

LOVE'S OBJECT, OR, UNREQUITABLE LOVE: REFLECTIONS ON THE LITERATURE OF PASSION BETWEEN ROUSSEAU AND PERCY SHELLEY

EL OBJETO DEL AMOR, O EL AMOR INCORRESPONDIBLE: REFLEXIONES SOBRE LA LITERATURA DE LA PASIÓN ENTRE ROUSSEAU Y PERCY SHELLEY

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Abstract

This discussion of the literature of unrequited love deals with the elusiveness of love's object in the world, and asks whether that elusiveness may be intrinsic to the passion. If love is dependent upon the imagination, this implies vulnerability to disappointment or unappeasable longing; but it also makes space for the imagination as creative function or power. The unrequited lover in the texts under discussion is significantly also a writer, a maker of letters or books or poems; the artwork is understood less as a displacement of desire than as a model for its instantiation in the world. Texts discussed include Rousseau, *Julie*; Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*; Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*; Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*; Percy Shelley, 'On Love', Hazlitt, *Liber Amoris*; and Plato, *The Symposium*.

Keywords

Artwork; imagination; love; sensibility; unrequited

Resumen

Esta reflexión acerca de la literatura sobre el amor no correspondido incide sobre el carácter esquivo del objeto del amor en el mundo, y se pregunta si esa elusividad no es intrínseca a la pasión. El amor depende de la imaginación, lo que implica vulnerabilidad a la decepción o anhelo sin fin, pero también una puerta abierta a

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la imaginación y a su poder creativo y fortalecedor. En los textos comentados en el artículo, el amante no correspondido es, de manera significativa, también un escritor: un fabricante de cartas, libros o poemas. El trabajo artístico se entiende, más que como un desplazamiento del deseo, como un modelo para su materialización en el mundo. Los textos propuestos incluyen *Julia o la Nueva Eloísa*, de Rousseau; *Viaje sentimental*, de Sterne; *Los sufrimientos del joven Werther*, de Goethe; *Safo y Faón*, de Mary Robinson; *Memorias de Emma Courtney*, de Mary Hays; *Sobre el amor*, de Percy Shelley; *Liber Amoris*, de Hazlitt, y *El banquete*, de Platón.

Palabras clave

Trabajo artístico; imaginación; amor; sensibilidad; amor no correspondido

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You kiss by the book. -- *Shakespeare's Juliet*

I

In a notebook entry written around 1814-15, Percy Shelley mused on the nature of love:

What is Love? It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves. [...] An imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret; with a frame whose nerves, like the chords of two exquisite lyres, strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice, vibrate with the vibrations of our own ... this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that without the possession of which there is no rest nor respite to the heart over which it rules. Hence in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, and the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. There is eloquence in the tongueless wind, and a melody in the flowing brooks and the rustling of the reeds beside them, which by their inconceivable relation to something within the soul, awaken the spirits to a dance of breathless rapture, and bring tears of mysterious tenderness to the eyes.... Sterne says that, if he were in a desert, he would love some cypress. So soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself.²

This was probably written as or in relation to an appeal to Mary Godwin, soon to elope with Shelley and later to become his wife. Love here seems to be understood, accordingly, as the desire for understanding, for perfectly reciprocated feeling, for a kindred spirit. But as Shelley expands on this, some striking complications appear. Love's object becomes something general and diffused – not just another person, but «all things». And as Shelley warms to his theme, it is recognised as «unattainable», the vanishing-point to which desire tends in an endless unrest, to be possessed, if at all, not in its substance but only as a «shadow». The tone, however, is curiously buoyant. The sense of unattainability shifts the emphasis from what the lover *finds* to the sympathies which the lover can *imagine into existence*, in an essentially creative movement of the imagination which the passage itself enacts. We move from loneliness and neediness to a compensatory power in the mind which celebrates, not the beloved being, but its own self-sufficiency in power.

Shelley's account of love thus seems to be connected to his interest, as an artist or poet, in the creativity of imagination. The casual pairing, «want or power», is interesting: Shelley seems to be offering these as synonyms in this context, so readily

2. Shelley, 1996: 55-57.

does the want become or reveal itself as a power, the need to be loved become or reveal itself as the power to perceive the environment as resonating in harmony with your own feelings. «The chasm of an insufficient void», which Shelley posits as love's origin and precondition, becomes paradoxically generative.

But «want» and «power» can, of course, be severely exclusive alternatives. Here is the Sterne quotation Shelley is referring to:

I declare, said I, clapping my hands chearily together, that was I in a desert, I would find out wherewith in it to call forth my affections – If I could not do better, I would fasten them upon some sweet myrtle, or seek some melancholy cypress to connect myself to – I would court their shade, and greet them kindly for their protection – I would cut my name upon them, and swear they were the loveliest trees throughout the desert: if their leaves withered, I would teach myself to mourn, and when they rejoiced, I would rejoice along with them.³

This comes from Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), a seminal work in establishing in Britain the idea and the cult of sensibility or, in a particular sense, the «sentimental». The sentimental, as Sterne evokes it, exactly addresses the equivocal relation of warm feelings to objects in the world. Are such objects (whether trees or persons) the generative source of the feeling, or merely its occasion or pretext? – and if the latter, is «merely» the appropriate word? Yorick, Sterne's playfully adopted persona in this travel-memoir, is descanting on his tendency to feel himself, self-reflexively, always a little in love. He can scarcely encounter a woman on his travels without registering some special warmth of feeling, some intimation of special intimacy. The writing is continually suggestive, in a way that includes but goes beyond the bawdy. For although blushes arise and hands touch, no encounter leads further, for Yorick is always travelling on, in a travel-narrative that has no goal or destination. Hence love's object is always hypothetical or potential, most strongly evoked through the imagination, as with the myrtle and cypress trees in the passage quoted. If Sterne celebrates this power of imaginative projection in Yorick, which I think he does, he also exposes it to some irony: we see it as a little ridiculous, or as proceeding for a neediness in Yorick, a conceivable loneliness which could easily slip into pathos. The power to fall in love with a cypress is also felt as a kind of impotence or want, as if it arose, necessarily rather than accidentally, from a «desert» place, like Shelley's «chasm of an insufficient void».

The Sterne quotation enjoyed considerable currency, and as a way of bringing out its more painful or difficult aspect, we can note the way in which it was picked up by two women, feminist colleagues and friends, writing at the same moment in the 1790s. In Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Emma is writing one of her many letters to her unresponsive love-interest, and explaining why, as a woman with a strong affective life and few other opportunities for self-realisation, she must seek to love:

3. Sterne, 2006: 39.

The affections (truly says Sterne) must be exercised on something; for, not to love, is to be miserable. Were I in a desert, I would find out wherewith in it to call forth my affections. If I could do no better, I would fasten them upon some sweet myrtle [etc., quoting the whole passage].⁴

In Mary Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian travel-memoir, presented as a series of letters to an addressee who is recognisably her love-partner, she recalls the same passage from *A Sentimental Journey* and links it to another.

For years I have endeavoured to calm an impetuous tide – labouring to make my feelings take an orderly course. – It was striving against the stream. – I must love and admire with warmth, or I sink into sadness. Tokens of love which I have received have rapt me in elysium – purifying the heart they enchanted. – My bosom still glows. – Do not saucily ask, repeating Sterne's question, «Maria, is it still so warm!»⁵

Epistolary form is relevant here: the writing of a love-letter is an act which overtly seeks response, but may also terminate in itself, bringing its own subjective satisfactions.⁶ Both passages are addressed to men for whom the women writing feel a passionate love, but who do not reciprocate that love. Emma's love for Augustus has a large imaginative component, as she herself acknowledges; his unresponsiveness will bring her to the point of breakdown. Wollstonecraft is in the process of being discarded by her partner Imlay, whose current behaviour toward her scarcely supports the rapture in Elysium that she cherishes in memory or imagination. «Do not saucily ask ...»: that is, do not activate the ironies of Sterne's deflating voice, which remind us that imagination may be no more than improper projection. Maria figures in *A Sentimental Journey* as an abandoned woman whose love has driven her into madness, whom Yorick visits and weeps over, not without some pleasure in doing so. *Her* want does not convert into power, though *his* may do. She is, we might say, an emblem of the gap between the erotic imagination and what the real world can provide.

2

The relation between love as want and love as power is wonderfully treated in Plato's great dialogue on love, the *Symposium*, which Shelley went on to translate. In this dialogue those present take turns to make speeches in praise of love, and these speeches range across the possible relations between an ideal love and objects in the world. I want briefly to touch on the four most significant of these, by (as characters within the dialogue) Aristophanes the comic poet, by Agathon the tragic

4. Hays, 1996: 104.

5. Wollstonecraft, 1987: 111.

6. For letters of love in this period, see Brant, 2006: 93-124.

or serious poet, by Socrates himself, and finally by Alcibiades, the golden celebrity figure of Athens who professes himself hopelessly in love with Socrates.

In Aristophanes' comic vision, human beings were once double-bodied creatures whom the gods cut in two; love is our desire, sundered and lacking as we are, to be made whole again, reunited once more with our missing other half. I quote from Shelley's own translation.

These are they who devote their whole lives to each other, with a vain and inexpressible longing to obtain from each other something they know not what; for it is not merely the sensual delights of their intercourse for the sake of which they dedicate themselves to each other with such serious affection; but the soul of each manifestly thirsts for, from the other, something which there are no words to describe, and divines that which it seeks, and traces obscurely the footsteps of its obscure desire... intimately to mix and to melt and to be melted together with his beloved, so that one should be made out of two.⁷

In this account love is grounded in want or lack, but what is lacking and desired is a union with another person which is conceivably attainable. «The happiness of all, both men and women, consists singly in the fulfilment of their Love, and in that possession of its objects by which we are in some degree restored to our ancient nature.»⁸ Love is entirely compatible with reciprocation, indeed mutuality is its point, and although a total, undifferentiated union may be irretrievable, so that some element of longing always remains, if this can be tolerated then a deeply gratifying relationship with another person is not impossible.

In the speech of Agathon which follows, however, the emphasis falls quite differently. All sense of something wanting, or indeed of any object of desire, disappears: love is praised as a principle of existence and as that state of exalted feeling which accesses such a principle, one which is itself lovely, and therefore curiously and wonderfully sufficient unto itself. Agathon dwells on Love's beautiful fluidity, «the most moist and liquid» of divinities, able to «fold himself around everything, and secretly flow out and into every soul». The description of the god evokes a particular way of being or feeling. In this vision, the borders or distances between persons evaporate, so that Love «neither inflicts nor endures injury in his relations either with Gods or men».⁹

Next comes the speech by Socrates, or rather the account by the priestess Diotima which Socrates claims to be recounting, which brings elements from both the preceding speeches into an entirely new synthesis. Love, Socrates insists with Aristophanes against Agathon, is once more radical lack or desire, but its object is an ideal or highly abstract beauty that is beyond persons, and rather as for Agathon, lacks nothing, being altogether beyond the realm of contingency and change.

7. Shelley, 1996: 121.

8. Shelley, 1996: 122.

9. Shelley, 1996: 125.

It is eternal, unproduced, indestructible; neither subject to increase nor decay ... nor does it subsist in any other thing that lives or is, either in earth, or in heaven, or in any other place; but it is eternally uniform and consistent, and monoeidic with itself. All other things are beautiful through a participation of it, with this condition, that although they are subject to production and decay, it never becomes more or less, or endures any change.¹⁰

The unusual word «monoeidic», which Shelley takes from the Greek, underlines the self-completeness or absoluteness of this beauty. Relationship, let alone reciprocation, have no place here, although the love of such beauty, leading to its increasingly adequate perception, educates and ennoble the soul.

Diotima's speech expresses one version of high Platonism, the theory of Forms, and we may be tempted to read this sequence of speeches as an ascending series, with this speech as a revelatory climax that comprehends the fragmentary insights of those that preceded it. But this is radically disrupted by the arrival of the unruly Alcibiades, who insists on making a speech not about Love in general but about Socrates, with whom Alcibiades professes himself desperately infatuated. What Alcibiades has perceived in Socrates, that which makes him his lover, is something very like that ideal beauty and elevation of soul of which Diotima had spoken. But this is now embodied in the particular person of Socrates, something which inevitably puts reciprocation out of the question. The beauty of soul which inflames Alcibiades is, by its very nature, without lack or need, sufficient unto itself, and Socrates has responded to Alcibiades' passion with an indifference or irony which Alcibiades feels as subtle mockery. He enlarges with rueful comedy on the hopelessness of his attempts to seduce Socrates physically, to achieve with him intimacy of any kind, to have his love *requited*. That which makes Socrates supremely the object of love also makes him a disastrous person to be in love with - and given Alcibiades' notorious behaviour, Plato allows the reflection that, as a desiring person who seeks reciprocation, to be in love with Socrates may be very far from ennobling and elevating the soul.

In this connection, we might think of Shelley's poem *Alastor*, in which the poet-figure pursues his imagination of an ideal beauty to his own destruction. Some of the tensions explored in Plato's discussion of love are here translated into a familiar Romantic idiom of unfulfilled yearning. Shelley gives as epigraph a haunting line from Augustine's *Confessions* - «*Nondum amabam, et amare amabam, quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare*»¹¹ - which may be rendered, «I was not yet in love, and I was in love with loving, [so] I was seeking what I might love, being in love with loving.» Augustine here echoes Plato's sense of love as an instinct directed toward an ideal or spiritual reality. But the action of Shelley's poem, like Alcibiades' intervention, reflects on the difficulty of reconciling such desire with

10. Shelley, 1996: 142.

11. Shelley, 1970: 15.

the need for reciprocation, or the need to find love's object within the world – as Shelley's summary indicates:

His mind is at length suddenly awakened and thirsts for intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. He images to himself the Being whom he loves. Conversant with speculations of the sublimest and most perfect natures, the vision in which he embodies his own imaginations unites all of wonderful, or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture. ... The Poet is represented as uniting these requisitions, and attaching them to a single image. He seeks in vain for a prototype of his conception. Blasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.¹²

Couched in the highly symbolic terms of Shelley's poem, this «disappointment» taps into a vein of Romantic melancholy that has its own seductive appeal. The harshness of such disappointment is more disconcertingly rendered in William Hazlitt's remarkable work, *Liber Amoris: or the New Pygmalion*. This is a barely fictionalised, transparently autobiographical account of Hazlitt's infatuation with Sarah Walker, daughter of his landlady, and his increasingly desperate hopes that she might reciprocate his love. The gap between «H» and «S», which is also the gap between the lover's idealising vision and the workaday world to which Sarah firmly belongs, is from the very beginning painfully apparent. «H» insistently recalls to «S» that she has plainly told him she can never be his.

H: Ah! if you are never to be mine, I shall not long be myself. I cannot go on as I am. My faculties leave me: I think of nothing, I have no feeling about any thing but thee: thy sweet image has taken possession of me, haunts me, and will drive me to distraction. Yet I could almost wish to go mad for thy sake: for then I might fancy that I had thy love in return, which I cannot live without!

S: Do not, I beg, talk in that manner, but tell me what this is a picture of.

H: [He tells her it is a fine copy of a Raphael Madonna or Magdalen or Cecilia, and very like her.] Ah! dear girl, these are the ideas I have cherished in my heart, and in my brain; and I never found anything to realise them on earth till I met with thee, my love! Whilst thou didst seem sensible of my kindness, I was but too happy: but now thou hast cruelly cast me off.

S: You have no reason to say so: you are the same to me as ever.

H: That is, nothing. You are to me everything, and I am nothing to you. Is it not too true?

S: No.¹³

Her resistance to his courtship, which is also an entirely understandable resistance to being thoroughly appropriated by him, is at bottom the resistance of reality to the would-be transformative force of H's desire, which must cast S as an angel – or, if that fails, then later in the narrative, as a vile and heartless coquette. The remarkable thing is that the narrative fully registers this, thereby registering

12. Shelley, 1970: 14-15.

13. Hazlitt, 1970: 292-93.

the perspective in which H is a middle-aged man embarrassingly and wilfully projecting his inappropriate desires upon an unaccommodating reality – and yet still self-laceratingly insists that this is not some grotesque and grubby parody of love but the true high passion itself, *Liber Amoris*, the Book of Love.

3

From the discussion thus far, I would like to draw out two threads of thought about the literature of passion in the period between Sterne and Shelley. These both have to do with the imaginative or ideal component of the erotic, and the consequent difficulty of finding (what love nevertheless seems urgently to require) an answering or reciprocating object in the world. The first is that the story of unrequited love is often the story of a love that is intrinsically *unrequitable*, and that the texts which tell this story – and perhaps even the lovers too – secretly know this and secretly cherish the state of non-consummation, or love of the impossible, which this implies. The second is to dwell on the affinity of the erotic with the imagined, and so to focus on the creative role of the imagination, and the making of the artwork as something which enacts and constitutes, rather than merely strives to represent, erotic experience. (We might posit here an analogy between the trouble with representation and the trouble with love: both love and representation seek to overcome a separation from their object which is however the very source and condition of their activity.)

The first line of thought, about unrequited love as essentially unrequitable, is perhaps the more straightforward. It is supremely illustrated in the landmark work of passion in the period, Rousseau's epistolary novel *Julie: or the New Eloisa*, an instant classic which transported its readership across Europe for more than fifty years.

A summary may be in order. High-born Julie and her tutor, known in the novel as Saint-Preux, fall passionately in love. They express their love in the most extreme and exalted terms. They make physical love twice, once in a momentary lapse, once through deliberate planning. But social and familial pressures are allowed to force them apart. Julie marries the older man her father has chosen for her, the thoroughly kind and decent but passionless Wolmar. Devastated, Saint-Preux sails round the world. Years pass. Julie has a family, and runs an idyllic home; Saint-Preux feels himself «cured» from what was excessive or uncontrollable in his passion. This still means extreme devotion and strong emotion, but purged of its original turbulence and longing, and safe in particular from falling into directly sexual expression. In the final books of the novel, Wolmar – who knows the past history of the lovers – invites Saint-Preux to stay and to be re-united with Julie, requiring only that Saint-Preux behave in the same way with Julie when he the husband is present and when he is not. He pointedly leaves them together for some days, the better to test and manifest their virtue. Despite highly charged moments of dangerous emotion, this is a test they pass. Wolmar's plan is then that the lover will come and live permanently with them as tutor to their children, in what would be a remarkable *ménage à trois*. The plan is prevented only by the death of Julie in an accident; in a long

dying letter to Saint-Preux she writes that her cure was delusion and that her love for him burns as dangerously as ever.

Much is suggested by Rousseau's subtitle, «the new Eloisa», alluding to the famous affair between Abelard and Eloisa in the twelfth century, likewise recorded through their letters. (The name and legend of Eloisa seemed to Rousseau's English translator William Kenrick so appropriate that in the English version Julie is re-named outright as Eloisa.) One obvious point of correspondence between the stories is the affair between pupil and teacher. But perhaps more significant are Eloisa's letters of passion after the affair is effectively over, when Abelard has been castrated and she is immured within a convent. With Abelard both removed and permanently incapable of reciprocation, her ongoing love becomes quintessentially a matter of the imagination, or the «soft illusions» which she passionately invokes in Alexander Pope's celebrated version, «Eloisa to Abelard».¹⁴ Passion seems to be nourished, rather than balked, by the unattainability of its object. Or at least, this is a potentiality of the story that is repeatedly underlined by Rousseau's lovers: «O flattering illusions! O fantasies, last resort of the wretched! Ah, if it can be done, stand us in stead of reality!»¹⁵ Julie is writing there of the blissful physical sensations she feels when she imagines Saint-Preux kissing her portrait. Later, in a long letter written at the point of her marriage to Wolmar, she strikingly concludes:

In order to love each other forever we must renounce each other.¹⁶

This renunciation is as much willed as forced. The circumstances and ethical considerations that keep them apart, and keep their love (mostly) chaste, might seem less than overwhelming. Saint-Preux leaves Julie's household because his sense of honour prevents him from remaining as paid tutor while also her secret lover. Julie could elope with him, but is too good to cause such distress to her parents. Later, before she is married, she has an offer to set up home with him in England, generously supported by his rich friend, but she declines. Her resolution to reject Wolmar is undone by her father's tearful plea, and although she insists that she will not marry him without Saint-Preux's consent, she quietly expects this to be given – which indeed it is. The lovers' separation is thus to a considerable extent their own high-minded decision.

All this feeds into what is continuously conveyed by their lengthy letter-writing, that their passion is most exquisitely felt when the beloved is away or unattainable, and there is no immediate prospect of its consummation. Earlier in the book, Julie writes:

There is no man for her who loves: her lover is more; all the others are less.... Decency and honesty accompany it [love] in the lap of ecstasy itself, and love alone knows how to grant everything to desire without compromising modesty.¹⁷

14. Pope, 1966: 116.

15. Rousseau, 1997: 237 (Part Two, letter XXIV).

16. Rousseau, 1997: 299 (Part Three, letter XVIII).

17. Rousseau, 1997: 113 (Part One, letter L).

This catches the book's equivocal attitude toward physical pleasure: maybe true lovers have a way of making love that remains decent and modest, or maybe their emotions are voluptuous in a sense that is altogether beyond bodily gratification. Equally remarkable is Julie's momentary reflection that love has or needs no object, or in a certain sense does away with its object: «there is no man for her who loves». Their love-letters, although not quite the expression of pure fantasy, occupy a space of intensely self-reflexive subjectivity that pauses at the threshold of any crossing into the objective world.

Oh how lovable are the illusions of love! Its flatteries are in a sense verities: judgment holds its tongue, but the heart speaks. The lover who praises in us perfections we do not possess sees them indeed as he represents them.¹⁸

This question of the relation of such high love to objects in the world is not settled by the word «illusions» but kept continually in play. The ardent, high-minded devotion expressed by Julie and Saint-Preux belongs originally to the genre of romance, which is always a consciously stylised and fictional world. The chivalric vow of complete transparency that Julie requires of Saint-Preux, or his willingness to infect himself with her smallpox as she lies ill, belong to such a romance world. Such a world can normally admit realistic modes and settings only with ironic effect: as supremely in *Don Quixote*, and in all its eighteenth-century descendants – Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote*, for example. But Rousseau finds a language and a setting for emotional extremity that his readers could understand as contemporary and recognisable. This is effected above all by the magical directness and naturalness of his style, and the delicate evocation of «a small town at the foot of the Alps» as a place at the border between imagination and actuality, where sublimely natural feeling is possible, uncorrupted by urban modernity and self-consciousness.

This interplay in *Julie* between the erotic imagination and objects in the world, an interplay in which the imagination never surrenders to the terms of the world, but preserves a space for itself, can be traced also outside the text. In Book 9 of his *Confessions* Rousseau tells how, in middle age, despite having a nature «for which to live was to love», with «inflammable feelings» and «a heart entirely moulded for love», he had «not once burned with love for a definite object».¹⁹ Therefore, he retreated or transported himself into a world of fantasy or, in the term he often prefers, reverie:

The impossibility of attaining the real persons precipitated me into the land of chimeras; and seeing nothing that existed worthy of my exalted feelings, I fostered them in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings after my own heart.²⁰

18. Rousseau, 1997: 105 (Part One, letter XLVI).

19. Rousseau, 1963: 396.

20. Rousseau, 1963: 398.

He was then moved, Pygmalion-like,²¹ to embody the figures of his imagination in the written fiction that became *Julie*. This he did «to give some sort of expression to my desire to love which I had never been able to satisfy, and which I now felt was devouring me».²² But this did not terminate in fiction but had an effect also in real life. Finishing the novel in a state of «amorous delirium», writing in «erotic transports»,²³ Rousseau was visited at the critical moment by one Madame de Houdetot, to whom he transferred all his feelings for Julie:

She came; I saw her; I was intoxicated with love that lacked an object. My intoxication enchanted my eyes, my object became identified with her, I saw my Julie in Mme d'Houdetot, and soon I saw only Mme d'Houdetot, but endowed with all the perfections with which I had just embellished the idol of my heart.²⁴

This was Rousseau's «first and only love»²⁵: erotic imagination at last finds a foothold in reality. But some crucial degree of distance is still observed: Mme d'Houdetot has not only a husband but more importantly an absent lover, and it is about him that she pours out her feelings to Rousseau. This means that the intimacy they enjoy is of a particular kind:

I am wrong to speak of an unrequited love, for mine was in a sense returned. There was equal love on both sides, though it was never mutual. We were both intoxicated with love – hers for her lover, and mine for her; our sighs and our delicious tears mingled together.²⁶

«She refused me nothing that the tenderest friendship could grant; she granted me nothing that could make her unfaithful.» This is not unlike the charged but chaste liaison between Julie and Saint-Preux towards the end of *Julie*. Life imitates art; or rather, the artwork is the means by which Rousseau's fantasy is released into life, or finds a foothold in life that is relatively secure against disillusionment. «I loved her too well to wish to possess her.»²⁷

There are two ways of thinking about this, not mutually exclusive. We can see Rousseau as flinching from real relationship – expressed once in the escapism of his writing, and again in his erotic connection with a woman whom he knows to be unavailable, in a relationship which perhaps afforded him a masochistic pleasure in self-humiliation, and certainly allowed him to abandon himself to his feelings without finally risking himself. But (remembering still Shelley's collocation of «want» and «power») we can also reflect on the function of the artwork, the work of creative imagination, in creating an external object, a local habitation and a name, for what originated as the objectless desire of a restless subjectivity.

21. *The New Pygmalion* is the subtitle to Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*.

22. Rousseau, 1963: 401.

23. Rousseau, 1963: 408.

24. Rousseau, 1963: 410.

25. Rousseau, 1963: 408.

26. Rousseau, 1963: 413.

27. Rousseau, 1963: 413.

We might even see the feedback loop between life and art as continuing further, if we say that Rousseau's love for Mme d'Houdetot was finally consummated when he wrote this section of the *Confessions*.

I can develop this thought further by turning to one of the other landmark texts of unrequited love in this period, Goethe's *The Sorrows [or Sufferings] of Young Werther* (1774). This short novel might be said to begin where *Julie* finishes, while also re-imagining its central dynamic. Werther is desperately in love with Lotte, who is engaged to and then marries the thoroughly decent Albert. This love-yearning is interwoven with wider aspects of a Romantic sensibility – an intense appreciation of nature, a strong alienation from wider society, an emotional volatility that seems both dysfunctional and compelling. The distress Werther feels is intense and finally unbearable, bringing him to the point of breakdown; there is much less of that pleasurable cherishing of anguish that can be extracted from Rousseau; and in the end, with deliberated intention, Werther shoots himself.

As in Rousseau, the presence of a decent husband stands for an impossibility of full requital that goes deeper than simple contingency. It is clear that Werther, restless and estranged from the higher class to which he belongs, is entranced by precisely those qualities in Lotte which separate her from him: her rootedness in a domestic reality, her reliance upon unquestioned and sustaining *mores*, it is this which strikes him as idyllic. One memorable scene which fills him with rapture has her cutting bread and butter for her many younger siblings. That Lotte cares warmly about Werther and is able to respect his intensity of feeling, but without becoming unsettled in her own world all the while, merely emphasises the gap between them; and Goethe makes us feel that were Werther to draw her fully into his own way of feeling, this would destroy the very nature of her being in the world (rather as Faust does to Margarete). Full reciprocation would mean her ruin, at a level deeper than the social. Lotte is unattainable because her feelings are given to another; but were Werther to seduce her, the object of his passion would nevertheless have eluded him.

This is broadly comparable with Rousseau. The new point which Goethe helps me to make has to do with the act of writing. These unrequited lovers are all, by formal necessity, writers: Yorick writes of his sentimental travels in the first person, Rousseau's lovers exist only in their letters, and Werther's story is told mostly through his letters and journal entries. Goethe takes the affinity of love with creative production a step further by making Werther an amateur graphic artist. But this affinity really comes to the fore at the emotional climax of the novel, when Werther, on the brink of suicide, reads to Lotte a long passage of elegiac sentiment from his own translation of Ossian, an extract in which the bards perform reiterated passages of grief and lament for the glorious dead and for love crossed by disaster. It is this intensely literary moment, when real-life passion is both expressed and displaced by literary creation, that causes the pair to break down and to weep together.

A torrent of tears which streamed from Charlotte's eyes and gave relief to her oppressed heart stopped Werther's reading. He threw down the sheets, seized her hand, and wept bitterly. Charlotte leaned upon her other arm and buried her face in her handkerchief;

both were horribly agitated. They felt their own fate in the misfortunes of Ossian's heroes – felt this together, and merged their tears.²⁸

Charlotte begs Werther to continue reading to her. But then, in speaking these words from his translation,

But the time of my fading is near, the blast that shall shatter my leaves. Tomorrow shall the traveller come; he that saw me in my beauty shall come. His eyes will search the field, but they will not find me²⁹

he breaks down; she holds him to her, «the world vanished about them,» and they embrace for a long moment before she turns from him and leaves. The great literary archetype here, which Goethe surely means us to recall, is the love of Dante's Paolo and Francesca, who give way to the feelings aroused by their reading together of Lancelot and Guinevere. But more particularly, Werther's translation of the contemporary English work is of course also Goethe's, so that at this moment the two become one. As a matter of biographical fact which he later acknowledged, Goethe was both expressing and transforming his own real-life feelings of unrequited love through this novel. But we do not need biography to be struck by how, within the text itself, the act of literary creation – as something, crucially, both imagined and actual – offers a way of managing the gap between love and its object in the world.

That emphasis on Werther as a *writer*, who at the height of passion holds the pen of the author who writes him, is carried into England through the poet Charlotte Smith. Her sequence of *Elegiac Sonnets* gained a wide readership, and in the third edition of 1786, she inserted five poems «supposed to be written by Werther». Here is the first:

Supposed to be written by Werther
 Go, cruel tyrant of the human breast!
 In other hearts thy burning arrows bear;
 Go where fond Hope, and fair Illusion rest;
 Ah! why should Love inhabit with Despair?
 Like the poor maniac I linger here,
 Still haunt the scene where all my treasure lies;
 Still seek for flowers where only thorns appear,
 «And drink delicious poison from her eyes!»
 Tow'rd the deep gulf that opens on my sight
 I hurry forward, Passion's helpless slave!
 And scorning Reason's mild and sober light,
 Pursue the path that leads me to the grave!
 So round the flame the giddy insect flies,
 And courts the fatal fire, by which it dies!³⁰

Line 8 is drawn from Pope's *Eloisa*, as Smith points out in a note, and in the last of these five sonnets she, or rather Werther, quotes from Rousseau's *New Eloisa*, as Smith again explicitly notes. This connects *Werther* to the wider *Eloisa*-complex

28. Goethe, 1995: 80.

29. Goethe, 1995: 80.

30. Smith, 2017: 70-71.

of an unrequitable love that lives in and by the impassioned imagination. It also chimes with her general fondness in these sonnets for clearly signalled quotation, which, as one commentator puts it, highlight «the *literariness* of the melancholy they express». ³¹ Somewhat as Werther went to Ossian, these quotations express an impulse to ground emotion in some pre-existing literary work. Within the series as a whole, the Werther sonnets themselves function as a kind of extended imaginative quotation, as Smith «supposes» or imagines words for him which, the reader is invited to assume, realise feelings in which she herself participates. ³²

This effect is pointed when, in the fourth of these sonnets, Charlotte Smith imagines Werther imagining «Charlotte» weeping at his grave.

And sometimes, when the sun with parting rays
Gilds the long grass that hides my silent bed,
The tears shall tremble in my CHARLOTTE's eyes;
Dear, precious drops! – they shall embalm the dead!
Yes! – CHARLOTTE o'er the mournful spot shall weep,
Where her poor WERTER – and his sorrows sleep!³³

This is a scene which has no basis in the literary reality of Goethe's text (which ends with Lotte so stricken by Werther's death that her life is in danger). It therefore offers itself as doubly an imagined or fantasised scene, and this is significantly connected to its ability to evoke a sympathetic resonance that is, perhaps, the next best thing to reciprocation. Werther can write of Lotte weeping for him, in a fiction of his imagination; Smith can imagine a Werther whose grief is the double of her own melancholy.

Also important here is the sonnet form, which Smith seminally reintroduced into English as something other than an antiquarian mode. By comparison with the novel, it is a more consciously artificial form, that balances emotional expressiveness against attention to the made artwork. Yet it is also true that these sonnets largely dispense with narrative reality to leave only the subjectivity of feeling; when, in the final two sonnets, the object of Werther's love at last appears, he there imagines her hypothetical future response rather than recalls her actual being.

A new point here concerns gender. The *Elegiac Sonnets* are not all or even mostly love poems, but they are largely poems of grief or melancholy whose object is largely unspecified; occasionally maternal bereavement comes into focus, or the corruption of the times, but for the most part the emotion is given without its occasion, and may even be felt to express that very want of an object. (The antiquarian associations of the sonnet at this period contribute to this sense of pervasive but indeterminate loss or absence, of something whose time is past.) This quality can be thought of as characteristic of the poetry of sensibility, and in Smith's sequence sensibility is

31. Pinch, 1996: 66.

32. «Some very melancholy moments have been beguiled, by expressing in verse the sensations those moments brought.» (Preface to first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*.) Smith, 2017: 53.

33. Smith, 2017: 72-73.

felt as strongly gendered. We might think of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and of Anne Elliot's crucial distinction there between men's and women's love. Anne grants that «true attachment» is possible for men, « -- so long as you have an object», but it is women who have the power to love without one, «when existence or when hope is gone».³⁴ For reasons more likely to be cultural than biological, women are prone to live more vitally within the mind, and although this characterisation lends itself readily enough to the pining and languishing heroine-victim of the sentimental novel, it also suggests a more positive capacity for creativity. Although the Werther sonnets are supposed to be written by Werther, they are also offered as scenarios especially congenial to the female poet. Werther and Saint-Preux were never very manly men – that role is filled by Wolmar and Lord Edward in *Julie*, and in Goethe's novel by Albert, whose pistols Werther has to borrow in order to kill himself. In taking Werther's sensibility to herself, Smith was underlining how a certain kind of passion calls a certain kind of manliness into question: this, she might seem to be saying, is a subject where women are on home territory.

4

Many of these matters come together in Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), which draws on Smith's ground-breaking work with the sonnet and turns it into something all her own. This sequence of 44 sonnets follows the emotional course of Sappho's doomed passion for the beautiful Greek youth Phaon, who reciprocates her feelings only briefly if at all. When he leaves her, she follows him to Sicily, discovers him to be «false», as she puts it, and leaps from the rock of Leucadia into the sea.

Throughout this sequence we are kept aware that Sappho, like Shakespeare in his Sonnets, is not only a lover but a poet, already famous in her time. The sequence of poems is not only the outpouring of her passion but also and at the same time a work that she has made. If the pain of unrequited love is sometimes said to prevent her from singing, it is also that of which she sings. Another way of putting this is that Sappho is present in this sequence both as first and as third person, an effect that connects her with Robinson in a kind of transhistorical collaboration. I'm thinking not just of moments when Sappho refers to herself in that way – «That fame ill-fated Sappho loved so well», «On the bleak rock your frantic minstrel stands», «While Sappho's brows with cypress wreaths are drest», «A mournful stranger, from the Lesbian Isle»³⁵ – but also in a more general sense. The primacy of subjective feeling that reigns supreme in Rousseau, as also in Werther's letters until Goethe's final devastating switch into the bleak neutrality of editorial narrative, is here counter-balanced or framed by the paradoxical self-possession of the enraptured artist. This self-possession is conveyed through the formal patterning of the sonnet – the Petrarchan or «legitimate» sonnet, as Robinson calls it, being the exacting form

34. Austen, 2006: 256.

35. Robinson, 2000: 159, 166, 169, 174.

chosen – and especially through a rhetorical consciousness that never abandons its awareness of audience.

The title, Sappho *and* Phaon is indicative here. This is crucially distinct from the mode of the Ovidian epistle, where the abandoned woman's subjectivity spills endlessly out into the void created by the absent and unresponsive addressee. Robinson explicitly distances herself in her preface from the «Sappho to Phaon» poems of Ovid and Pope, as «tending rather to depreciate than to adorn the Grecian Poetess».³⁶ Instead, she gives us not only the expression but also a reflective account of Sappho's feelings and situation – as experienced by Sappho, but also as if witnessed by another. Only five of the 44 poems are addressed to Phaon; at the same time, we do not feel that Sappho is communing only with herself. There is in fact a great deal of second-person addressivity in the sequence – to Sappho's women companions in particular, also to the Muses, to Venus, to personified forces or aspects of the landscape, and what this does is to underline the impulse to reach beyond personal subjectivity, to establish an imaginative community of feeling. The manner of the sequence as a whole is felt as socially oriented, public-facing; one recent commentator, Daniel Robinson, has helpfully related the conscious literariness and intertextuality of the work, dialogically engaged with Pope, Ovid, Smith and Petrarch as well as the classical Sappho, to the kind of networking by which Robinson established herself in the world of letters.³⁷

Daniel Robinson characterizes this attitude, though, as «masculine», despite the way in which the many references to Sappho's female companions tend to establish the community as primarily female. More pertinent may be Jerome McGann's assertion that in her Preface Robinson «comes out as 'a woman speaking to women' about feminized sources of poetical power».³⁸ In truth, by endorsing the femaleness of the passionate lover, Robinson is treading a delicate line. She does not want to create yet another work of sensibility in which the lover – especially the female lover – feels a great deal because she is the passive victim of an unfeeling world or of a heartless man, and her emotionality is bracketed off as a feminine or feminised sensitivity which may be fine but has no strength. But neither does she want to write a moral fable, diagnosing the destructiveness of strong passion as degrading, as Mary Wollstonecraft had done in the *Vindication*:

Women subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respecting that passion, which lead them shamefully to neglect the duties of life, and frequently in the midst of these sublime refinements they plump into actual vice.³⁹

This leaves no good place for love as rapture, and rapture as the source, as well as the subject, of creative art. Robinson's sequence invokes, indeed, the opposition of

36. Robinson, 2000: 150.

37. See Robinson, 2011: 111-152.

38. McGann, 1995: 63; reprinted in McGann, 1996.

39. Wollstonecraft, 1995: 281.

Reason and Love near the start (sonnets 5 and 7), but this conventional opposition burns away in the strength of Sappho's passion, which however transporting and unhappy is always lucidly envisaged and embraced. The return of Reason is envisaged only in her final sonnet, as she contemplates her leap into the waters while the sun sets and the moon rises:

So shall this glowing, palpitating soul,
Welcome returning Reason's placid beam,
While o'er my breast the waves Lethean roll,
To calm rebellious Fancy's fev'rish dream;
Then shall my Lyre disdain Love's dread control,
And loftier passions, prompt the loftier theme!⁴⁰

The hypothetical affirmation of Reason against Love is more complex than it seems, for if Sappho dies in her leap, then the return of Reason comes only with the extinction of life, and if she survives, the simile has identified Reason's moonlight as the reflection of the «sun's transcendent blaze»: not, then, the elimination of passion, but its transformation into «loftier passions» that will, significantly, lead to the making of further art.

This association of the feminine with both love and creativity was brought immediately into play with the name of Sappho. Even before she published this work, Robinson had been known as «the English Sappho», though not uniquely; for two centuries «Sappho» had tended to attach itself to some notable woman poet in every generation, in a varying mixture of praise and condescension. Sappho's high place in the classical canon was unquestioned – hence the praise – but the opportunity for condescension came not only because so little of her work was extant and entire (making her a ghostly presence among the classics, another absent object, so to speak) but also because of her legendary openness to passion. Whether or not marked as homoerotic, this made her biographically suspect and poetically marginal as a model; could the poet of love who killed herself for love be altogether sound? Robinson, however, takes on both aspects of Sappho's reputation without embarrassment: poetic distinction and strength of passion go hand in hand, with both equally gendered as feminine.

That Sappho famously loved women cannot be front and centre in the story of her love for Phaon, but at one remarkable moment it makes its presence felt. In sonnet 32, which is the 31st poem of the sequence proper, Robinson explicitly quotes the opening of Sappho's fragment 31, her most famous homoerotic poem, and footnotes the allusion. I give first Sappho's and then Robinson's opening lines.

He seems to me equal to the gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

40. Robinson, 2000: 179.

Blest as the Gods! Sicilian Maid is he,
The youth whose soul thy yielding graces charm.⁴¹

In Robinson's treatment, the gay male dalliance in which she imagines Phaon participating is saturated by the strength of female passion, which offers to recast all parties as female. Sappho's male rival is momentarily figured as a «maid», and Phaon's desirability is markedly feminine – «Throbbing with transports, tender, timid, warm! / While round thy fragrant lips light zephyrs swarm».⁴² The imagination is important here, as elsewhere: Sappho is projecting her feelings into a scene which, in Robinson's version, she does not actually witness. The closest thing the whole sequence offers to bliss achieved is Sappho's wonderfully sensuous imagination of Phaon in sonnet 12, which takes place «previous to her Interview». In this anticipatory fantasy, Phaon smiles and blushes in the present tense; this is what Sappho's mind reaches out to, in an anticipation so vital as to create a present experience. The sonnet ends, «Then let my form his yielding fancy seize, / And all his fondest wishes, blend with mine».⁴³ «Fancy» here retains its old double meaning of both love and fantasy, and the seizing of fancy by form speaks of erotic experience in the terms of artistic creation. Whether Sappho actually achieved sexual union with Phaon when they met is left unclear, but the blending that is really going on here is at the level of the imagination.

Does this emphasis on imagination imply a flight from reality? Robinson's personal history is relevant here. She had been notoriously a figure of free and illicit passion, a married woman taken into keeping for a time by the Prince of Wales and then discarded, moving on to liaisons serial or simultaneous with other high-profile celebrities, for years the subject of fascinated, prurient, and sometimes cruel reportage in the press and in cartoons.⁴⁴ Crippled by illness, she returned from voluntary exile in Europe to reinvent herself as a writer, adopting a variety of pen-names or poetic personas in a way that foregrounded the relation of her personal to her literary identity as equivocal or elusive. By casting herself here as Sappho, famous poet and abandoned lover ultimately wrecked by passion, she trailed the possibility of personal reference – but only to assert her claim as a writer to have transformed personal history in the imagination of the artist. The invitation is precisely *not* to read biographically, decoding the Sappho sonnets as the expression of personal longing thinly masked as fiction, but rather to register how the writer has, in the act of writing, survived her passion – rather as if Sappho had survived her leap into the sea. It is not that disappointed or unrequited love is irrelevant, but rather that something happens to feelings of desire when they are given literary form, realised in a figure that has become subtly other than oneself.

We can see, perhaps, a similar impulse at work when Mary Hays recasts her agonising non-relationship with her real-life object of desire as the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, adapting her actual letters to do so. Or, more painfully and perhaps less

41. Carson, 2003: 63; Robinson, 2000: 173.

42. Robinson, 2000: 173.

43. Robinson, 2000: 163.

44. See Fawcett, 2016: 173-205.

successfully, when William Hazlitt turns the story of his desperate infatuation with Sarah Walker into the *Liber Amoris*, the book of love: in which the chasm between the protagonist's idealisation of his «angel» and the woman's actual being is clear on every page. Like other lovers we have been discussing, Hazlitt's recourse in this predicament is to literature; he repeatedly colours the record of his experience with quotations and allusions. This includes casting himself or rather his double «H» in a further doubling as a second Rousseau. «As Rousseau said of Madame d'Houptot (forgive the allusion) my heart has found a tongue in speaking to her, and I have talked to her the divine language of love».45 «H» fantasises taking «S» abroad, «to have repeated to her on the spot the story of Julia and St Preux, and to have shewn her all that my heart had stored up for her».46 Emma Courtney, too, who equally relates herself to «Rousseau's Julia»,47 is aware of the activity of imagination in her feelings for Augustus, whom she first loved in his painted portrait, and is not at all defensive about this: «some degree of illusion» is needful, she reflects, to invigorate «genius, virtue, love itself», and although her perception of Augustus may be conditioned by her imagination, «*the sentiments it inspires are not the less genuine*».48 It is perfectly in accordance with that statement that she, like Shelley, quotes the passage from Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* with which this article began, extolling love's power to imaginatively invest, and invest in, whatever object presents itself.

5

How might we understand this connection between unrequited love and literary creation, which seems to be one possible gloss on Shelley's linking of «want» and «power»? One possibility here is the Freudian idea of the arts as a by-product or sublimation of libidinal frustration: an essentially compensatory mode, by which art becomes the alternative to neurosis. But there are other psychoanalytic models, such as the object relations school developed by Donald Winnicott and others, which afford a more independent reality to the life of the mind. Winnicott derives adult creativity from the infant's 'ability to create the world,'49 which, if all goes well, evolves from pure projection into 'a continuous interchange between inner and outer reality'.

The child is now not only a potential creator of the world, but also the child becomes able to populate the world with samples of his or her own inner life. So gradually the

45. Hazlitt, 1970: 319.

46. Hazlitt, 1970: 344.

47. «Like Rousseau's Julia, my strong individual attachment has annihilated every man in the creation: -- him I love appears, in my eyes, something more -- every other, something less.» Hays, 1996: 117. The passage in *Julie* that she is referring to (Rousseau, 1997: 113) has been quoted above.

48. Hays, 1996: 82.

49. Winnicott, 1986: 40.

child is able to «cover» almost any external event, and perception is almost synonymous with creation.⁵⁰

By this way of thinking, the mind must not take its law from the given world, but may properly invent or transfigure its object in the field of desire. In a chapter significantly called «The Necessity of Illusion», the psychoanalytic writer Marion Milner illustrates her argument about artistic creativity by quoting from George Santayana's essay on «Love»:

There is, indeed, no idol ever identified with the ideal which honest experience, even without cynicism, will not some day unmask and discredit. Every real object must cease to be what it seemed, and none could ever be what the whole soul desired. Yet what the soul desires is nothing arbitrary. Life is no objectless dream. Everything that satisfies at all, even if partially and for an instant, justifies aspiration and rewards it [...] Love is accordingly only half an illusion: the lover, but not his love, is deceived. His madness, as Plato taught, is divine: for though it be folly to identify the idol with the god, faith in the god is inwardly justified.⁵¹

I find myself reminded that in Plato's *Symposium* – itself an artwork, which transfigures recent historical figures into a sublime fiction – Agathon declared that «the God is a wise poet; so wise that he can even make a poet one who was not before: for every one, even if before he were ever so undisciplined, becomes a poet as soon as he is touched by Love.»⁵² This may sound like a poet's easy fancy; but it is endorsed by the grave priestess Diotima, who speaks of how love instils in the lover a passion to create – to create physical children, yes, but also to create less physical works of beauty, realising in the world objects for that yearning which love is.

Love is the desire of generation in the beautiful, both with relation to the body and the soul. [...] Those whose bodies alone are pregnant with this principle of immortality are attracted by women, seeking through the production of children what they imagine to be happiness and immortality and an enduring remembrance; but they whose souls are far more pregnant than their bodies, conceive and produce that which is more suitable to the soul. What is suitable to the soul? Intelligence, and every other power and excellence of the mind, of which all poets, and all other artists who are creative and inventive, are the authors.⁵³

One of the fragments of Sappho's love-poetry consists of a single word: «mythweaver».⁵⁴ The focus of this paper has turned out to be on literary creation; but it is not barren of implication for love-relations between persons. When Romeo

50. Winnicott, 1965: 91.

51. Milner, 1990: 28-29.

52. Shelley, 1996: 126.

53. Shelley, 1996: 137, 140.

54. Carson, 2003: 353 (fragment 188).

and Juliet first meet and love, the lines they speak to one another interlace to form a perfect sonnet, embedded within the dialogue, a sparkling force-field within the social reality of the Capulets' ball. This may provide us with an image for how to think about an undisappointing love-relation in the world: as an imaginative creation or fiction that is co-authored by those who love. Not requited, exactly, but collaborative.

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