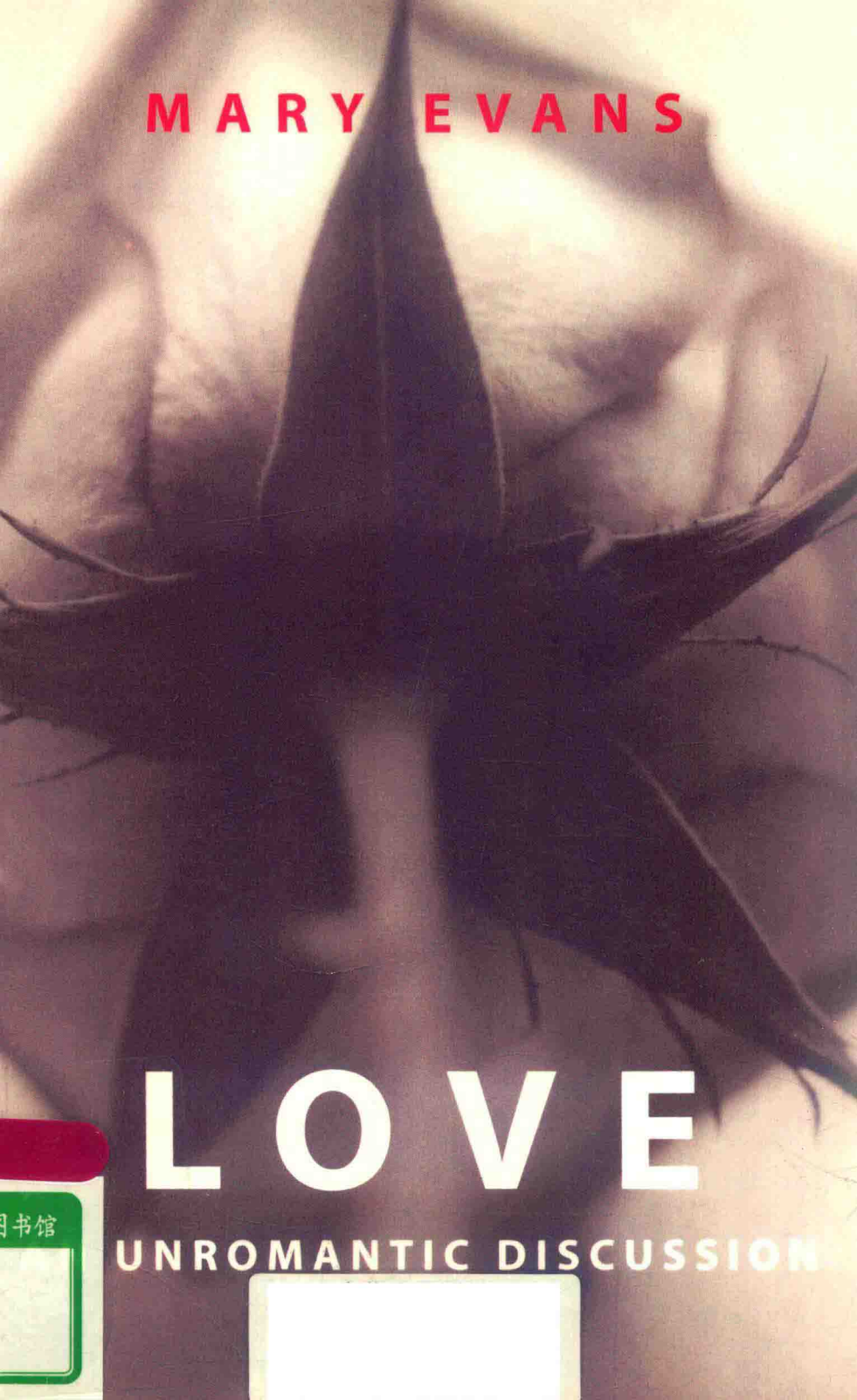
MARY EVANS
LOVE
UNROMANTIC DISCUSSION

LOVE

An Unromantic Discussion

Mary Evans

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LOVE

For David, Tom and Jamie

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Contents

1

What is this Thing Called Love?

> There is nothing that the human heart more irresistibly seeks than an object to which to attach itself.
>
> William Godwin

The pursuit of love has engaged human energy for centuries. That comment implicitly assumes, as a great deal of writing about love also does, that the emotion which we describe in the West as 'love' is about personal, emotional relationships. We no longer also assume that all love is about heterosexual love (or between people of the same age, race and religion) but our association of love is with an individual relationship which also involves a sexual relationship.[1] Although we use the word love to indicate our feelings for objects, situations and ideas, most people, in thinking of love, would probably associate the word with love for another, chosen, person. Despite the fact that for many people the greatest loves of their lives are their children (or their parents) it is love for unrelated others which dominates our present thinking, and expectations, about the subject. Indeed, some of the more famous declarations of affection (such as that of the biblical Ruth to her mother-in-law, 'Whither thou goest, I will go') are often subsumed into romantic discourse.

The way in which we construct love, which is the subject of this book, has long been the concern of writers and artists. The highs and lows of love have been recorded on miles of canvas and forests of paper. From this tradition has emerged the consensus that romantic love is both deeply desirable and extremely difficult to achieve, let alone maintain. Thus we grow up, and are socialized into, a set of expectations about love which both endorse the aspiration of romantic love and are sceptical about its achievement. We hope that through love we will end the emotional loneliness of adult life but have to confront, like Levin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the stark truth that the loved other is not only unable to offer perfectly realized intimacy, but is also another person. We associate being in love, and the state of bliss of love, with the love sonnets of John Donne ('For love all love of other sights controls'[2]) but seldom read the more sombre, later, poems of Donne in which he professes his recognition of the limits of earthly loves and passions.

Donne's acknowledgement of the disappointments, as well as the joys, of love was first published in the seventeenth century. Since that time 'love' has never been absent from the agenda of writers, artists and moralists in the West. Love matters, not just to us as individuals, but to society and the social world in general because it is the language, the understanding and the behaviour through which we organize our sexuality and our personal lives. It is because of this that love has recently acquired a place amongst the concerns of sociologists and social historians: 'love', it would seem, is becoming more problematic and is giving rise to confusions and contradictions which have a destabilizing effect on the social world. It is this question which is the concern of this book: what does 'love' mean to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century and is it an emotion, and an expectation, which we should abandon or continue to pursue? Dare we entertain the idea of a world without love and could another vocabulary, in which words such as care, commitment and desire were more often used, actually make us happier? Would we, could

we, live more fulfilled and contented lives without the emotional state which we describe as 'love'?

The possibility that individual happiness, organized around 'love', is becoming more difficult to achieve in the West (despite generally improved living standards, access to contraception and the economic emancipation of women) has begun to attract considerable attention, not least because the problems of 'love' have been linked to what is described as the 'breakdown' of the family. That breakdown has been much exaggerated, and often viewed – as is much else in the contemporary West – in an ahistorical way, so that there is little understanding of long-term instabilities in the family (resulting, for example, from death or migration). But social pundits concerned with what they see as the increasing fragmentation of social life are quick to identify 'selfish' attitudes to personal life and love. Against these voices (amongst which can be identified that of the journalist Melanie Phillips) are sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck who have argued that personal life has become not more chaotic than ever, but more democratic.[3] In the view of Giddens, 'intimacy' (by which he means primarily, although not exclusively, relations between women and men) is being transformed in ways which offer the possibility of a 'pure' relationship. (A 'pure' relationship is one founded upon the autonomy of both parties and their ability to relate to each other as separate, functionally and emotionally competent adults). For Giddens, love is no longer tied to sexuality and those 'pure' relationships which he values are entered into for 'their own sake'.[4] Like the majority of writers on love, he shares much of the Western language of love, in which love between adults is essentially a matter of individualized attraction, although one which can now exist within a new moral framework. The cornerstone of that framework, the new 'democracy' of intimacy, is that the relationship need only continue, in Giddens's words, 'in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it'.

Cynics (both feminist and otherwise) might argue that this is exactly how many men have always viewed relationships with women, as relationships that need only continue as long as they are satisfactory to men. The difference – according to Giddens – is that now the ending of relationships need not take place within a rhetoric of blame or the assumption of the economic abandonment of women. It is tempting to read Giddens's account of the democratization of intimacy as an optimistic male rationalization (and legitimation) of a new order of Western gender relations made possible by the economic emancipation of women. But for Giddens the new order benefits women as much as men, a view challenged by, amongst others, Wendy Langford. Her case, to be discussed later, emphasizes many of the persisting inequalities of gender which Giddens tends to minimize. But the argument here is less with the politics of gender in Giddens than with his account of the politics of the social world. There is a consensus amongst sociologists that there has been a shift in late modernity towards a new rhetoric and a new set of expectations about some aspects of gender relations. It would be extraordinary if the 'language of love' did not change as other aspects of the social world change. Nevertheless, the question of how, and why, that language changes remains problematic. To assume, as Giddens does, that the 'new' organization of love in the twenty-first century will create more democratic societies and civil cultures is extraordinarily optimistic. To suppose that changes in the private world will bring about corresponding changes in the public world is to ignore the strength of those public institutions and structures which are far from democratic.

When demonstrators against the war in Vietnam famously confronted the National Guard of the United States by placing flowers in the barrels of guns, they created a vivid image about power in the West. Those demonstrators contributed to the ending of the war in Vietnam; but whilst political opinion was changed, the structural order of political power was not. Since the 1960s individuals in

the West have known greater personal freedoms, albeit in terms which have been identified as 'repressive tolerance'. As those critics of mainstream Western culture have argued, this greater personal sexual freedom has neither changed the absolute sum of human happiness or unhappiness (although the forms may have shifted) nor made significant inroads on the structural distribution and organization of economic and political order. On the contrary, and a theme for discussion here, it is possible to argue that greater sexual 'freedom' has increased personal dissatisfaction and had a destabilizing effect on everyday life. The expectations of romance and sexual pleasure within intimacy which are the subject matter of the various dream factories of the West endlessly threaten the fragile possibilities of human happiness. Perhaps most significantly, we have become less able to recognize the limits and boundaries of love: the 'democratization of intimacy' is thus more about the democratization of the miseries and the disappointments of love than about an increase in its many rich pleasures.

Thus the discussion of love has come to the attention of social pundits largely because it has become clear that love, and most specifically heterosexual love, has disruptive social consequences. As a consequence of being 'in love', or falling 'out of love', individuals change partners, move house and leave behind jobs, homes and children. Economists in the United States have remarked that divorce and separation are good for business, in that people who leave home generally have to engage in setting up another home. In setting up this new home (and often beginning to live – as increasing numbers of people do – alone) individuals have to buy all those household goods they left behind or did not manage to take with them. The slogan published in Britain in the Second World War ('Careless Talk Costs Lives') was never more true than in the contemporary politics of love and romance. The fateful admission of love, or its lack, literally changes lives and creates consequences not just for the individuals concerned, but for those others

involved in the relationship. Those 'others' are notably children, who may grow up, particularly in Britain and the United States, as the results of vanished 'loves'. The familiar mantra of 'Mummy/Daddy and I no longer love each other, but will always love you' has become part of the lives of many children, who experience in real life the vagaries of love portrayed in television soap operas. It would no doubt startle many viewers if a character in the British soap opera *EastEnders* admitted that even though 'love' had disappeared from a relationship, they would nevertheless stay in it for the sake of the children, social respectability or religious principles. Love, or its absence, as an acceptable motive for individual action has become part of the expectations of our culture. We take it as a form of socially sanctioned and accepted individual entitlement that the presence or absence of love legitimates the establishment or the ending of personal relationships; the moral force of the idea that parents should stay together for the 'sake of the children' has largely disappeared from our culture.

Thus, as many of us experience the increasingly diverse and general controls on our lives associated with complex industrial societies, love, and our love relationships, may appear to be becoming less controlled as moral codes and taboos change or fragment. As women and men of the twenty-first century we are allowed to go out and look for love, on what is supposed to be the newly level playing field of relations between women and men. There is no longer the expectation that men will express feelings of love in order to persuade women into sexual relationships or that women will exchange sexuality for love. That such exchanges still occur, and are still part of many people's assumptions, does not invalidate the fact that the expectation is no longer held as the normal or single discourse of love. It is permissible for sexual desire to be openly expressed by both women and men and for a separation to be made between sexual desire and romantic and emotional attachment. A popular culture exists throughout the

West in which fleeting sexual encounters are regarded, if not as necessarily normal or desirable, then certainly as commonplace. This has allowed moral judgements about sexual behaviour to move to other aspects of sexuality, such as those of deceit or care with contraception. Establishing a morality for the 'new' sexuality remains a contentious issue: but in that debate 'love' still plays a considerable part, in that in the absence of other forms of social control it remains an informal, but generally recognized, sanction.[5]

Love, in our present use of the term, can only be seen as a changing code. To look for 'real love' in the history of love (or the literature about it) will lead us, assuredly, to find many different meanings and expressions of the word. The fixed point in this context will be the question of the social implications of love. Sociologists (and historians and literary critics) have come to recognize that love matters in social, just as much as in individual, terms. As Stevi Jackson has pointed out, contemporary sociologists fall 'in love' and in part, no doubt, because of this have started to re-engage with a subject that initially attracted previous generations.[6] Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas have all noted the connection between romantic love and modernization.[7] Indeed, nobody brought up and educated in European bourgeois culture could fail to notice that a generalized discourse of romantic love, as we now know it, first made its significant appearance at the end of the eighteenth century when women, just as much as men, become active participants in the discourse of romance. Just as ideas about human freedom and autonomy challenged the practice and ideology of slavery, so the language of romantic love began to allow women a greater, legitimate part in the negotiation of marriage. The language of emancipated individualized love contained similar ideas to the debate about slavery: ideas about freedom, liberty, ownership and personal choice.[8] The expectation of mutual attraction began in which male and female partners had to make themselves lovable to the other party.

This expectation, which is now part of the gender relations of all Western societies, began to take certain recognizable forms in Europe in the late eighteenth century. These forms differed over time and in different contexts, but have increasingly come to form the cocktail of explicit sexual desire and shared secular interests which is the basis of contemporary, heterosexual, Western love. This is not to say that romantic love has only been invented in the past 200 years: the history of love includes Abelard and Héloïse, Romeo and Juliet as well as those Renaissance nuns described by Judith Brown as being 'passionately in love'.[9] But these loves existed as much outside marriage as within, and what became distinctive about constructions of love from the beginning of the nineteenth century was their identification with marriage: an identification which marginalized other 'loves' and created the expectations of marriage which are currently being renegotiated. A contest over the meaning of marriage was not an invention of the nineteenth century, but what was a significant departure was the expectation that romantic love was an essential part in both the construction and the continuation of marriage.

Unfortunately for many people this contest – and discussion – remains unresolved. The history of how 'love' has changed in the past 200 years is the subject of the next chapter, but in order to illustrate the dramatic difference that can exist between individuals from the same culture and society about love we need look no further than the case of the marriage of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer. This unhappy relationship dramatized the different expectations and aspirations that can exist about love, and the disastrous consequences for individuals if they do not share at least a measure of common understanding about the relationship between love and marriage. As spectators of this marriage we could all observe the havoc that these different expectations caused. We know that when asked, before the marriage, if he was 'in love', Prince Charles could only bring himself to admit to a doubtful yes, and

the qualification 'whatever love means'. The tape has been frequently re-run to show either the honesty of Prince Charles, or his deceitfulness. On the one hand, he was a man who was genuinely confused about encoded messages in the discourses of late capitalism or on the other he was a two-timing deceiver who knew perfectly well his real affections were with a woman other than his fiancée. The constrained engagement interview essentially talked away the kind of single-minded passion which many individuals aspire to in love: the most positive characteristic of Lady Diana Spencer was, to her fiancé, that 'she was very energetic' and the most important question about their marriage was that 'lots of other people are involved'. 'Very energetic' could be taken as a coded reference to sexual enthusiasm and energy, or it could be a reference to the kind of energy associated with children and young animals. As a description of a loved one, and a singled-out loved one, it is not particularly flattering. On the other hand, what we now know about the circumstances in which Prince Charles went into this marriage (and his comment at the time that a lot of other people were involved in it) may lead us to suppose that the comment on Lady Diana's energy was a reflection on his lack of it.[10] A much older man confronting a young bride was faced, and hardly for the first time in recorded history, with the prospect of needs (both sexual and otherwise) greater than he could meet.

As episode succeeded unhappy episode in the sad saga of the Charles and Diana marriage, the global public saw a tired (both individually and generally) version of patriarchal, dynastic marriage confronted by a set of modern expectations about emotional life. Inevitably, critics, commentators, friends and relations lined up on either side of this contest, but there was little attempt to acknowledge the strengths, and horrors, of *both* sides of this domestic drama. The two central characters were world-famous, rich and privileged, but in their different ways each represented the considerable difficulties of resolving the question

of both defining the meaning of love and showing how to implement that meaning. To begin with their respective families: each extraordinarily materially secure yet riddled with dissent and rage. On the Spencer side Diana's grandmother had virtually disowned her daughter, Diana's mother, whilst amongst the Windsors the children, and specifically Prince Charles, had been sacrificed to a homophobic regime of separation and brutality.[11] The personal misery inflicted in childhood and adolescence on all British male heirs apparent since the time of Queen Victoria was duly inflicted upon Charles, and what emerged was a man of erratic temper inside the faultless tailoring of royalty.[12] Charles, it was taken for granted, had to marry, and he did so in a way which demonstrated both the respect and the contempt for marriage which has long been a part of aristocratic understanding. Marriage is important as a social contract, because it secures succession ('the procreation of children', as the Church of England marriage ceremony states). Marriage is much less important as a relationship of realized and fulfilled personal love. Signing up to the contract of marriage as outlined by the Church of England (the procreation of children first, safety from 'sin' second and the mutual help and understanding of husband and wife a somewhat belated third) demonstrated a commitment to an understanding of marriage which has long been abandoned by many couples. The seventeenth-century prayer book was written a century before the first general emergence of romantic love in marriage and what it defines is an explicit distinction between ideals of union (which are part of a religion) and secular aspirations about behaviour. Reading the words of the Anglican marriage ceremony in the twenty-first century confronts us with a statement about marriage which is at odds with romanticized expectations.[13]

The expectations of Lady Diana Spencer were clearly for a 'modern', romantic, marriage and when she died there was a considerable body of opinion which suggested that she had been cheated out of this. That view obscured