse what this happiness consists in or in what way the couple might manifest their happiness and contentment. Furthermore, there seems to be widespread consensus that this fairytale concession ‘of living happily ever after’ can’t possibly be taken to mean that they have an intense and joyous sex life.

Then there’s that term, “marital love.” It’s almost entirely fallen out of use, hasn’t it?, in daily speech as well as in literature and film. The antithetical term of “marital strife” is, if anything, an expression we are more likely to hear. Due to the presentation of romantic love in fiction and cinema, and thanks to the psychological studies that are continually done regarding marital conflicts and divorce, marriage has become synonymous with passionless cohabitation—plagued by the unending routine and the minute problems of everyday life, in which two people grow old and worn out from the constant boredom, bickering, and pettiness afflicting their relationship.

No one writes, analyses, talks about, or thinks to study the phenomenology and emotional dynamics of intense, passionate, erotic marital love in so far as officially it doesn’t exist. Certainly, quite a number of books have been written on the subject of love in the couple, and preceptive researchers, such as Robert Sternberg⁴, have had much to say about love relationships. There are also countless publications on marriage counselling and therapy, written by psychologists (in Italy, Willy Pasini⁵ comes to mind) who describe the emotional and sexual problems of couples whom they have counselled and then proceed to share the solutions they came up with. While such works are useful and needed, they nevertheless fail to examine the phenomenology of love and sex inside the couple, the complex emotional dynamics of which make their union enduring.

Over and beyond these therapy manuals, there are thousands and thousands of novels which deal with a most diverse range of passionate love experiences but never recount a happy, successful love relationship or marriage. Our élite literary culture gives importance to love and sex only when they upset the banal routine of a marriage in which husband and wife are “fond of each other” (this, at the very most) in a brotherly-sisterly way devoid of Eros. The prevailing opinion in such circles is that marriage or even the experience of living together destroys passion and any erotic stimulus. For this reason the question of why one should bother studying or analyzing love and sex inside the couple becomes merely rhetorical: how can one study something which simply doesn’t exist?

This is not the first time that élite culture has ignored or developed a mental blind spot for an aspect of real life. For quite a long time it ignored the issue of sex, for instance. Western society began to talk about it only in the nineteenth century, and this only in medical terms. It was only with Freud that society suddenly found a way of explaining any and every human emotion—which consequently detracted value and importance from the falling-in-love process. Stendhal was the only one to perceive that this was a mistake. This total oblivion ended only with the publication of my work *Falling in Love and Loving*, which restored respectability and scholarly seriousness to the subject. Nevertheless, the same cultural blind spot, which in the past regarded at first sex and then the falling-in-love process, today excludes from serious analysis and study the subject of erotic love in a married couple.

The reality is, however, that it exists. Even if we take as our starting premise the data compiled by Helen Fisher on the duration of sexual love passion—in the measure of three or four years—we should see how very significant that truly is. First, there's the fact that this time interval represents an average, meaning that the data includes the briefest of love passions—even those lasting just a few days—as well as, on the opposite end of the scale, long intense love situations which endure for eight or ten years, if not longer. And what the devil takes place precisely in such a long stretch of time? If this period of stable relations or marriage were only, as our élite culture believes, a long prison term or time spent in a desert erotically-speaking, why the devil don't people escape from it the first chance they get? The choice of staying in a marriage of this sort might be viewed as understandable within the context of a peasant society where there are families with five or six children and neither the husband nor the wife could survive on their own. For the last fifty or so years, however, many couples have done without children, or had one at the very most; both people, moreover, have held jobs and enjoyed unprecedented material well-being. Why on earth should such couples prefer prison to freedom? The only explanation is that in reality there are many men and women who live together because they love each other, desire each other, and make love together.

Therefore, if we want to proceed here in an honest fashion we need take this sort of erotic love into serious consideration. Is it best not to term it “marital love” because that word seems too old-fashioned or cliché? Well, then let's call it “love in a couple”, or better yet, since we are talking about erotic love, we can refer to the two people involved as an “amorous couple.” And now with a little effort, we can make our way past the barrier of misconceptions and blind fallacies and see what actually takes place in such a relationship.

2. The basis for its lasting power

Only the experience of falling in love renders us so malleable and adaptable as to love the other person no matter what changes he or she may undergo. Someone in love does not merely love, say, his or her beloved's little, upturned nose or red lips, but also the other's voice, way of gesturing, and the life he or she has lived. One doesn't just love the exterior aspect of the other, but also what lies within, down to (in Simone de Beauvoir's words) his or her liver and lungs. This is why we continue to love that person even when he or she changes. The falling-in-love process makes it such that we don't love the person who is standing empirically before us as much as his or her invisible roots and potential. We love what was once in Aristotelian terms called at school "the substance" and not "the accidental."

Of course, as we fall in love we are particularly drawn to and attracted by certain physical aspects of the other person; this leads us to think that we feel so connected and bonded to him or her on account of this aesthetic appeal, and that if this should disappear, so would our love. But this isn't true; such a thing doesn't happen if we are really in love. The fact is that if our love is great enough, we will continue to love that same person even when those physical features change. We will continue to love him or her even when his or her body changes, wrinkles appear, and his or her hair turns gray or white. It takes a good while for you to notice such changes, and then, after you do, you love these signs of aging with a tenderness and sweet languor which eventually replaces the exulted thrilling feeling that used to race through you.

In *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov⁷, the protagonist, Humbert, is fascinated by and attracted to only young pre-adolescent girls aged eleven or twelve, whom he calls "nymphets." He does everything possible to seduce and hang on to Lolita in particular. He's convinced that he is suffering from a form of sexual perversion that is paedophile in nature. This, however, turns out not to be the case. He understands this when another, younger man steals Lolita away from him. Losing her nearly drives him mad. He searches for her desperately, sick with anguish and a hollow feeling of emptiness. After many years he finally finds her; she's a grown woman who's expecting a child. Even though she has totally changed and there is nothing left of that "nymphet" appearance she once had, he realizes upon seeing her that he is just as desperately in love with her as ever, and that he will love her forever. He understands that love may be so great as to embrace everything that the person we love has become. Humbert asks her to come back to him, to live with him. The young woman refuses. His reaction is to give her all the money he possesses and then go to kill the man who separated them and ruined their life.

A man who is truly and deeply in love will not change in his feelings if his woman gets fatter as the years go by or no longer has the erect breasts or firm buttocks that she had at the start. He manages to pinpoint new things to find beautiful about her and feels moved with tenderness. This aspect of deep love in an amorous couple can be compared to the love that a mother continues to feel for her sick, weakened, frail child. Perhaps she loves him even more now, not less. Naturally she'd prefer to see him healthy and happy, but her love doesn't change. Nor does it alter as he grows into an adolescent and then into an adult. It is only by keeping in mind this propriety of true love that we can fathom how it is that love in a couple can last.

3. Falling in love and loving

This ability to adapt to changes in the other person doesn't, however, guarantee that erotic love will last. Nothing in life remains identical; everything is in flux. Change means being alive. Love, too, is never static but always in evolution.

The phase of falling in love initiates when the other person begins to look totally new and different to us—taking on the features of what Barthes called “atopos”⁸, or the stranger who holds the secret to our destiny. Love's unfolding between a couple involves a constant discovery of the other which in turn involves a discovery both of self and of a new world. For this, two people newly in love require little beyond “a heart and hearth”; they are too absorbed in their physical and spiritual explorations of one another to pay attention to much else. Over the course of their living together, however, they have to face real life in all its complexity and with all of its challenges and new happenings. But this is precisely what the falling-in-love process has prepared them to handle. Each of the two has found inspiration in the other for how to renew him- or herself, and how to find strength, courage, and inner resources. Each one helps and spiritually enriches the other; each infuses the other with energy and enthusiasm for new projects. All this makes it possible for the united amorous couple to do things that neither would have been able to complete on their own.

Let's imagine two people who live together. They are active in the world and face life together. They get up at the same hour in the morning, exchange a kiss, and then with smiles and good-humour have breakfast together. They glance at the same newspapers, talk and discuss things, make plans, then go off to their separate jobs. Upon their return, they tell each other about their experiences that day. They comment on what the people surrounding them did. They share judgments and assessments. They decide on what they want to attempt in the future and on ways to fight for this together.

Then, since they feel strong attraction and desire, they begin to flirt and play and arouse each other. The woman conveys her love and demonstrates her seductive powers by, perhaps, changing her hairstyle or makeup, or by putting on a long dress with a sexy side slash or adherent pants or a see-through blouse. She will also express her eroticism in her homemaking. The decorating symbolically reflects her body and how she sees herself. She will put new sheets on the bed, make a fresh flower arrangement, and think about things like room scents. Oftentimes her man doesn't consciously realize what a refined bit of work she has done. Although he doesn't understand that it constitutes in reality a work of art into which she has put great mental and emotional effort and energy, he is nevertheless aware of the beauty and harmony. When he walks through the door, he has the impression that the house is welcoming him like a mistress with open arms—and it is true: the house is the body of the woman who loves him.

This intimacy reinforces and nurtures their intellectual and vital capacities, charges them with energy, and makes them feel better about life in general. When one of them is tired, the other is there to help; when one gets irritated and impatient, the other maintains a sense of calm equilibrium. Each comes to trust the other's judgment; these discerning powers have been put to the test and they know they can rely on each other. If there is some appointment or commitment that he or she cannot handle in person, the other will willingly go in his or her place and can be counted on to do or decide the right thing. They are constantly exchanging opinions about matters in any case and reach a common consensus that translates into concrete results. Since one is male and the other female, their forms of sensitivity are both different and complementary. Each sees aspects that would otherwise elude the other, and when they discuss a given situation they are consequently more insightful and penetrating than each would be on his or her own. Over time they become more tolerant of minor character flaws and more successful at correcting major ones. They learn how to joke, to avoid certain irritating subjects, to apologize, and to shrug off the other's mistakes. When they make love, they are so intimate and open with each other as to be able to ask each other for what they like most, without embarrassment, shame, or inhibition. They know their bodies and play them like musical instruments.

In essence, they live the way they imagine all lovers naturally do—hand in hand. At the same time, however, they remain two distinct individuals with separate, unmistakable personalities. As Murray Davis points out,⁹ it is precisely the fact of having so many things in common that enables each person in the couple to carve out a distinctive personal niche or role. He observes that any human being has the ability to separate himself into numerous parts and then live each of these parts as if it were his authentic self. Thanks to this synecdochical aspect of the human psyche, a

person can totally give himself to another and yet at the same time stay himself, seeing that each of these components is part of him.

It is thus a mistake to talk about “symbiotic unions” in couples, the way certain psychologists do. Even though they are extremely united, both lovers remain different and free. Each continues to have his or her food preferences or dislikes. Each has a personal bio-rhythm, even though he or she has learned to adapt this rhythm to that of the other. Each has favourite films and authors, as well as personal philosophical, religious, and political opinions. Naturally, one lover is very open to the ideas of the other; each understands the reasons behind these preferences and during discussions on these subjects is always attentive and respectful. In short, each lover sees the world through his or her eyes and yet at the same time is capable of seeing it through those of the other. Their relationship is not characterized by continual, uninterrupted consensus but rather constant, uninterrupted dialogue, during which any number of convergences but also divergences may emerge. It bears repeating yet again that love is never about being but about becoming.

4. Sex as a form of faithfulness

From a session with Roland: “The guy was sitting at the table across from me with his fat wife and four kids, the eldest of whom looked to be about 18 and the youngest about 10. At a certain point someone nearby said, ‘Every opportunity not taken is an opportunity lost.’ Now I guess I’ve heard that expression a hundred of times. Some people even think it’s true. And anyway, the guy across from me looked uncertain for a moment, maybe even embarrassed because his wife was there beside him, but then he murmured something about temptation, and all at once I realized that he agreed with the person who’d said that. Not only, but I was absolutely certain that this respectable man, who seemed to get along just fine with his wife, had made it his motto in life. His opportunities may have been few and far between, but he had seized every last one of them. I pictured him at his company making love with his secretary in the back office after everyone had gone home, or having sex with the girl who hoped that her temporary job on the factory floor would become permanent, or fondling up the sales rep for the company supplying him with machine parts. I admit that I used to admire men like this, especially when I stopped to think about all the opportunities I myself let slide. How many women could I have had if I’d set my mind to it? A hell of a lot, I believe. So why didn’t I take advantage of those moments? Was I afraid that I wouldn’t have enjoyed it? But of course I would have enjoyed it, every minute of it. I think it has to do with the fact that every time I came near a woman, even one who attracted me, the possibility of having

sex with her was never the first thing to cross my mind. I remember that once a friend of mine who wanted to get a sexual rise out of me at her house actually took her clothes off and got into bed, saying that she was tired and didn't feel very well, and instead of me understanding that it was an invitation to slip into bed beside her, I went out to buy her medicine. She must have thought I was a total idiot. Come to think of it, there are certain to be a couple of dozen women walking around who consider me a total idiot for not having realized that they were making blatant sexual overtures. But I have always looked above all for intimacy. With many women I've preferred to maintain a platonically erotic relationship. It would have taken nothing to make it so that we ended up in bed together, but I chose not to let it happen. I preferred to preserve that excited feeling of possibility and of the potentially marvellous. The only women I have ever made love with are ones I already knew and could talk to, confide in, and already shared a certain sense of intimacy with. I have had a number of these relationships. And all these women have loved me a little, the way I have loved them a little.

“It's all a very different thing for men like the guy in front of me at that table. Whenever they see a woman, they think about their chances of being able to ‘fuck’ with her or not. They don't want dialogue or intimacy but just a pretext that will allow them to stick their penis up her vagina. A man like that can't be faithful to any woman. He has no idea of what the word means, or how much physical pleasure your being faithful can give you. He thinks it deprives him of something. In reality, it is making a choice, saying yes to intimacy, intensity, and deepening awareness. I tried in a conversation with that guy at the table to convey all this with a story example. I talked about someone who likes to be constantly on the move, constantly travelling. He quickly gets fed up with living in the same city and staying in the same house. He can't wait to leave, to get to some exotic place, and then to another and still another, each one different and unique. He goes from hotel to hotel, room to room, airport to airport. He talks with many waiters, takes in many landscapes. Now compare him to someone who, on the contrary, loves his native city. He loves walking around it, taking in the familiar sights, observing the street life and passers-by. He loves the house that he built and decorated the way he wanted it, with one balcony facing the mountains and the other the sea, and outside a yard full of flowers in perennial bloom. It's the same thing with a person. If you keep to an exclusive relationship with the woman you love, you'll find that all your interest and energy will converge on her, and the result will be not only that you get the *impression* that she's constantly changing and evolving in an interesting way, but that she *really* is doing so. Of course, one can have various loves going all at the same time, but they are never as intense as this.

“But while I was talking I got the impression that he didn't understand. I let the subject drop. I didn't tell him that faithfulness signifies intimacy, dialogue, and deepened understanding or that it

means the two of you being on the same wavelength, and for each other feeling trust, security, dedication, and pride. I didn't mention that you are giving up or depriving yourself of anything, because your pursuing every opportunity that comes your way is only going to make you distracted, hollow, and dissociated from reality. I didn't tell him that being faithful to one person is like designing a public monument or writing a fine novel. In order to bring it off, you really have to dedicate yourself to the project. That you can't set out to design ten magnificent buildings simultaneously because you'd end up with all of them looking ugly and awful. And you can't write ten novels at the same time because you're bound to come up with a lot of trite gibberish. I didn't stress that all precious and beautiful things come out of the sum total of all our energy, determination, passion, dedication, choice of what is essential, and disregard for what is not."

5. The voyage

Life is a voyage in which we are forever going towards and fighting to reach an objective. It is also a situation of constant danger and struggle. Most of the time we forget this; we are convinced that we have freed ourselves of the State of Nature and removed ourselves from the precarious conditions of existence faced by animals on the constant lookout for food and ready to flee from predators from one minute to the next. When we look up at the swallows passing in the sky, we forget that they dedicate nearly all their energy to the search for food and that their marvellous flight is a desperate fight for survival. In reality, we find ourselves in a rather similar situation in society. If we have any doubt about this, all we need do is consider for a moment the life of great men in history; they had to face endless obstacles, betrayals, and misunderstandings. If we open any history book and read it all in one go, we see nothing but an ongoing series of wars, alliances, leagues, splinterings or ruptures, and then new wars. Compared to all this, the very fact that sexuality and eroticism exist represents a bright spot, in that at least here people come together not to fight but to give each other pleasure. Our lovemaking constitutes the only moment when we lay down our weapons, stop fearing and fighting and mistrusting, and abandon ourselves defenceless and prone as a newborn baby in his mother's arms. It is also the moment when our desire for the other person's happiness is greater than that for our own. Inside the enchanted realm of love we experience a taste of the innocence and pleasure of an earthly paradise devoid of all evil.

This is the experience that cements the love relationship between a couple—whether they are married or simply living together. Or to say it in another way, this is what makes for a watertight ship ready to handle the perils of a rough sea. If we are lucky enough to be part of a

complementary, solid union, our voyage through life is no longer a solitary one. We work together like a ship crew headed towards a common destination. Our strength and inner wisdom are enhanced by the other's presence. We have by our side a person whom we trust and can lean on, who will fight alongside of us through thick and thin. A special he or she who offers us warmth, shelter, and energy.

“We have been through terrible times together,” Arthur says. “I remember when the storm of misfortune overtook your family, when they lost everything and faced financial ruin. It was utterly devastating. I remember how pale and stricken you looked; I remember how you cried every night and didn't want me there to witness what you were going through. Sometimes we would stare at each other in a lost and terrified way because we no longer felt sure of our future. Yet it's strange, you know, that even in such terrible circumstances and at the worst of moments, every time I looked at you I felt my heart lift with joy. The kind of joy that someone who has what is essential in life feels; you have this precious treasure and everything else is unimportant. I have never stopped feeling attracted to you. You have always been the most beautiful and desirable woman in the world to me. I don't mean that in the abstract either, but concretely-speaking. Everywhere we went there were beautiful women around, but to my eyes none could compare to you. Maybe you don't realize what it means to a man when he feels alone and defeated to be able to think, ‘All right, but I have something that other men don't have and it's the most precious thing in the world. The most beautiful woman in the world loves me and will always love me.’ Every time we make love I feel as if I were receiving from you the most profound of life and energy sources. When I stand up again, I feel young and strong and ready to return to the fray again. I feel like a rock that has never been damaged by any storm.”

6. Storms of misfortune

A couple is a solid community of two inhabitants. The destiny and fortunes of one are intimately linked with those of the other. It doesn't matter if a storm of misfortune hits him rather than her because they constitute a unit, a oneness. If he loses his job, goes bankrupt, or ends up failing to achieve what he is after, they face this ruin together. And if she isn't able to obtain the recognition and rewards she was aiming at, or if she is treated unfairly, he will suffer with her, support her, and try as hard as he can to right things in her favour. This is the way newlyweds or new lovers are thought to behave—and people often laugh at them or tease them about it. They

would do better, however, to realize that a person's merit or worth rarely gets recognized in life and there is always a need for someone else to insist on it for them.

There are worst scenarios, naturally. One member of a couple may fall terribly ill or be diagnosed with a fatal disease. The other is there to support, sustain, and fight for him or her; there are new doctors and forms of treatment to find or research. The sick person's battle for life and recovery depends to a large extent on his or partner's unwavering efforts and will. There are countless cases of wives who have made a heroic effort to save their husband, just as there have been husbands who have done all that is humanly possible to save their wife.

"You can't begin to imagine how you looked," says Natalia. "Your face was pale and grey, and there were dark circles under your eyes. You didn't realize this because you were totally taken up with fighting against your illness and with no concern for yourself, with keeping up with the objectives that you as leader had always dragged that band of half goof-offs towards, thanks to which they'd been blessed with work and money. Then there was the fact that because you are as trusting as a child and because you believe anything any doctor tells you, you'd simply swallowed their explanation and accepted what they told you to do, even though it meant heading down a road of despair leading towards death. But I rejected all this. I understood what those doctors were up to and I decided that there was no way, I decided I would save you. I fought like a lioness. I fought with utter determination and conviction, sure that you could be saved. You were so ill and weak that you couldn't think or reflect, and consequently I became hyper vigilant and observant and resourceful. At last I realized what the solution to the problem could possibly be. It all depended on a certain person, a certain researcher. I thought of nothing but how to get him to help me. I knew I had to get him emotionally and mentally involved in this search for an answer; I had to make him feel that my problem was his problem. It went on for days and then months. I felt more inside his mind than mine. And at last he came up with the answer. Today you are alive, strong, and healthy again. And I am worn out and exhausted—but happy."

"You're ill, I know," says Marcus. "Your body has become weak and frail. I watch you sit by the window listlessly, your hand holding up your chin as if your head were too heavy to bear. You don't realize that I'm observing you; your gaze is gentle and sad. Your golden curls cascade down your slender neck. Your light summer dress has slipped down your left shoulder, revealing the round form of your breasts. I have always found you breathtakingly beautiful. My love for you expands across and takes in all time and space. But I know that isn't enough. I just wish time would halt because that would halt your illness, and you would remain the way you are now forever, and I would be able to stay here gazing at you forever, and there would be nothing else that could happen."

“I sit down next to you and gently lower even further the short sleeve of your dress, uncovering fully your small breasts. I bend over and lay my head against that delicate part of you. As I kiss your breasts, my hands run down your naked body, along your back and over your buttocks. When they make their way between your soft legs, you smile. You relax as if you were resting, and I caress you gently over and over again, wishing that I could continue like this forever. I’d like everything to end and for there to be just you and me, here like this, for the eternity of death. I have wondered at times how it was that Goethe found it so hard to imagine that moment where one says to oneself: ‘stop, brief instant, for you are beautiful.’ I’ve said this to myself often while making love with you and gazing at your beautiful body. I have even gone so far as to think, ‘stop forever.’ I know that ‘forever’ is death, and there would be no death sweeter than being able to hold you the way I am doing now, kiss your lips, and then, nothing more, dissolve into nothingness.”

7. Moral qualities

The moral qualities manifested by each lover count much more than is commonly thought in safeguarding the solidity and endurance of love or even sex in a relationship. A great, lasting love manages to incorporate in it the attraction felt in the falling-in-love phase, the erotic charge that brings happiness, and the moral and ethical aspects of friendship. We have already defined friendship as a form of love that is infused with an ethical sense. We put our complete trust in a friend, for we know that he is she is honest, has a pure heart, and will always stand by us. We know we can entrust our children as well as our money to him or her, and that this friend will come running to help us in a time of need. Two people fall in love because on certain profound levels they complement and complete each other, the fact of which opens the way to a possible future articulated in both individual and collective terms. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they have the ethical qualities which foster deep friendship. There is no telling, furthermore, whether they will succeed in developing them over time. Yet, it is precisely the existence or development of such qualities that guarantees that love will endure. This moral sense and code is the final cement, which gets overlooked half the time because we are inclined to think that physical attraction and fulfilling sex are enough. But this is not the case. That “love at first sight” lightningbolt will develop into a full-scale process of falling in love only if psychological rein is given to it; and the falling-in-love process will in turn into deep love only when it incorporates profound mutual understanding, loyal support, and the honouring of the pact of reciprocal commitment.

It's equally wrong to think that sexual attraction has nothing to do with morality. It may be a completely independent thing, but in that case it is destined not to last. When we took our look at erotic infatuation in previous chapters, we saw that even the most passionate sexual desire fades when it comes up against the difficulties, problems, and concrete relations in life. When we studied the falling-in-love process we saw that the trials and problems of real life are what establish how deeply rooted and felt love is. If misunderstandings and apparently superficial disagreements continue, they will slowly over time create an insuperable barrier between the two people, which in the end will translate into sudden, radical sexual rejection. Finally, when we had a look at the end of love relationships we saw how easy it is to go beyond the point of no return, past which the fact of living together becomes intolerable and erotic interest becomes repugnance.

To put it more simply and briefly, a love lasts when the magic enchantment of the falling-in-love process, while conserving its warmth and glow, evolves into the crystal-clear, moral integrity of friendship. As Isabel tells us, "I love my husband because he has a noble spirit. He's proud, generous, and courageous, in that he always keeps his word. Everything he decides to do, he does well. He is harder on himself than he ever is with others. He helps anyone who comes asking for his assistance, to the point of going overboard with people who don't deserve such treatment. Even though he's highly intelligent, he never makes a show of it. Actually, he usually does all he can to hang back or keep out of the limelight. He doesn't know the meaning of the word 'vain.' Standing next to him makes me feel proud and happy. When he takes me in his arms I feel both his physical strength and his inner force. When he kisses me, his lips convey all his intense, unshakable love. His gaze is deep and his eyes see past the surface of things. When I make love with him, I both let myself go to his body and melt my soul with his. I feel so much physical and also spiritual love that it is impossible for me to distinguish between one and the other. I could never have loved a man without such a noble spirit. I can't see myself with a man who is self-centred or petty. This, never."

8. Freedom and challenges

And what about boredom? Isn't it standard practice to say that after a while any marriage loses its excitement and boredom sets in? When we say 'boredom', we are referring to the repetition of the same actions and gestures day in and day out, to the lack of the surprising or unforeseen, to the loss of interest in the tried and true. Boredom is the consequence of our need for change and to get to know, explore, and experiment all that is different. We feel the same way about food. Human beings are omnivorous by nature, and when we are forced to eat always the same food, we start

getting annoyed and even disgusted by it (unless, of course, we are starving). What we experience with food we also experience with sex. For love to last, therefore, it must necessarily allow for new stimuli and experimentation. How exactly, however, is this possible?

When we start falling in love with someone, we pass from a state in which the sight of that man or woman in the midst of others has no special effect on us to one in which we feel curious to know more about him or her. The more attracted we feel, the more we want to hear about the other person's life, past, and romances. If that special other is a man, I begin to view all the women who have to do with him as competition. If one approaches him and he treats her in a confidential and familiar manner, I start wondering if there is something—or there might soon be something—between them, and I feel an ever-so brief spasm of jealousy. To say it with Anaïs Nin,¹⁰ we are always spies in the house of love.

Subsequently, when we are sure that we love and are loved in return by this marvellous being, this fear of competition vanishes. We talk to other people about our beloved and about all his wonderful qualities; it's almost as if he were a beautiful work of art and we flush with pride when others show their admiration. At the same time as we are playing at this little game, however, we may find ourselves occasionally assailed by those old fear and insecurities which plagued us at the very start, when the mere sight of him in the distance made our heart pound—a state of anxiety that ended only when he took us in his arms and rekindled in us the certain of being his one and only love. Even though in the second phase of a consolidated love relationship this fear of being abandoned disappears, there remains a small margin of insecurity. “When Bastian walks in the door after work and doesn't give me a hug or a kiss—I mean it's like I were invisible or something—I get upset. It makes me wonder about us. I get afraid that he doesn't love me the way he did before. I'm scared he doesn't find me attractive. I ask myself where I've failed,” Zoe explains.

Love—even the most steadfast and certain variety—is always characterized by moments when one's heart races in mounting expectation of being together and when one feels fantastically proud of having such a marvellous mate. It is also characterized by thrilling times, like those instances when one averts there is a danger of losing him or her or like that moment when one manages to win one's lover back.

In so far as love is founded on free choice, free choice implies that there are various alternatives to select from. One never possesses the person one loves in a way that is certain and stable once and for all, as would be the case with a slave or an inanimate object. Sartre¹¹ postulates that love ends precisely for the reason that the one who is loved makes the one who loves into a slave. The latter is totally dominated, subjugated, and deprived of his or her freedom. But Sartre is

wrong. True love thrives on freedom and endures precisely because human beings are always free, even when they are in fetters.

Every human being possesses a free spirit, and this means that each member of an amorous couple can never be completely certain of the other's response or of his/her love. That other person remains forever free and autonomous. If you offend or betray him, he can always reject you.

Love doesn't exist in and for itself the way an inanimate object like a rock does. Love exists because it is continually replenished. This renewal process happens when love is challenged, questioned, endangered, and beset by temptation and doubt. Love lasts when each person in the couple scrutinizes the other's face to check if he or she is happy or not; love lasts when a lover hopes with a bit of uncertainty, excitement, or perhaps jealousy to see the other smile or respond in the hoped-for way. Each of the two needs to approach the other carefully, with respect and even a touch of fear, in so far as no one can be absolutely certain of being perfect or irreplaceable. The man must continue to woo and charm his woman, and the woman must keep up her efforts to seduce her man.

A couple in love need to socialize, go to parties or out dancing, experience desire for other women (or men), realize that her or his lover is desired by others, and see this lover for a moment through someone else's avid eyes. Although Girard¹² is wrong to claim that all desire is mimetic, he is right when he says that it is always mimetic *as well*. If someone else admires, appreciates, and desires the person we love, this renders our beloved all the more desirable. In other words, the danger of losing our beloved makes him or her all the more precious. Most women know this very well. After all, why do they get all dolled up like movie stars when they go out, even if it's just to dinner or to the theatre? Consider for a moment all the fashion shows or perfume and lingerie ads which are aimed at them. Every bit of their intimate wear is designed to render their body more desirable; indeed, they wear it in order to feel the heat of this desire against their skin. The desire of whom, you ask? Why, both the desire of the man they love and the desire of other men as well, because the two desires are connected. Every gesture a woman makes to enhance her beauty and erotic powers of seduction are a gift she is giving to you, her man, at the same time as it is an offering to other men. Even in the greatest and most solid love relationship in the world, there is always a chance that it will end, and so also the awareness that it needs to be preserved and saved. Love is forever challenged by desire.

9. Games

We have said that love needs freedom and yet this freedom is always tenuous. This does not signify that we can only love someone who does not love us, as theorized by Sartre, De Rougemont and many others.¹³ We can only love someone who “can” reject us—who has the freedom to do so. Loving another person means wanting his or her freedom and trying always to hang on to, and merit, his or her love.

This brings to mind the case of a literature professor I know, who has always adored his beautiful wife. At the start he was vaguely afraid that she would be attracted to someone else, seeing that he wasn't rich. He had the sensation that she was looking for a Pygmalion who would help her rise in the world and make the most of her personality and beauty. Being ambitious and at the same time insecure, she needed someone to lean on. This was the foundation of his fear that she might find a rich or powerful lover. At this point, the sole purpose of his life became that of loving and being loved by his wife. By working like mad, he was able to advance rapidly in his university career and become known and respected in his field. This in turn meant that he was surrounded by many female students, asked to judge numerous literary contests, and called upon frequently to give guest lectures...in short, he was swarmed by women who adored him—something that enhanced his worth in the eyes of his slightly jealous wife. At the same time, he dedicated himself to helping his wife further her career; they wrote pieces together, and she was finally granted the opportunities that meant so much to her. He lived the emotion—which was also erotic and sexual—of having a student-wife, while for her there was the thrill of having a mentor-celebrity husband. For him, the act of undressing, kissing, and sexually taking her was every time that of seducing the most beautiful of his young female students, whereas for her, there was the thrill of conquest—the fact of being grasped and possessed by such a strong man, by her professor and mentor.

They didn't have children. She never felt the need for them. Consequently, he was able to continue to spoil and coax his pretty wife the way he would have an adolescent daughter. I don't believe he ever once cheated on her, even though he was surrounded by beautiful women. He certainly felt intense sexual desire for her, even after many years. As for his wife, she took pleasure in feeling so adored and catered to, as well as in her lovely home and magnificent clothes. One might say that their enduring erotic love was reminiscent of the marriage described by Henrik Ibsen in “A Doll's House,”¹⁴ where the woman clearly enjoys behaving like a doll and plaything in private yet succeeding in her public career.

Another case of lasting erotic love that I have seen involved what at first appeared to be an impossibly conflictual relationship. The husband had a natural propensity to roam and kept a proud

mental count of all the women he went to bed with, as if with each affair he might add another notch to his gun handle. The wife, on the other hand, was thoroughly monogamous and couldn't abide any extramarital fooling around. Their marriage, therefore, seemed headed towards certain disaster within just a couple of years' time. Instead, it was lasting. The two complemented each other in many ways. Whereas, for example, the husband was indecisive and disorganized, the wife was as efficient as a machine and perfect at organization and planning. Although not beautiful, she possessed savoir-faire, intelligence, and charm. During the early years of their marriage he did have a few sexual affairs, but then he realized that these women could in no way compare to his wife; they appeared sleazy and above all stupid to him. He felt ashamed of these experiences. Meanwhile, his wife was becoming increasingly the centre of attention at any gathering they attended together, and this began to reawaken his competitive drive and desire. Over time his admiration grew more and more intense. She continued all the while to see to his needs, to play both mother and mistress to him, and to guess his thoughts at a glance. It was very hard for him to try anything right under her nose like that. In the end, he stopped doing so completely.

10. Re-falling in love again

Nothing lasts if it is not regenerated. This law governs our very body tissue, which remains youthful and identical only because the old cells die and the undifferentiated staminal, or more precisely totipotent, cells are activated. The original process whereby the undifferentiated becomes the differentiated is reproduced—giving rise once again to the nascent state of biological life. The same cycle of regeneration necessarily occurs in our social life and our psychological life as well. Nothing lasts if it is not regenerated—and love is no exception. Such renewal, however, means love will first be lost and then re-found.

Each of us continues to change, develop new desires and projects, and encounter new people; this sort of change can increase to the point where it crowds in on our love relationship, which begins to feel limited and restrictive. Eventually, this *divergent evolution* creates an impossible gap between what we have and what we desire and dream of having. Our bond with the other person becomes an obstacle to our happiness; we have become ready for a new falling-in-love experience.

In the life of any couple, even the closest and most compatible, there are periods—lasting days or months—when we are avid to try new experiences, or when we think we've made a mistake, or when we are drawn to the fascinating and unfamiliar. When this happens to an amorous

couple with an enduring relationship, this inkling for a new falling-in-love experience doesn't get directed at a new love object (a third person) because the other partner in the meantime has intervened; he or she changes in some way so as to fill the void that has been created. These new love energies are once again aimed his or her way. For this reason, we might say that the *co-evolution* that Jurg Willi¹⁵ talks about is, in reality, the continual process of returning to being in love with each other again.

The life of a couple in a loving, lasting relationship is characterized by the same processes found in the falling-in-love experience. In order these may be termed: *pleasure, loss, indicating sign, the nascent state*. When individuals change, they can either look beyond their relationship or else return to the same person as their choice of love object. Love that lasts is a continual process of seeking, losing, and re-finding. Being is discovering; it is something that comes your way and reveals itself. Everything in this world is fragile, precarious, and destined to fade away. What lasts is what returns and is re-found.

Hence our love is destined to last if we re-fall in love with the same person, if we re-experience the awesome sensation of "love at first sight," and if for an instant the ignition state of love is retriggered inside us. "Then suddenly at some reception or party I catch sight from a distance of a woman who is laughing and talking with others. She is breathtakingly beautiful. I am utterly charmed. My heart even starts pounding. She is the most wonderful person I have encountered, and I know that no other woman is—or could ever be—capable of attracting me more. I am completely indifferent to the other women in the room. And I briefly experience the sort of thing people about to fall in love feel: I have the sense that she is mysterious, unreachable, and part of a world that I will never have access to. Then suddenly and with a sense of astonishment I realize that I am looking at my wife...my wife is this woman. I feel so overcome with happiness, joy, and gratitude, that it makes me giddy and dizzy. How long did that state of consciousness last where I didn't recognize it was my wife? I don't really know—maybe for a fraction of a second. Subjectively-speaking, anyway, it seemed like a long time. And for all that time I was observing her as if she were someone else, a complete stranger that I was seeing for the first time. And I felt all of the overwhelming emotion of someone who is falling in love yet desperately uncertain as to whether he will be loved in return."

Remaining in love, therefore, means succeeding in seeing once again the person we love in the same astonished and joyous way we felt at the start, when we experienced the revelation of beauty and happiness such as we had never imagined would be ours in this world.

11. Complexity

But if love that lasts is a continuous process of losing and then re-finding each other, of change, renewal, and experimenting new things with the same person, then it must mean that in so far as the person we love develops and takes on different aspects as well as roles (both erotic and non-erotic) over time, he or she is destined to become many different personae put together. When Hector is about to leave the city to go fight Achilles, Andromache says, “you friend, you father, you brother, you noble husband.” For her, he is all these things at once.

Love that lasts is the full-scale development of what was merely implicit to the falling-in-love experience, which is to say the sensation that the other person whom I am in love with is ‘totipotent’—as capable as that kind of undifferentiated cell of becoming anything and everything. What distinguishes the relationship of a couple who remain in love is that these diverse possibilities actually take concrete form.

I described this multitude of realized roles in my book, *I Love You (Ti amo)*, in the chapter where I relate what a woman once said to a friend of hers. “You’ve got to understand that your wife isn’t only one woman for you, but rather many women put together. You can sit her on your knee like a pretty young girl and act silly together: right then she’s your daughter. But at the same time she takes care of you: now she’s your mother. She’s beautiful and you admire her beauty: she’s a diva. Then again, she’s also your mistress, and your geisha. She takes care of the house: she’s your housekeeper. She diligently assists you in your work: she is your secretary. At the same time she guides you: she’s your manager. She learns from you: she’s your pupil. She teaches you what to do: she’s your instructor. Seeing that you’re neurotic, she’s your psycho-therapist. She backs you up: she’s your accomplice. She reproaches you: she’s your moral conscience. Finally, she’s your most loyal ally in the battle of life. You see that? You two are in reality lots of different people. And you have so much to do, discuss, and share between you, that you will never get tired of one another.”¹⁶

12. Arrival and departure

Contemporary novelists are curiously reluctant to talk about happy love relationships between married couples. The vast majority of their stories are about the difficulties involved or hardships faced in the effort to find or be reunited with one’s love, or else about the conflicts

between lovers and their split-up. But is it really possible that no one is capable of describing the incredible complexity and multiform profundity of enduring love?

Let's take, as a case in point, a husband's return home after a gruelling day at work.

Here in Ross's words is how it went.

"Ever since I became the administrative director of my company and started having to deal with union leaders, politicians, and affiliates, my job has become not just fast-paced but also stressful to the point of distressing. No one likes to talk about it, but I can assure you that once you've reached a certain level, the job of manager is totally exhausting. You can ride high on a charge of adrenaline for years and then one day it hits you. It's not just mental fatigue but also physical. You end up not even wanting to take out your boat because it becomes another place to do work. You don't feel any desire for a new woman because you know she'd ask you for something and you're too tired to deal with it. For all these reasons the thing I want most is to go home at the end of the day and escape from all contact with the world. No telephone, no people. The other day I left work in god-awful state of tension, with problems and complaints whirling non-stop in my mind and without my being able to shake myself out of it. I was supposed to go to a big important business reception, but I ended up cancelling. I went home to be alone with my wife. The two of us went out into the yard—which is all fenced in and completely private. She took off all her clothes and starting walking stark naked on the grass and around the flowerbeds. I sat in a wicker chair watching her. She looked so lithe and graceful that she reminded of a wood nymph. Then she came up to me gently and I felt the press of her cool, silky skin. I put my arms around her, lay my head against her abdomen, and looked upwards at her breasts. I scrutinized her body inch by inch; I couldn't get enough of it. Then I sat her on my knee like a little girl and she smiled. Suddenly all the tension, anxiety, bitterness, and worried thoughts disappeared. There was only my woman, with her body, skin, scent, and beauty, and I realized that the only cure for everything was her. Not the house, the yard, the switched-off cell phone, but her. All these other things just served as background decoration to her—to highlight her importance. Returning home means one thing to a man: his woman's body and her love."

Having taken a look at an arrival, let's turn our attention now to departures. The many interviews I have conducted confirm the fact that the large majority of women as well as men feel a sense of sadness when they leave behind the person they love for even a short period. They experience the emotional state described in the expression, "leaving is a little bit like dying" (*partire è un po' morire*). They want more than anything to remain 'till the last possible minute'

with the person they love. They want their lover to accompany them to the airport, stay with them up to the final boarding call, then give them a last hug and a goodbye.

It is natural to suspect that this departing ritual is simply and purely a repeat of the difficulties you experienced as a child when you had to leave your mother. The truth, however, is that there is a major difference between the two experiences. A child cries when he sees his mother leave because he is convinced that this separation is forever. When, however, he is the one who leaves—for a walk or to visit an amusement park, he doesn't cry at all. It won't be until evening that he'll ask for his mother and cry if she isn't there. Whereas the child cries because he's terrified of a definitive loss, we adults know very well that this separation is temporary. Yet curiously enough, we nevertheless feel a faint aching sense of loss and void, which albeit not attributable to apprehension or fear, still stems from this departing, this interruption in our relationship, this separation.

Nothing of this sort takes place at the beginning of the falling-in-love process. One doesn't feel an ounce of bitterness or unpleasantness at the approach of departure day. Life with the person you love is so intense and full that you don't give it any thought. Even when you leave him or her at the train station or the airport, you don't feel bad in any way because everything involving this special person is wonderful, down to your last hug and kiss and final wave. Up to this last moment life is full and seems completely charmed. The presence of the one you love makes the world joyful and complete. As soon as your lover has left, however, you start missing him or her. You look around you and notice that the faces that looked friendly and happy up to a moment ago now see cold and distant. And if, on the other hand, you are the one who has left, already as soon as the plane is in the air, you miss him or her terribly. To compensate, you visualize his or her marvellous face, and you concentrate on memories of what you have experienced together and what you will continue to have with him or her in the future....yet all the while, you are beginning to feel overcome with immense longing.

When the love relationship is a consolidated one, this sadness is felt earlier on. It seems to be the very idea of leaving, and the coming arrival of the moment when you will have to do so, that causes this sadness. It's as if you were experiencing the loss of something important. But what are you losing in reality? Not the person you love, because he or she continues to love you and to wait for you; you will certainly see your lover again. Then what is it that makes you sad? Could it only be the loss of the time that you would otherwise have spent together? Does this mean that your sadness stems from the fact that you're being deprived of a bit of your life together—a bit of the time left you to love each other in?

Perhaps so.

13. The goddess of beauty

“It’s been twenty years, my love,” Rogan writes, “since the day when I first saw you—or when, I mean, you first appeared in front of me—all tanned in your bikini. You were there with a girlfriend on what I believe was your first time at the seaside, and your body had greedily soaked in the sun for the first time as well. Your silky golden skin—your incredible skin beyond all comparison—had taken on an even deeper amber hue and yet still shone like gold. All the exercise and sea air had toned your muscles and made your breasts fuller. Your black eyes shone under your soft cloud of golden hair. And I realized—realized once and for all—that I had never ever seen such a beautiful woman before. And that right here before me was to be found—was being offered me—the thing that I desired most in life—which was to say, beauty. I have always understood why when offered a choice between wisdom, beauty, and power, Paris chose beauty and eloped with Helen of Troy. He chose beauty knowing that it would spell his own inescapable ruin. I myself knew that I had in front of me—that I had for me, because I already was certain that you wanted and loved me—the woman whom I had always in some obscure way desired without being able to picture concretely. If I’d had a talent for drawing, I would have created a heroine with exactly your features and body—your neck and shoulders, your back pulsing with muscles, your small waist and expanse of hips, those round buttocks and your long legs with those full thighs, small knees, and slender ankles. My heroine wouldn’t be a tall woman—I don’t like tall women—but of medium height. She’d give the impression of being small-boned and slender, and yet at the same time she’d be full of curves and the kind of grace and natural elegance that arouses admiration and respect. What’s there to add? I mean, there is nothing about you that isn’t already perfect. Your shoulders are wide, you’re stupendously buxom, you’ve got a small waist and full womanly hips, your lips are rosy red even without lipstick, your arms and wrists are slight and delicate, and your hands tapered. Even the nails on those long fingers of yours are a work of art. I was gazing at you the other evening; you’d asked me to rub some scented oil onto your back and shoulders. My eyes travelled down your splendid back all the way to dimpled end and then along your hips. I was enchanted and moved by the sight.

“Every time you get undressed to have a bath or to change your clothes, and you are actually naked for a moment, I gaze at you mesmerized. I don’t know how many years have gone by, darling, since, with these same eyes, I first caught glimpse of the small of your back and the swell of your buttocks and yet for a hundred times or more I experienced the same magic and wonder at

the sight because I couldn't, and even still now can't, believe that such natural perfection was there for me, all for me. Perfection that has gone untouched by time—which has something of the miraculous and divine about it. You, my love, have been granted the gifts of beauty and eternal youth.

“I always stop in place and gaze spellbound at you when you go around the house from room to room, even when you aren't naked or scantily-dressed—even when you are completely enveloped in a long robe. I have never seen another woman walk in the same way as you, as regally as a queen and simultaneously with the light grace and charm of a nymph. The robe encases your shoulders, folds round your narrow waist, and takes on the form of your body, delineating the shape of your legs and your small ankles. There is a wave and sweep of magnificent folds that only a very determined and renowned stylist would ever be able to copy.

“I sometimes wonder at how it was given to me to welcome such perfection into my house. At how lucky I am to be able to look at you and, if I ask you to stop for just a moment, to touch and caress you. My hands stop on your neck and then move over your shoulders and across your silken skin. My glance falls on your back and I caught glimpse of your breasts in profile; then when you turn to look at me, smiling in wonder (you always seem astonished when I stop to look at you), your breasts seem to heave proudly in place. A moment later you go on your way again, laughing, with your light, bouncy, girlish step, while I follow your body with my desire.

“Sometimes, while you are sleeping, I gently lift the covers to have a look at you. It's not an easy thing to manage, because you are such a light sleeper. The short tunic which you wear to bed is almost always raised, leaving exposed your hips, abdomen, small waist, and full, round haunches. Your beautiful legs are bent slightly and in the space between your thighs I can see a dark patch. But I don't go exploring there. Rather, I stand there gazing in place at all those lovely round parts, and feel the adoration that a mother must feel as she contemplates her baby's sweet bottom, knowing that she will never see anything more beautiful than this.

“So many years have passed, my love, more than twenty for sure, and yet there are mornings or evenings, or even the occasional afternoon if I decide I need a nap, when I take one of your photos off a table or out of a drawer and study it. There's one with you in profile and me straight on with my big full face, which makes the two of us look like the beauty and the beast. I feel immense respect as I gaze at that profile shot of you. A woman that beautiful, with such a splendid, serene, sweet, and yet noble-looking face could only be some sort of Hollywood star, I muse. Naturally, it would be the work of some famous director and talented make-up man to make her look this way. But you are that way by nature. You were so girlish and adolescent looking that you will always seem so—this sort of beauty endures. I just wonder how it is that you came my way. Why didn't

some famous director see you, snatch you up, and carry you away? I'm positive that some one tried to do so at some time in the past. But for some mysterious reason you stayed where you were until I arrived, and then you chose me.

“Who sent you my way, my love? What was the mysterious path that led you to my door? What were the mysterious reasons why you didn't do what you could have very easily have done—what any woman with a tenth of your talent and charm would have done? Why did you wait for me to appear on the scene? Why did you choose my life when you could have had so much more? Some of the goddesses in Greek mythology married a mortal man. Thetis, the goddess of the sea, for instance, married Peleus, and Aphrodite herself married Anchises. Why ever for?”

“Now you wander off again, your long swirling dress draping your body, hiding and at once revealing everything you are physically, telling your body's story. The steps you take are light, soft, regal. Your long gown reveals only your incredibly fine ankles. And while you turn to enter through a side door, I once again catch a side view of you and of your blond hair gathered in a ribbon above your neck, while other curls spill over your forehead and cheeks. Like those of a Greek goddess.”

AFTERWORD

Although I started studying the workings of love at the end of the 1960s, it wasn't until 1979 that I published the volume entitled *Falling in Love and Loving* (*Innamoramento e amore*), wherein I applied the theoretical model that I'd come up during the preceding decade. The key to this model is the definition of the process we term 'falling in love,' which is the nascent state of a collective movement made up of two and only two people (the couple). I made every attempt to use the sort of language found in romantic novels in order to describe the emotional changes occurring in love instead of the abstract lingo of psychoanalysts or sociologists. For this reason, the book is at the same time scientifically accurate and emotionally authentic in its representation of emotions. It is also for this reason that the book became an international best-seller and was translated into 20 languages; several dozen editions later, it continues to attract many readers even today. In 1984, I used the same approach in my book, *Friendship* (*L'amicizia*), as well as in *Eroticism* (*L'erotismo*), published in 1986, dedicated to a comparison of male and female forms of eroticism. I am pleased to say that the latter two books met with the same sort of interest on the part of readers.

In the years that followed, I continued to study the nature and evolution of love feelings. In *Nuptial Flight* (*Il volo nuziale*), published in 1992, I took a close look at pre-adolescent and adolescent crushes on film stars, and then at the general feminine tendency to seek out superior love objects. I then proceeded to make a systematic account of varying types of emotional ties, as well as of the formation and evolution of the couple in *I Love You* (*Ti amo*), published in 1996 and an international bestseller. Following this, I started studying something that had never been scientifically examined before, which is to say how children and adolescents experience friendship and falling in love in my book, *First Love* (*Il primo amore*), published in 1997. Subsequently, I took issue with the theories about love advanced by Sartre, De Rougemont, Bataille, and René Girard in *The Mystery of Falling in Love* (*Il mistero dell'innamoramento*), published in 2003. To complete this comprehensive work, I turned to a systematic study of the one outstanding issue—that of the various links between sexuality and love, which with the title *Sex and Love* (*Sesso e amore*) I have finally published here.

In writing this book, I made use not only of literary works but also and above all of the material I gathered from dozens of clinical interviews, letters, confessions, and recorded conversations of various other types. I used a number of special techniques to get these individuals to give full expressive rein to their intense feelings regarding sexual desire and pleasure, love, anger, disappointment, and regret. One of the techniques was to ask the person, after having established a relationship of emotional trust, to imagine that the other in question—husband, wife, present or past lover—was present and to open up and candidly reveal what had never been possible to say before. I said, “Speak your heart, don’t hold anything back, and use the words you want.” Or else, “Now dictate a love letter out loud to me, or else a letter of reproach or a farewell letter, in which you tell the other person everything you would have liked to say to them. Clearly, it’s a letter that you will never actually send because certain things are for thinking and not saying, seeing that our feelings sometimes are contradictory.” I’d ask for similar confessions on other topics as well. For instance, “Tell me now what is the truly most important or essential thing for you, or else the things that you never had the chance or the courage to do.” Still other times, I asked the person to tell me his or her whole life story, in order to formulate questions about a given period and some extremely important event.

In this way I managed to obtain these highly emotional and intense excerpts that the reader encounters in the book. In some cases the language was obscene or vulgar, and in other cases, it was delicate. The tone ranged from bitter or sarcastic to passionate and even poetic. Some people whom I interviewed became very moved by their memories; some cried, and a few even started shouting. Naturally, I had to edit the text to guarantee full anonymity, or else because it was too harsh or repetitive or long. In any case, I always tried as hard as I could to preserve the spirit and, as far as possible, the language of the original. All the interviews and quoted passages relay, in other words, the sentiments and experiences of real people; nothing has been imaged or invented. The resulting literary feel of *Sex and Love* stems from a careful shifting through, ordering, and shaping of the material to the conceptual scheme of the book.

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Milan, Italy - June 2005

For additional information about the author, a bibliography of his work, foreign editions, book summaries, and English text translations, consult the Internet site, www.alberoni.it.

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