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The Theory of Amorous Illness*

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Abstract. The present paper is part of a larger research on the narrative peculiarities of amorous fiction. This section analyzes a particular metaphor engaged in the explanation of the nature of love in configurative arts and literature: *the illness*. Seen as a psycho-somatic or only a psychological condition, love is understood as a disease because as such it makes the chaos of being in love comprehensible and it helps the management of what seems unmanageable in passion. From Marsilio Ficino to Thomas Mann and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, world love fiction offers illustrations of the theory of amorous illness.

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Amorous fiction,[1] just like adventure literature or the detective novel, is a literary form privileged by the audience. With such readings, the reader's immersion in the possible world of the book happens easier, and often at once: not accidentally, the image of the mistress fallen into the trance of sentimental reading, sensuously stretched on the sofa, is one of the iconic images of the Reader, whether at the Flemish masters of painting, Impressionists or Pre-Raphaelites, Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Mircea Cărtărescu, or Laurence Sterne. The reader who forgets holding a book in hand, "transported" into its possible world in order to "see everything with his own eyes", leaving only a body inert and unreceptive of stimuli in the "real" world, has long ceased to see letters, words, or sentences, and is now seeing cinematographically, as the discourse that has been erased in front of his eyes is dictating him. As studies in fictionality claim, in the multipersonal worlds of novels the erotic motivation is one of the strongest to generate narrative seduction.[2] It must be said,

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[1] The phrases "amorous fiction" or "love fiction" must be read conceptually. I call like this any form of fictional project on the subject of love, in order to escape the somewhat conventional and depreciated limits of "love literature". It is not a literary genre that interests me but much rather a certain type of imaginative projection.

[2] Łubomir Dolezel considers the erotic subject "the crux of interaction" due precisely to the versatility of its motivations. See Łubomir Dolezel, *Heterocosmica. Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 104 ff.

nonetheless that in the world's love novels the scene of the lovers' contemplation bears the mark of certain artificiality, meaning that it is necessarily cultural, and not natural. Even in the most "naïve" of cases possible (see for example the idylls in the Greek novel), the love contemplation seems to keep in mind a third gaze (e.g., the reader who watches Chloe watching Daphnis), just like the lovers in Renaissance or Romanticist painting, caught in an unnatural contortion of passion, are aligned according to the perspective of the onlooker's gaze, even when they pretend to lie in perfect solitude.

The present study treats the relation of amorous fiction with the possibility of a certain truth. Love engages in the novel the obsession with truth: the question "he loves me or loves me not?" (with the version "does he really love me?") turns the character of the lover into a detective of the psyche, always alert at the tiniest signs of confirming a suspicion of lie. Lovers are convinced that their love offers them a fundamental answer to the major (and impossible!) questions of life. It is touching to see, all the same, that lovers think they "know" more than they ever have, and more than anyone else, especially when their consciousness, their reason, and their heart rate is altered by love, when, in other words, they bathe in the most delightful of illusions, or they are affected by the most pleasing illness. Obviously, this is explained by the power of transfiguration often attached to love, which compensates the lack of "usual" knowledge with the revelation offered by an outstanding experience of love.

This study is part of a much more extended narratological research on the peculiar mechanisms of love fiction, therefore it maintains open certain paths left unexplored in the present framework. The favoured methodological toolkit is that of narratology, but other methods, such as the investigation of the imaginary, the Geneva school of criticism of consciousness, the reading of visual images, or the psycho-sociology of reading will also be employed. That is to say, the relevance of this study is not strictly literary, but largely humanistic.

As stressed above, it is the paradoxical relationship between truth and lie that grounds love fiction. As a subject of fiction, love is privileged by its conceptual instability.[1] In want of a more or less scientific discourse about love, but with the power of the general, the subject offers itself to configurations just as attractive as they are varied. In a certain way, love is a generous subject particularly due to this configurative variety. As they become increasingly tabooed, or attached to a general discourse or a universal explanation, artistic subjects get more "dangerous", and less appropriate for creating a great work: it is more difficult to write a great novel about a mother, than a great novel on love, as long as love is perceived differently from individual to individual or from paradigm to paradigm, whereas a mother has, at least in a traditional paradigm, a

[1] From a certain point of view, love "becomes so universal a theme because of the remarkable variety of its worlds" (John Bayley, *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality* [London: Constable, 1960], 5.), that is, it is the more "universal" the more "particular" configurations it receives. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann has a different explanation: he thinks that the diversity of representations of love is due to the fact that, although rationally speaking a particular problem will be solved in a similar way by a large number of people, love is offered irrational, consequently different, solutions of explanation. Cf. Luhmann, Niklas, *Love as Passion. The Codification of Intimacy,* translated by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1998 [1982]), 27.

fairly monochrome representation as primarily a sacrificial, protective, generative and emotional being. Therefore modernity has witnessed something of an aesthetic success when it dared take over the ancient image of a mother-Medea, infanticidal and passionate, in the representations of a negative, castrating and suffocating mother.

The problem of definition

Love fiction always presents, implicitly or explicitly, an *erotology*, that is, a pseudo-explanation, a pseudo-theory, or even an ideology of *eros*, a code of identification of "true" love or the "nature" of love. Erotology, an alternative philosophy of love, joins the visual power of the erotic image in order to construct a fictional world guided by a certain *truth* about love: the idea that love is a matter of androgyny *or* that it is a fatal attraction *or* that it is a creative power *or* that it is a sexual illness or metaphysics becomes the absolute law of a certain fiction. It is not the "strong" truth and its possibility that is a concern of the love novel, but the truth of a useful fiction:[1] the lover *chooses* to believe that he was torn away from his love at the beginnings of the world, when they both formed together a perfect being, because this "lie" with truth value,[2] believed "as if" it were true, helps him understand his love and himself, just as it helps – on a metaphysical level – his novel to write itself and organize itself as a possible world.

One of the erotologies of major cultural authority is the theory of amorous illness. This theory has never limited itself to formulating a philosophy or a truth of love; more than that, it has pre-formatted the erotic imaginary, explaining with its particular logic a whole set of artistic representations and configurations. Accordingly, love is an illness, a psycho-somatic disorder by which the lover is defined as ill. Prevalent in several cultural spaces and epistemes, the theory of amorous illness does not claim itself from a single source. Still, this type of theory has one specific source which deserves attention in the imagery of the European novel. This is the Neo-Platonic adaptation of certain ideas on magnetic attraction, as well as the philosophical explanation of certain assertions of ancient and Arabic medicine.

A possible erotology: magnetic love

The phenomenon of magnetism must have exercised a special fascination in the Renaissance, as long as this model was used for the explanation of phenomena as varied as, for example, heroic mania (by the magnetism of the ancient heroic pattern), poetic

[1] In the sense that Hans Vaihinger lends to *fiction* in his *The Philosophy of "As If"*. This observation is a major one, and Vaihinger's idea will be generalized here as a working hypothesis. Here, fiction is a specific logical product, a "useful instrument for finding our way more easily in this world", a mental structure distinct from a hypothesis (which is demonstrable) by its being *impossible to be theoretically validated*, although it proves useful in "fictionally" solving "impossible problems". With the help of fiction understood this way, epistemological systems can treat "impossible" terms "as self-evident", using them in subsequent projects of maximum practical importance (e.g, the definition of the "atom" as a fiction makes possible the practical discourse of mechanical physics, the theory of relativity, etc.). Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind,* Translated by C. K. Ogden (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968).

[2] "A deliberately false supposition", as Vaihinger calls it in his *The Philosophy of "As If"*.

mania (by the magnetization of the poet by his muse), the erotic *furor* (by the spiritual magnetization of blood), or the modelling of virtues (by the magnetic influence of the pattern to follow). The magnetic theory of love shapes itself starting from different directions. Its formulation best known today belongs to Julius Evola, who chose to use, prior to the European Renaissance, eastern patterns and sources. Declaredly anti-modern, anti-feminist, and anti-progressive, Evola regressively places modernity in the most degraded age of mankind (an oriental *kali-yuga* or an "iron age" of Greek and Roman Antiquity). The cornerstone of his polemics with alternative theories is the conviction that moderns no longer know how to love and therefore they must be reminded the metaphysical potential of sexuality. Between the two extremes of absolute depreciation of love (the extreme of marriage – a reduction to affection, and the extreme of promiscuity – a reduction to a physical exercise), Evola invokes eastern structures. *Yin* and *yang* get in a magnetic relation once the vital fluid *tsing*, a specification of the life energy *tsri*, establishes a channel of sensory communication between a man and a woman. From here, the usual level of wake individual consciousness moves upwards, being blocked for ordinary people as soon as orgasm has been reached, but continuing in sacred orgiastic rituals or tantric coupling all the way to the exaltation and vibration which enable the transportation to transcendence. In his attempt to override the aporia of proposing an eastern sexual metaphysics to a purportedly regressed west, Evola seeks support also within the western paradigms. Closest he finds is the magnetic theory of Camille Mauclair,[1] but most significantly for the demonstration appears Plato with his androgyny theory reinterpreted by Ficino,[2] and the Neo-Platonists themselves with the concept of the pneumatic body borrowed from Arabic medicine.

This is how Ficino explains the nature of love in his commentary to Plato's *Symposium* (in the first European Renaissance translation of the text), as it is described in Agathon's speech: „The magnet conveys the iron its own quality and the iron, becoming thus very similar to the magnet, tends towards it. /.../ The human figure whose appearance is often very beautiful, owing to the interior kindness that God had so fortunately bestowed on it, sends the ray of its radiance in the soul of those who watch him, which penetrates them through their eyes. Permeated by this spark, the soul is as if pulled by a fishing rod and it moves towards that what draws it to itself. This attraction is Love; it depends on that what is good, beautiful, and fortunate, and turns to these, so that, according to the concept presented by Agathon and the others who had spoken above, we can certainly call it the Beautiful, the Kind, and the Beatitude, and thus call is God."[3]

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[1] Camille Mauclair, *Essais sur l'amour: La magie de l'amour* (Paris: Ed. P. Ollendorff, 10th ed., 1921).

[2] Evola uses complicated speculative artifices to explain as "magnetic" the union of the double monogeneous being (woman-woman, man-man), not based on a plus-minus polarity (see especially the chapters on homosexuality). Julius Evola, *The Metaphysics of Sex* (East-West Publications, 1983).

[3] Marsilio Ficino, *Asupra iubirii* sau *Banchetul lui Platon,* (On love, or Plato's Symposium), (1st ed.: Bucharest: Institutul Italian de filosofie, Societatea Română de filosofie, 1942, 2nd ed.: Timişoara: Editura de Vest, 1992), 176. Quotes from Ficino throughout the text are translated by Emese Czintos.

Love as illness

In Ficino's version, the myth of the androgyne is translated as the myth of magnetic unity. This way, the body is only the result of a "thought of the soul",[1] sculpted according to its pneumatic shape. Erotic union is a question of spiritual magnetism, as well as also a double imprint of two similar souls in different bodies and their subsequent recognition ("we love more not just any being, more beautiful than others, but we love those who are ours"[2]). Love is a spiritual affection in the most literal medical sense of the word: the soul is hurt by the image of the beloved like by a poisoned arrow thrown by a look, then it is recognized as identical with one's own interior image, and – consequently – placed over it, loving it as "one's own work". This is what initiates the literary-philosophical tradition of *love as illness*, for in *De Amore* the erotic affect is listed among contagious diseases, next to itching, scabies, leprosy, stabs in the chest, phthisis, colic, red spots on the eyes, and the plague! At the end of the dialogue, Marsilio Ficino marks it as "the most serious of all plagues",[3] as long as the person ill of love knows both the disorder of lust as well as that of pain.

As with Evola later on, mutual love is considered a form of bewitchment: „the ray we throw through our eyes attracts also that steam of spirits, and this in its turn draws to itself the blood. /…/ The open eye attentively looking at someone throws the arrows of its rays to the eyes it is looking at; with these arrows /…/ it also throws the steam of blood that we have called spirits. The poisonous arrow pierces the heart and, being thrown from the heart as an arrow, it pierces the heart of the man it wounds as a place which belongs to it and is just right for it. Here it digs a wound in the heart and then it condenses on its rough surface and becomes blood again"[4].

Obviously, in Ficino's concept the unity of soul-spirit-body revolves around the concept of *pneuma*,[5] and the terms used belong to Arabic medicine. This becomes clearest towards the end of the dialogue on love, where the symptomatology of amorous illness, attributed to Diotima, appears: the Neo-Platonic lover is thirsty, refuses to eat, must be fed by force, is sad and pale because of the shivers caused by the cooling of his blood, caused again, in its turn, by the fact that all his vital energy is directed to fuelling the phantasm of the beloved person.[6] Mobilizing all life energy of the magnetic lover, the beloved spiritual imprint hinders the good functioning of the liver, the glands, and the stomach, hinders the circulation of blood, until „the pure and translucent blood is consumed and remains the impure, thick and black blood. Then the body dries is becomes pale, and those who love become melancholic precisely because the humour of

[1] Ibid., Chapter VI.
2 Ibid., 184.
[3] Ibid., 241.
4 Ibid., 238–239.
[5] "The soul and the body are of a truly outstanding nature and they are united by the mediation of the spirit which is a very thin and very shiny steam formed by the heat of the heart from the most subtle parts of blood. From here, it spreads in all parts of the body, and taking on the character of the soul, it communicates it to the body." Ibid., 185.
[6] "Therefore the food is not formed well in the stomach." Ibid., 193.

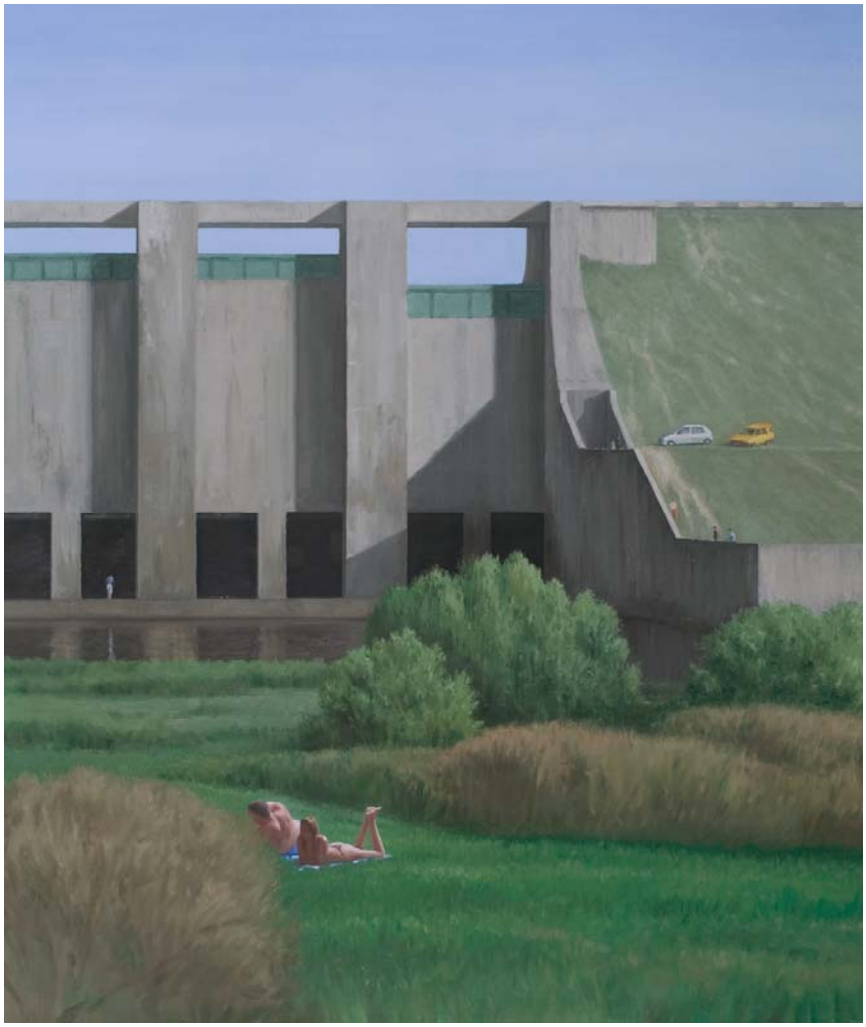
melancholy[1] grows together with the blood which becomes dry, thick and black. This humour then fills the head where its steam penetrates, and also dries the brain and never stops, day or night, to grieve our soul with bad and fearful phantasms."[2]

It is not surprising therefore that for Ficino melancholics are slower in love than cholerics, who violently throw themselves into love. Similarly, it deserves attention that, in the description of amorous fever, love is preferably provoked by a brown-haired woman with a very white complexion (idealized for its contrasting appearance), and also by a woman "with big, blue, shining eyes", the more lethal if they "manage to challenge love if they live in chastity. Indeed, the use of coitus causes clear spirits to be absorbed and the body to become dark. But the eyes of the kind we have presented above are destined to throw faster the arrows that can harm the heart."[3]

The theory of the threefold stratified soul

Still, Marsilio Ficino breaks off with ancient medicine when he relativizes the malign character of this erotic *furor*, attributing it to a wrong use of love: „they give the sense of touch what belongs to contemplation". This differentiation must necessarily be connected to the threefold structure of the Platonic soul, corresponding in his ascending model to certain oriental patterns such as the ascending disposition of the *chakras*. What Ficino sanctions is precisely the wrong use of the soul, with an utter contempt for the meaning of any level and their particularities. In *Timaeus*, Plato sketched his famous stratification of the *nous* (*logos*, the superior, immortal level, which governs the head and is related to divine reason, responsible for wisdom, clear insight, and disinterested generosity, the *king* of the Platonic fable on the soul), the *thymos* (the intermediary level, limited on the lower side by the diaphragm, mortal, animating the heart together with passion, will, and mania, whether heroic, poetic, or erotic, characterizing in turns the *soldier*, the *poet*, or the lover), and the *epithymia* (the inferior level of desires and instincts pertaining to the stomach and the genital organs, responsible for all primary desires like greed, jealousy, sexual appetite, the smallest *worker* in the philosophical fable). In this context the amorous illness is not only a state of the disorder of the *thymos*, but it can also mean a dependence on the *epithymia*, an unfortunate result of an enthusiasm wrongly directed towards the belly ("touch" at Ficino) instead of being directed towards the head ("contemplation").

1 According to the theory of humours, famous both with Hippocrates in the 5th century BC and Galen in the 2nd century CE, and also during the Renaissance, the characters take on a kind of ailing aspect, since they are defined by an excess: the red, hot humour characterizes the sanguinic, and is specified by an excess of fluid blood, the white, moist humour characterizes the phlegmatic by an excess of phlegm, the yellow, dry humour and an excess of yellow bile characterizes the choleric, and the black, cold humour of the melancholic is marked by an excess of dry blood.
2 Ficino, *On love,* 194.
3 Ibid*.,* 245.



Şerban Savu, *In the Shadow of the Dam***, 2008, 146 x 123 cm, oil on canvas**

Ancient medicine (by Hippocrates and especially by Galen taking over the Aristotle of *On Generation and Corruption*), sealing the relation of love with illness, recommends remedies matching the ailment: recommendations for the lovesick include coitus, fasting (in this sequence!), drunkenness and movement (dromomania is one of the symptoms of this illness). The oddness of healing propositions continues also with the interpreter of the secrets of Platonic love. Ficino, being convinced that the separation from the object of love is impossible, and that the sudden removal from the soul of the insatiable image would hurt the entire soul, confusing for ever the good functioning of the amorous organism, recommends a slow and gradual disruption from the web of love. These ever rarer encounters must be associated with particular care for not meeting the eyes of the loved one (because that would mean a relapse into passion), in reciting and remembering the worst features or physical defects of the beloved as often as possible in

order to replace the fatal imprint with a neutral one, the soul must be redirected to other aims, requested to accomplish complicated things difficult to carry out, the body must be exercised until it sweats so that the harmful vapours could be eliminated through the open pores, no effort must be spared, even chemicals ("food and drugs that doctors recommend as cures") are welcome. Finally, we must "bleed ourselves often; drink clear and perfumed wine and get drunk often for our old and fermented blood to be removed and a new blood and a new spirit to be rebuilt in us."[1]

The concept of love as an illness can be traced in two shapes: it is either manifested psycho-somatically, as a form of insanity, melancholy,[2] or bewitchment, or it is exclusively somatic, in which case it can be defined as a concrete clinical picture (i.e., syphilis, plague, leprosy). Syphilis (or "the necklace of Venus") is considered "the illness of Venus" in the sense that it is suspected to have as the source of infection an overly heated erotic obsession, and not necessarily as a sexually contagious disease in the modern sense. In addition, syphilis also gains its renown as "the great imitator" in the 15th –16th centuries, for its onset stages are deceptively similar to other illnesses. Due to its peculiar syphilitic skin tumours, the disease is often confused in popular mentality with leprosy or, starting with the 14th century, the plague, conceived of as diseases of fornication, which explains Ficino's argument. Regardless of its somatic form, the illness is always associated with some sinful origin, a birth from an illegitimate relationship or from a promiscuous couple.[3]

On the rhetoric of illness

Love as illness, which was conceived in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in medical terms, having its particular set of symptoms and being recommended the above mentioned forms of therapy (which, let us briefly mention, modern psychology redefined, applying them in the therapy of depression caused by emotional failure), became, beginning with the 18th century, only a metaphor, a "rhetorical device".[4] This is the case in an 18th-century epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* of the young J. W. Goethe. No doubt, Werther's whole passion is consumed at a rhetorical level: made up entirely of letters addressed to Wilhelm, Werther's far away friend, the novel uses rhetoric as absolute means and objective. This is also partly the reason why it is so difficult to understand why this text almost unreadable today because of the multitude of

[1] Ibid., p. 249.

[2] *Erotic melancholy,* frequent with people of young age, is a concern of 16th-century doctors. One of them, Jacques Ferrand, sees it as a psycho-somatic equation, paying attention primarily to the fatal devastation that it produces on the liver, the brain, and the heart, both with men and women, whose body is even more exposed to this illness. Cf. Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, "Corps et sexualité," in Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello, eds., *Histoire du Corps*, vol. 1 (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 2005), chapter 3, 167–234.

[3] "All lepers are usually born not from educated people who keep clean both on ordinary days and feasts, but especially from rogues who cannot withhold their cravings." – this is how Caesarius, Bishop of Arles summarized the causes of leprosy in a sermon composed in the first half of the 6th century, cited by Le Goff in *Refuzul plăcerii* (The refusal of pleasure)*,* in Georges Duby, ed. *Amor şi sexualitate în Occident* (Love and sexuality in the West) (Bucharest: Artemis, 1994), 140.

[4] As Luhmann formulates it in *Love as Passion*, p. 52.

its confessional sighs was at the time of its appearance (an age of extreme sensibility for the declaration of love) the source of the social phenomenon called "Werther fever". The relationships between the characters are established in a triangular shape: Werther loves Lotte with *amour passion*, but she is engaged to Albert, whom she seems to love. Interestingly, in the version revised by the author, terrified at the wave of suicides after the publication of the first version, there is a form of affection even between Albert and Werther (rival lovers): they cherish each other with the pathos that only the 18th-century cult of friendship could attach to the non-erotic relationship between men. Here, the amorous crisis is about, figuratively speaking, the division of the channel of communication of the erotic illness which only remains a psychological disorder: Lotte does not recognize Werther as the one shaped by her spiritual phantasm, as her interior "lover", while she represents everything for Werther.

Ever since its onset,[1] Werther's love for Lotte finds itself under the mark of an interior disorder. Contemplated with his entire soul, Lotte "absorbs" with her black eyes, in an almost mystical sense, too much of Werther's energy of life, without either of them knowing it, as confessed in the letter describing their encounter, describing the soul of the young man "gloated over her warm lips", and ending dizzily, exhaustedly, "lost in the delightful meaning of her words, so much so, that I scarcely heard the actual expressions."[2]. For the time being, one may observe a dangerous displacement of the lover's soul, set out to meet its lover of steam in a possible world ("dreams") and dysfunctional in the world in which the young man would need it to make up a whole person. While already drugged by Lotte's appearance, Werther repeatedly resorts to the description of his condition as an illness ("I treat my poor heart like a sick child", "wretched being, whose life is slowly wasting under a lingering disease" etc. etc.).

At a closer look, this novel could almost be read as the very text which takes to the extremes the consequences of amorous illness conceptualized by Ficino four hundred years earlier. However, following a more attentive reading, it is apparent that the unhappy ending derives from a second disturbance in the way of the amorous virus caught by the eyes. Lotte does not allow Werther's phantasm to occupy her soul, she does not recognize him as her pair, or at least this is what we are left to understand from the letters of the poor suffering man. This mono-perspective adds to the tragedy: it could be very probable that Lotte also loved him, just as much as that she did not love him at all; the dilemma cannot be settled as long as only Werther speaks, and the other voices are only heard as he himself understands and translates them. However, what we are offered here is none other than the perspective of Werther's heated mind, set on fire by the fever of his soul, which Wilhelm, his epistolary friend, has no chance of quenching. In the end, Werther remains alone with a Lotte who never succeeds to be more than her

[1] Werther contemplates Lotte in the "painting" framed by the door, "the most charming spectacle I had ever witnessed. Six children, from eleven to two years old, were running about the hall, and surrounding a lady of middle height, with a lovely figure, dressed in a robe of simple white, trimmed with pink ribbons. She was holding a rye loaf in her hand, and was cutting slices for the little ones all around, in proportion to their age and appetite." (June 16.) J. W. Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, translated by R.D. Boylan, edited by Nathan Haskell Dole, Project Gutenberg edition, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2527/2527-h/2527-h.htm.

[2] Ibid.

own spiritual emanation, too alive in his dreams for her absence in reality to be bearable while awake. Therefore the ideal solution, imagined as such by the lover is – contrary to the poetics of love-passion, is the *materialization* in the most concrete terms: "I her husband! O God, who gave me being, if thou hadst destined this happiness for me, my whole life would have been one continual thanksgiving! ... She—my wife! Oh, the very thought of folding that dearest of Heaven's creatures in my arms!"[1] This way, devoid of the vital fluid engaged by love, Werther withers with dryness, as the vegetation on a land dying with thirst, perceiving the "death of his heart" precisely in terms of a creative, imaginative aridity of a mummifying artificiality of any organic pulsation of another time (see the transformation of "splendid nature" into a "varnished painting".)

To conclude, one can see that love as a psychological illness has a fatal effect on Werther. Ill because of his ideal and insane with love, he seems to kill himself when he is no longer allowed to go on with his imaginative project, when he is forced to accept reality as it is exposed for others.

"Love's like scabies…"[2]

In order to exemplify the psychosomatic version of the amorous illness, it suffices to refer to the frequency of the association of, for instance, love and cholera in Western literature. In Thomas Mann's novella, *Death in Venice*, the cholera seems to have as its main function the obligation to keep the spiritual-creative nature of Aschenbach's amorous madness. Before pinpointing this function, however, let us remember that this novella is one of the few literary examples of another sort of erotology, that of Platonic love. Its description is not the subject of this paper; however, I must warn about a kind of conceptual abuse: there is an excessively and popularly improper discourse about "Platonic love". It is much less often referred to in its full conceptual peculiarity, as a form of absolute communication between two masculine spirits and especially as an aspiration for absolute beauty, maintained by the exercise of the creation of the beautiful, the good, and the true. In *Death in Venice*, the novella written in 1912, Platonic erotology is woven right into the story on the attempt of Professor Gustav von Aschenbach[3] to reconnect to the forces of creative energy by a voyage to Venice – a gloomy topos and favoured target for this type of *descensus ad inferos*. Von Aschenbach is, in his own way, a Faustian scholar, and the etymological suggestion of association with "ashes" (that is, the inert, dry material which remains after combustion) should reactivate the reference to the "greyness" of theory in Goethe's *Faust*. Regardless of the reading key (Faustian, archetypal in Jung's sense, or dualist in Nietzsche's), the professor discovers what he is looking for: the beautiful adolescent Tadzio, with his halo of ideal beauty, and also the protective halo of cautious sisters and mothers, offers Aschenbach the perfect pretext for constructing Platonic love in the strong sense.

[1] Ibid. (July 29).

[2] Quote from the song with the same title of Zavaidoc, from the 1920s. The success of the song is also explained by the circulation of the extremely popular idea that love is a contagious disease and it is like scabies. The case is not local, the theory of the "itchiness" of love has a wide historical and geographical dissemination.

[3] Turned into a composer in Visconti's 1971 film, as homage to Gustav Mahler, who was said to have inspired the writing of the novella, bursting into tears when he left Venice. The character's surname strengthens the suggestion.

Directly depending on visuality, Aschenbach's search is triggered by the appearance of a skinny red-haired traveller, who will be revealed for us in a symbolic reading as an epiphany of a Dionysus masked in senility. Any doubt about the nature of this "stranger" disappears as we realize that his function is merely to catalyze vital energy: the professor forgets him as soon as he gets impressed by his strange appearance, after which "he felt the most surprising consciousness of a widening of inward barriers", "coming upon him with such suddenness and passion as to resemble a seizure, almost a hallucination".[1] However, the prelude of Platonic love described in *Death in Venice* is not only about the reconnection with feeling or emotion: it also includes a spiritual aggravation, "this new austerity, that from now on his style showed an almost exaggerated sense of beauty, a lofty purity, symmetry, and simplicity"[2] The ascending pattern of Platonic love is coloured in a Mannian manner by the rapidity of its coming into being: the writer is presented, before his encounter with Venice, as an artist consumed by the experience at a higher level of the imagined worlds and events of his books. As an artist of fiction, Aschenbach would supposedly have access thus to more lives, but then he would pay this privilege with a much faster consumption of his life energy – this is how the utterly hopeless lover looks like in Mann's novella.

The writer as an *erasmen*[3] in the ancient meaning of the word is astonished by the perfect beauty of the fourteen years old Polish boy, an *eromene* whose face "recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture – pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose decending in one line, the qinning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate."[4]

Thomas Mann exploits at its best the precarious and necessarily ephemeral character of Platonic love: recommended to take place between a mature lover and a smooth-faced beloved, who is shaped by the excellence of the former's virtues, Platonic love is the only kind of love project which conceptually ends with a deadline. It cannot continue when the young man grows up, for it becomes condemnable as the pedagogical reason of formation disappears.[5] It seems that even this term is strictly regulated, so that it

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[1] Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter, in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 59. *Imaginative Literature: Selections from the Twentieth Century*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1990), 471–512; 472.

[2] Ibid*.,* 477.

[3] *Erasmen* and *eromene* are the terms which define the homoerotic couple in Greek Antiquity in the Golden Age, equating the mature professor–lover on the one hand, and the young disciple–beloved, on the other.

[4] Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice,* 484.

[5] The same double standard characterizes the acceptance of homosexuality also later, during the Renaissance: „in the 15th and 16th centuries in Italy sexual relationships between young males were tolerated on a large scale, but were harshly repressed if prolonged into maturity" Sara F. Matthews-Grieco, *Corp şi sexualitate în Europa Vechiului Regim* (Body and sexuality in Europe during the Ancien Regime)*,* in Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello, eds., *Istoria corpului* (The history of the body), vol. I, *De la Renaştere la Secolul Luminilor* (From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment)*,* ed. Georges Vigarello (Bucharest: Grupul editorial ART, 2008), 208.

may not be freely interpreted by the lovers: the homosexuality which grounds Platonic love becomes unacceptable as soon as the young man's pubic hair has grown, since virile hair-growth[1] is the clearest sign of maturity. The passive mature homosexual is understood as a woman-substitute in the sexual act, which in inconceivable. Similarly, the young person who wishes to prolong his adolescence by continuing the homoerotic relationship also after his virile maturation is regarded with the same kind of horror. The moment when Aschenbach is disgusted by the old man wearing make-up in order to hide his real age appearing with the group of young people on the ship must be regarded in relation with his own attempt to return in his body, by cosmetics, to a lost youth, but also with this negative image of the coquettish homosexual, clung onto his adolescent looks.

Symbolic uses of the cholera

Nevertheless, it is the symbolic function of the cholera that the novella offers as an example of the erotology of amorous illness. Significantly, no kind of touching takes place between the lover and the beloved, even caressing the boy's head is impossible, although maniacally contemplated. The twist of the text at the end, on the axis of Aschenbach's gaze, mummified while still alive, towards Tadzio and back to the one who died hung on these "twilit grey eyes" is utterly remarkable. Not observing the strict "canon" of ascent of the model of Platonic love, the artist's love threatens to stay at an inferior level of the obsession with the beauty fixed in the individual. The originality of the fictional solution lies in the imagination of death: the episode of the fall happens almost simultaneously in the writer's consciousness setting in death, and the eyes of the external observer: "He rested his head against the chair-back and followed the movements of the figure out there, then lifted it, as it were in answer to Tadzio's gaze. (…) It seemed to him the pale and lovely Summoner out there smiled at him and beckoned; as though, with the hand he lifted from his hip, he pointed outward as he hovered on before into an immensity of richest expectation. And, as so often before, he rose to follow. Some minutes passed before anyone hastened to the aid of the elderly man sitting there collapsed in his chair. They bore him to his room. And before nightfall a shocked and respectful world received the news of his decease."[2]

The reading of Thomas Mann's novella offers an implicit answer to the questions raised by the weak germinating power of the erotology of Platonic love: adjoining the *universal* and the absolute, this erotological configuration is difficult to be convincingly rendered as fiction, since it escapes *individual* features, the effect of the real, the effect of character. This is where amorous illness comes in as a solution, hybridizing the erotology of Platonism. Therefore in *Death in Venice* the love felt by von Aschenbach is excessively unsettling because it finds the solution of fixing a metaphysical fable on the immortality of absolute love in a fiction of the particular and

[1] It seems that ancient literature abounds in such warnings on the end of an acceptable homoerotic relationship: "Your leg, Nicander, is getting hairy, but take care lest your back-side also gets the same unnoticed. Then shall you know how rare lovers are." (Alcaeus of Messene, in *The Greek Anthology,* XII, 30, cited in Georges Duby, ed., *Amor şi sexualitate*…, 46.)

[2] Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice,* 512.

the recognisable. Beauty acts here as a magnetic centre relentlessly sucking the artist's soul which discovers it in the flashing presence of a golden ephebe.

The morbid pattern of the cholera was then also associated with love in Gabriel García Marquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the novel of a love postponed for fifty-one years, nine months and four days, where "the symptoms of love were the same as those of cholera". In the false love triangle[1] formed by Florentino Ariza (a Hermes in love with the same woman for over half a century), Fermina Daza (a fickle lover for Florentino, but a constant lover for her husband), Juvenal Urbino (doctor, and husband of Fermina), the married couple is much more likeable than the adolescent and later aged couple of Fermina and Florentino, always serious and without any sense of humour. Although the emphasis falls on the endless love of the patient Florentino and the regained Fermina, the married couple Juvenal Urbino and Fermina Daza share an authentic, unconventional love. They are also united by the cholera, which functions in the novel as a metaphor for passionate love: Juvenal becomes Fermina's doctor as a "result of a clinical error."[2] Their matrimonial passion is coloured by an androgynous suggestion, since Marquez describes them as acting like „a single divided being". Furthermore, their home and garden very soon become modern and illusory surrogates of Paradise (albeit an unstable Paradise), protecting their almost idyllic love: even Juvenal's death at an old age happens as an accident in Paradise, as the doctor climbs up on a mango tree to catch his favourite parrot, which could imitate the voice of any bird and any animal. The husband and wife do not seem to be connected by marital love of the *agape* type, but rather by the contradictory logic of *love as passion*, defined by Rougemont:[3] the war of personalities, moments of pure passion, disappointments and repeated fallings in love all happen in order to maintain the passionate temperature of this love. Therefore Florentino's first return, just after Juvenal's death, with the declaration of his immortal love, seems to Fermina improper and offensive. Literature's most stubborn lover, Florentino Ariza, "lost his voice and his appetite and spent the entire night tossing and turning in his bed. But when he began to wait for the answer to his first letter, his anguish was complicated by diarrhea and green vomit, he became disoriented and suffered from sudden fainting spells, and his mother was terrified because his condition did not resemble the turmoil of love so much as the devastation of cholera. (…) He prescribed infusions of linden blossoms to calm the nerves and suggested a change of air so he could find consolation in distance, but Florentino Ariza

[1] False because Fermina Daza is faithful to Juvenal Urbino until his death. "In the end they knew each other so well that by the time they had been married for thirty years they were like a single divided being, and they felt uncomfortable at the frequency with which they guessed each other's thoughts without intending to, or the ridiculous accident of one of them anticipating in public what the other was going to say." Gabriel García Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Random House, 1997), 272.

[2] Ibid*.,* 125.

[3] Denis de Rougemont, *Iubirea şi Occidentul* (Love in the West) (Bucharest: Univers, 2000.) The book is famous for setting up a distinction between *agape*-type, marital love on the pattern of the active love which connects the believer to God or the husband to his wife, and erotic, passionate love in the etymological sense, based on suffering, on the passion brought by the obstacle which invokes death.

longed for just the opposite: the enjoy his martyrdom."[1] In Marquez's novel, in contrast with Thomas Mann's novella, the cholera not only has a catalyzing function, but it is itself substantiated as an erotic chance: under the shelter of the yellow flag of the quarantine, the two elderly lovers can taste at length, as their own death, their love fulfilled at last.

The erotological solution

The tableau of literary illustrations of the particular erotology formulated by love as illness can continue well into post-modernity. An exhaustive illustration or comprehensive commentary of the chosen examples are not objectives of this paper. The works presented are classic, well-known to the reading public, therefore the research has limited itself only to certain elements and key-scenes. In fact, all three works, Goethe's early novel, Thomas Mann's novella and Marquez's novel were treated strictly from the perspective of the erotology they share. I have defined erotology as a project of truth which comes to lay the foundations, in its very heart, of a fictional construct regarding love, circulated by literature as well as visual representational arts. The study has particularized the narratological, and also philosophical character of a specific erotology, namely, that of amorous illness; the chosen examples have presented some of its compulsory features, though not exhaustively.

As a metaphor, love as illness represents a fictional solution or an artistic or cultural representation, because it shapes the shapelessness of passion and explains the inexplicability of falling in love. The metaphor of illness has a comforting answer to offer to the lover's questions "why?" and "what it is/how is it called what I feel?": acquiring the name of an illness, love becomes manageable, both artistically and existentially.

Translated by Emese Czintos

[1] Gabriel García Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, 76–77.