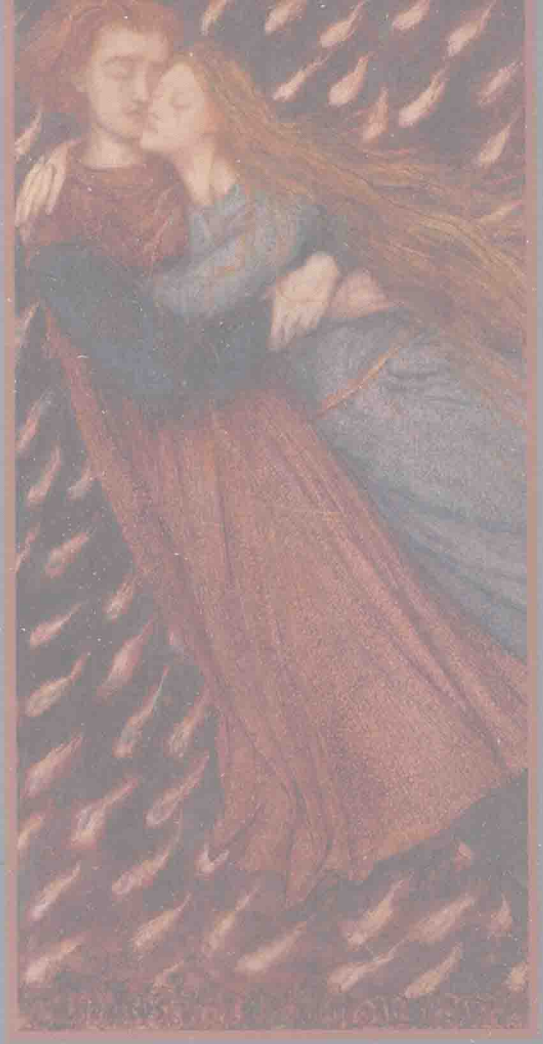

LYNNE PEARCE

Romance Writing

Cultural History of
LITERATURE

Romance Writing

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To the musician and writer
NICK CAVE

Jan van Eyck, *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami* (1434)

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The frontispiece, Jan van Eyck's *The Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami* (1434), is reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the National Gallery, London/CORBIS. Lyrics from Nick Cave's 'The Train Song' are reproduced by kind permission of Mute Song and Penguin Books.

Preface

The cover illustration to this volume depicts a pair of star-crossed lovers, Paolo and Francesca, floating entwined – and for ever – amidst the fires of hell. Their story, which is told in Book V of Dante's *Inferno* (1984 [c. 1308–14]), may be read as a warning against not only adultery (Paolo is Francesca's brother-in-law) but also the all-consuming nature of romantic love in general; their wish – 'never to be parted' – was, after all, innocent enough in prospect; their 'crime' merely their failure to heed its consequence. Although the story of Paolo and Francesca has its origins way back in the early Middle Ages, its tragic trajectory arcs across the centuries. Indeed, for Denis de Rougemont (1983 [1940]), it is the fate of another pair of adulterous lovers – Tristan and Iseult – that has *defined* 'love in the Western world' (the title of his book) over the past seven centuries; social and cultural context may change, but the architectonics of this – necessarily tragic – love story lies behind all subsequent re-scriptings.

Whilst de Rougemont's universalizing of romantic love is tied to a persuasive psychoanalytic thesis, the gauntlet it throws down to a project such as this – with a remit to chart *change* rather than continuity across the centuries – is considerable. Indeed, it is a challenge that goes to the heart of the paradox I have been forced to grapple with in the writing of this book: namely, the fact that romantic love is a discourse that *proclaims* itself universal and inescapable, yet is anything but. As several theorists and commentators cited in this book propose, there are other – safer, saner – ways of 'doing' love than to do it 'romantically'; yet what too many of us know, and what the literature surveyed in the pages which follow will surely attest, is that the adventure, thrill, abandonment and spectacle associated with romantic love in its unreconstructed form is a drug that is hard to quit. In writing about this discourse, I have therefore found myself treading the awkward tightrope of wanting to acknowledge its claims to universality at an experiential level (however illusory that universalism may be), at the same time as never letting slip its status as an ideology: a course

that Roland Barthes negotiated with such canniness in *A Lover's Discourse* (1990 [1977]).

Another – not unrelated – tightrope is the one that connects – yet simultaneously divides – the discourse of love from the discourse of the erotic and, indeed, psycho-sexual explanations of interpersonal relations. Although it is impossible to write about writings on love without also writing about 'desire', they trade in different values and tell different stories. Thus, while several of the textual readings I perform here draw upon psychoanalysis, others don't, and my rationale has been to respond to, and evaluate, the texts concerned on their own intellectual and discursive terms.

A word more needs to be said about my textual rationale generally. First, there is no escaping the fact that this is a cultural history of romantic love and its associated literary genre centred firmly on Britain and Europe (the cultural-historical territory that was first staked out so brilliantly by Denis de Rougemont). The literary history I survey in the first part of each chapter is, for the most part, mainstream and canonical, whilst the texts I subject to a close reading in the second section have been chosen largely because they are works I know well and, through them, I can pursue to best effect the theory and methodology I set up in Chapter 1. This means that they are indicative, rather than representative, with the intention that readers may subsequently bring my hypothesis to bear on their own reading. It will also be noted that all the texts upon which I perform these close readings are by women; a happenstance that I *could* defend ideologically with the long-accepted argument that romance is, after all, a 'woman's genre', but which is – once again – more to do with my familiarity with these particular authors. Male authors *do* feature elsewhere in the chapters, and to mitigate any perceived bias it might help if I declare that – in the realm of contemporary fiction – I find much more with which to identify and to admire in the writing of Nick Hornby than in that of Helen Fielding. Indeed (as will be seen as early as Chapter 2), the gendering of romance – and its readers – was never a simple matter. A further, very visible bias will be the book's whiteness and, once again, I would prefer to declare my hand rather than make excuses. Whilst Chapters 6 and 7 do deal with a fair selection of texts by black and postcolonial authors, there is no question that a further book is waiting to be written on the complex relationship that exists between different races and cultures and romantic love in its white, Western specificity. In addition – and as de Rougemont himself acknowledged in 1940 – there are also books to be written which draw on other histories and cultures in order to make visible

different kinds of *non-romantic* interpersonal love (and hence put into perspective the specificity of the one we are dealing with here). It should also be noted that the purpose of the third section of each chapter is to introduce readers to a selection of texts which provide a point of contrast to that considered in the close reading, and to extend the literary-historical overview begun in the first.

This brings us to the question of how, faced with the challenging remit of being asked to write a cultural history of romance in 90,000 words, I conceived a way of producing something other than a very superficial, very inadequate, survey. Although this is something I discuss at some length at the end of Chapter 1, here I would simply advise readers that my task was helped considerably by the realization – quite early on in the project – that although romance *as a genre* is reasonably well represented in literary history, the role and representation of romantic love (the emotion, the discourse, the dynamic) *within* the genre – outwith Mills & Boon-type popular romance – has been surprisingly underplayed. Keeping my eye firmly fixed on the discourse-within-the-genre has thus helped me focus my analysis enormously, and readers should therefore be advised that when I use the terms 'romantic love' (meaning the discourse) and 'romance' (meaning the romance *genre*) I do so advisedly; they articulate with one another, yes, but they are not interchangeable. The focus of my project has also been helped by the fact that, from the start, I set myself a very clear research question: namely, how, and to what extent, has romantic love (in the Western world) changed over the past five centuries, and how have these changes been registered and (re)produced by literary romance? The means – indeed, the 'method' – I came up with to answer this question is the subject of Chapter 1, but I don't think I shall give too much away if I observe that probably the *only* way a conceit that aspires to transhistorical universality can be meaningfully linked to its cultural–historical moment is through its 'supplementary benefits': what else it gives the lover *besides* love, in other words.

Thus having sampled – in the preceding paragraph – something of the philosophical and political challenge we face when thinking, and reading, about love, readers will be pleased to learn that – in the history of *literature* – the complexity is more often than not packaged as a story. 'Romance' and 'narrative' have, indeed, always gone hand-in-hand, and something else that became obvious to me as soon as I began working in the field was the fact that what romantic love (the emotion, the discourse) seeks to conceal, romance (the genre) *reveals* through its wonderful and spectacular stories. 'Spectacle', indeed – like 'adventure', 'surprise' and

'obstacle' –, is a conceit so intrinsic to romance writing from the Middle Ages onwards that, in the pages that follow, it serves as a constant reminder for why romance and literature need each other so much. Whatever pain and suffering romantic love may cause us to endure as the subjects of its ideology, there is, at least, the glorious consolation of its manufacture into art: the stories that, by some miracle, convince us of its beauty.

Historical Context: Suggestions for Further Reading

On the suggestion of one of my readers, I list below some texts that those unfamiliar with the earlier historical periods covered by this book may find useful:

- Barry Coward 1994: *The Stuart Age 1603–1714*. 2nd edn. London: Longman.
- Christopher Hill 2001 [1961]: *The Century of Revolution 1603–1714*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Anne Laurence 1994: *Women in England 1500–1700: A Social History*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Roy Porter 2001: *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*. London: Penguin.
- Matthew Sweet 2002: *Inventing the Victorians*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Keith Wrightson 1982: *English Society 1580–1680*. London: Hutchinson.

Scholarly texts dealing specifically with love, marriage and the family across the centuries are cited in the relevant chapters.

Lynne Pearce
June 2006

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1

Introduction

The Alchemy of Love

In the interest of getting this book off to a suitably impassioned start, I begin with the proposition that romantic love is the most singular, and most singularly devastating, emotion visited upon humankind. 'Losing our heart' to another is, indeed, the (traumatic) experience that most defines us: that eradicates, in an instant, the subjects we once were and reincarnates us in another guise.[1] From that fateful moment on, who we are is defined in part by the being we love, even though s/he is no longer what s/he was either. The first access of desire transforms the beloved even as it transforms us in the manner of the following equation: $x + y \rightarrow x' + y'$. This, at least, is one hypothesis.

The fact that, in the course of my reading for this project, I was seduced into devising my own model of romantic love tells us everything about the discourse *as a discourse*. Because, for most of us, romantic love is the most ecstatic *and* traumatic event we are likely to suffer, it is hardly surprising that we should seek an explanation; more, that we should desire this explanation to be *the* explanation. Just witness the obsessive, even biblical, fervour of so many of the texts/authors that have taken on the subject.[2] Western civilization, in particular, has been apparently hell-bent on discovering a universal explanation for this most lawless of emotions;[3] and this, in turn, has resulted in the widely held belief that romantic love is the same everywhere: transhistorical, transcultural and terrifyingly omnipotent. Such a view has certainly been prevalent in the literatures and philosophies of the Western world since the time of Shakespeare, and the coupling of love with *desire* post-Freud has provided the contemporary world with further universalist models to account for the most involuntary and/or irrational of human impulses.

A moment's reflection should, however, cause even then the most evangelical amongst us to accept that there is room for more than one theory of romantic love; more, that the different theories must, themselves, be seen to correspond to cultural–historical discourses that in turn create, recreate and sustain different experiences of romantic love. This is why philosophy,

literature and the arts in general play such a vital role in the (re)production of love. However unique and earth-shattering the condition of falling in love continues to be for the individual concerned, common-sense thus also tells us that it is not. The touch-papers that light the fuse that *causes x* to combust when s/he first meets y lie scattered all about us. It is just that for the individual concerned they remain, necessarily, invisible.

'Spectacular Spectacular'[4]

The invisible, occluded or darkly hidden nature of romantic love is, indeed, one of its most defining characteristics.[5] As an emotion that is probably best understood as a heady cocktail of psychic drives, cultural discourses and social constraints, it is experienced by its subjects as a traumatic 'impossibility' that is worse than irrational. Sexual desire, as psychoanalysis has shown us, positions individuals at the centre of a host of competing drives – some 'permitted' by the ego, some not – whilst the (various) cultural and social conventions which inform the emotion at the level of discourse add to the confusion.

Yet the fact that the conditions of 'falling in love' and 'being in love' are, by definition, so confused, contradictory and perverse as to render them inchoate and invisible to their subject is hardly borne out in our literature and culture. Indeed, the texts and discourses that have produced, and reproduced, our most popular versions of romantic love in the West over the last nine centuries have rendered the phenomenon not only visible but visibly *spectacular*: spectacular in its joy, spectacular in its grief, spectacular in its challenges and ordeals, spectacular in its transformative effect (on both the amorous subject *and* his/her world). Linked to this making visible of the 'great unspeakable' is, of course, romance's recourse to narrative. As I discuss below, taming love by turning it into a story is the oldest of the 'deep structures' used to make (artificial) sense of its complexity, not least in accounting for the apparently irrational behaviour of the beloved (such as hostility, faithlessness, disappearance). For the historical period covered by this book, at least – that is, the seventeenth century to the present –, we (as historical subjects) have been understandably reluctant to regard the hurtful behaviour of our beloveds as an indication that we, for whatever reason, are no longer the primary object of their affection/attention and have invented no end of stories to account for it. Indeed, interludes of misunderstanding, separation and enforced absence have been *endemic* to romance narrative ever since the texts of Arthurian legend. The traumatic, invisible moment of rejection experienced by most lovers at

some point in their relationships is thus converted into a spectacular adventure with a happy ending. Indeed, so intrinsic is this resolution to romance-as-we-know-it that Denis de Rougemont (1983 [1940]) elected to turn the formula on its head and search for theories that explain romantic love as *a quest for* (spectacular) *obstacles*. The resulting (and equally spectacular) *love story* is certainly what has most commonly come to be understood by the term 'romance'.

What thus emerges from this opening discussion is a manifestation of what I consider to be one of the most crucial points of distinction for a book attempting a 'cultural history' of romance: namely, the distinction between *romantic love, the discourse* and emotion, and *romance, the genre*. Indeed, what the condition of being in love *conceals*, romance – I would contend – *reveals*. And the fact that what it reveals is not the messy 'truth' of the condition but its spectacular, fantastical 'other' is the reason it provides us – as readers and as subjects – with such limitless pleasure; why it inclines us, moreover, to 'fall in love' ourselves and to produce stories every bit as spectacular, fantastical and pleasurable to account for the traumatic moment that has seemingly redefined us.

The Deep Structures of Romance

Apart from clarifying the distinction between the human condition and the genre when speaking about romance, we need also to attend to the major tension that exists between texts/theories that proclaim love a truly universal (transhistorical, transcultural) phenomenon and those that argue for its specificity. As someone deeply persuaded by many of the structuralist, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic accounts of romantic love, I found the remit to write its 'cultural history' a severe personal challenge. Notwithstanding the fact that I could, if I chose, interpret the brief simply as an invitation to write a straightforward 'literary history', I still had grave doubts about my ability to make the romance texts of the eighteenth century look very different to those from the twentieth century. Later in this chapter I shall explain the hypothesis, and methodology, I eventually devised to solve this problem, but turn first to an overview and interrogation of some of the deep structures themselves. As will be seen, all three groups of thinkers are driven by a desire to understand the causes, patterns and mechanisms of romantic love, and all strive for a definitive solution. This, as I implied in my opening remarks, is hardly surprising. Because love hails, and seizes, each individual in such a defining way, it somehow deserves a defining explanation.

The Philosophical Tradition

In terms of the history of *Western* thought, the first great battles over the meaning, and mechanisms, of love were fought out by classical and church philosophers: in particular, Plato, Aristotle, Capellanus, St Paul and St Augustine. During, and after, the Enlightenment, Descartes, Hegel, Hume, Rousseau and Nietzsche all pitched into the debates, whilst in the twentieth century a wide spectrum of philosophers continued to investigate the condition within the terms of their own discipline. Within the Anglo-American tradition these included Bayley (*The Character of Love*, 1963), Fromm (*The Art of Loving*, 1974), Singer (*The Nature of Love*, 1984–7) and Soble (*The Structure of Love*, 1990); whilst continental philosophy, often in more open dialogue with psychoanalysis, has featured significant contributions from Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*, 1956 [1943]), Barthes (*A Lover's Discourse*, 1990 [1977]), Levinas (*Totality and Infinity*, 1969 [1961]), Foucault (*The Care of the Self*, 1988 [1984]) and Nancy (*The Inoperative Community*, 1991). Despite the desire to achieve a single, universal definition of love, it is striking how many of these texts describe the perverse, contradictory and seemingly irrational nature of romantic love *before* attempting to reduce it to an equation or bend it to a rule of logic. Long before the days of psychonalysis, Henri de Montherlant, for example, observed: 'We like someone *because* . . . we love someone *although*' (in Soble 1990: 163). Indeed, the problem with romantic love is that it is an emotion that is not causally engendered in any obvious way: not only is it difficult to explain 'why' we fell in love with *x* and not with *y*, but also why we continue to love them when (for example) they treat us badly.

At the heart of classical, and subsequent, debates over the meaning and mechanism of love is the distinction between Eros and Agape. These models have been seized upon by different philosophers in the pursuit of very different arguments, but some of the most frequently invoked dualisms are shown in Table 1.1. As with all dualist thinking, there are huge philosophical problems with this set of oppositions. The pairings I have produced here are derived from a number of philosophical texts which invoke Eros and Agape in their quest for a definition of love, but it is very striking that all depend upon the promotion of some pairs and the suppression of others. This is because the contradictions are intense. A philosopher (like Alan Soble) focusing on the question of whether love is 'property-based' or not pursues a very materialist analysis of erosic love,[9] whilst Denis de Rougemont, whose hypothesis understands romantic love as a sublimated death-drive, focuses on its transcendent, 'heaven-bound'

Table 1.1 *The dualistic model of erosic/agapic love*

Eros	Agape
Love of individual	Love of God/neighbour(s)
Based on personal properties	Involuntary/unconditional
Object-centred	Subject-centred
Repeatable	Non-repeatable
Definite	Infinite
Rational	Irrational
Bodily	Spiritual
Heaven-bound	Heaven-present

intentions. Inasmuch as most subsequent discourses of romantic love would seem to mix and appropriate aspects of both Eros and Agape, there is also a good deal of philosophical gripe about 'misappropriation'. Soble, for example, berates Stendhal, Barthes and Singer for conceiving of romantic love agapically and hence fudging the importance of personal properties in causing individuals to fall in love with one another. My own solution to the Eros–Agape problem is encapsulated in the equation with which I opened this chapter ($x + y \rightarrow x' + y'$). Although deliberately tongue-in-cheek (how *can* love possibly be reduced to a single equation?), it allows for the possibility of romantic love *beginning* erosically (x is arrested/seized by some attractive quality in y) and then *becoming* agapic (x now loves y in the involuntary/unconditional way in which one might love God). Although Soble considers this possibility briefly at the beginning of his book ('Personal love, some have argued, can succeed (or be genuine) only if it is "agapized"' (Soble 1990: 5)), it is only to contest it: 'Much of the book defends the eros tradition (or "erosic" love) and argues that the agape tradition may succumb to similar tangles and objections when it is used to characterize personal love' (5). What Soble should possibly have clarified at this point, however, is the difference between his objective (a definition of '*personal* love') and that of many of those he argues against (including de Rougemont and Barthes) who are focused specifically on '*romantic* love'. As he himself concedes a little later, the *discourse* of romantic love is very obviously inscribed by both traditions (even if that is a mixing based on philosophical error and/or confusion):

> Romantic love is a special case. Because romantic love is often seen as a historical development of courtly love, it may fall within the eros tradition and have the features of the first view of personal love: powerful passion