

Facets of Love

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John Armstrong

Conditions of Love:

The Philosophy of Intimacy

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LOVE IS A central preoccupation of art and literature, of popular culture and autobiography. This book is an attempt to understand its central themes, to discover why love is so important to most of us, why we seek it, and why we so frequently fail to hold on to it.

John Armstrong is a philosopher whose primary interest is aesthetics. Accordingly, his meditations on love often proceed by way of reflection upon works of art and literature. The tenderness that may be contained in small gestures is brought home via a consideration of Chardin's *Meal for a Convalescent*, while the nature of infatuation is explored through a reading of Turgenev's *Spring Torrents*. But the target is always the understanding of love itself, its experience and transformations, and not merely the artistic representation of love. Where appropriate, Armstrong leaves art far behind, casting a slightly sceptical eye over the claims of sociobiologists that love can be best understood through its evolutionary history, for instance.

Love, Armstrong claims, is a concept woven out of many intersecting, and sometimes incompatible, strands. It does not have a unitary essence, but is an experience, or perhaps a number of related experiences, with many facets. Armstrong does not merely argue for this view; he also seeks to exemplify it. Each of his twenty-two short chapters explores a different aspect of love: what motivates us to seek it, its rationality or lack thereof, its place in a fulfilled life, its relationship to sexuality, and so on. Little overt attempt is made to link these facets of love. Instead, for the most part, Armstrong is content to let an overall picture emerge gradually from the shifting perspectives he presents.

If Armstrong does have an overarching theme, it is this: the manner in which love is primarily represented in our culture is one-sided. We are obsessed with falling in love. This, the legacy of German Romanticism, explains why our narratives of love focus so much on young love, upon love thwarted, love lost and regained. We celebrate the magic of first loves. But our almost exclusive concentration on this facet of love, our identification of love with this first flowering, leaves us without a framework through which to think of love as it matures, as it adapts to the reality of life together with the beloved. It also encourages us to think of love's changing and maturing as love dying; the fading of that first glow is

equated with the ending of love. No wonder love seems so hard to hang on to for so many people, when it is an essentially adolescent model that governs their thinking.

Armstrong therefore seeks a model of mature love. Although this is a laudable aim, judged by this standard the book is a failure. In fact, it remains dominated by the view of love it claims to reject. Most of the book concentrates upon topics that are of most relevance to young love, to early love, to love lost. Chapters on infatuation and sexual desire follow reflections upon the extent to which the image of the beloved is actually produced by the imagination of the lover and on the extent to which the search for love is dominated by a (necessarily futile) hunt for the fully compatible other. Worse, when Armstrong finally turns to his own account of mature love, he presents us with a vision of love diminished and debased. Maturity, he claims, is a matter of accepting disappointment in our relationships. We thought we had found our soul mate, but, instead, we embrace an ordinary human being, with limited sympathy for our dreams and hopes, and limited understanding of our deeper selves. Maturity consists in lowering our expectations.

This melancholy view of mature love is itself too dominated by a view of love as passion, besides which enduring love can look dull. There is a great deal of testimony, in literature and elsewhere, that love does not have to diminish in this way. Instead, as love alters, it can deepen; it can grow into something much stronger and more profound than Armstrong seems to realise. Early on in the book, he claims that those who have loved over the long term sometimes confess that they could have loved someone else. This is consistent with Armstrong's view of mature love as a matter of lowering expectations, settling for whomever we find ourselves with. But it is also profoundly wrong. Mature love is also a reciprocal process, of growing together and shaping one another. Thus, each mature love is unique, a joint product of two particular people. *That* love could not have been experienced with anyone else.

That Armstrong's culminating vision of love is disappointing does not detract from the many insights and new vistas he opens up for us on his tour. This is a fascinating survey of the main roads and back alleys of love, a glimpse of love in just some of its many manifestations. In his chapter on the value of the vision of ourselves that we receive back from the lover, Armstrong compares this perspective to the view of a town seen from its church tower. Suddenly, from this height, the relationship of every quarter and landmark makes sense, is seen as one integrated whole. It is precisely this kind of view that we cannot have upon love, if Armstrong is right, for love's parts do not fit together to make a unity. Instead, what Armstrong offers us is the street-level tour, in which some of the major landmarks are seen up close, and many of the same points are passed and repassed from ever-changing angles. This is love as it is lived, at least by many of us, and for that reason alone it is endlessly fascinating.