

Love – Its Many Faces. Towards a New Definition*

– Review –

Ana-Maria DELIU

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

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E-mail: anyshk.d@gmail.com

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Simon May's book is a praiseworthy attempt to define what is generally held to be indefinable. Although love studies is a continually expanding field of scholarship and love is discussed everywhere in media, the author feels the need to defend his work by showing that we are keen to discuss the psychology of love, but not its very nature because it has become an almost sacred territory that we do not want to question. Rather than a pure and almost divine emotion, love is more of a social construct, which seems to have been “frozen in time” since Romanticism. Without a history of love and lovers, would we know how to love? Simon May suggests an interesting and new approach in describing love within a historical-discursive framework.

The novelty comes from defining love as “ontological rootedness”, “the rapture we feel for people and things that inspire in us the hope of an indestructible grounding for our life. It is a rapture that sets us off on – and sustains – the long search for a secure relationship between our being and theirs.”¹ Love seen as an existential grounding based on otherness results in the disintegration of the myth of unconditional love.

Another notable development in the philosophy of love is the author's thesis about love's deification: the history of the idea of love from “God is love” to “Love is god”. He describes the last phase in terms of *hybris* and argues that love comes to satisfy the religious needs of the modern man, something that Nietzsche did not realise when he lamented: “Almost two thousand years – and not a single new god!”; “Love plays God”, as Simon May had the wit to reply.

The book focuses on four major changes regarding how love was perceived over the course of time in Western cultures, starting from the premise that “the emotion of love is universal but the way this emotion gets *interpreted* varies greatly from one society and epoch to another.” The author uses four formulae in order to illustrate the paradigm shifts of the particular emotion – the *value* of love, the *power*

* Simon May, *Istoria iubirii*, trans. Dana Ionescu (Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 2014) [*Love. A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011)]

¹ Ibid., 6.

to love, the *object* of love, and the *lover*.¹ The procession of forms through history indicates a slow but certain deification of love: from love directed to God as a supreme virtue, to a transcending force meant to elevate the human condition to a divine level, to love as an emotion worthy of any human with the same intensity that was formerly reserved to God, and finally, to a potency of being authentic through love, to “actualise his own nature”.² From exploring beyond individual, to exploring the individual, and from manifestation of love *for* and *to* God, to love for the sake of love, this are the cultural transformations.

To show the construction and deconstruction of an emotion, Simon May invokes examples from The Hebrew Scripture, ancient and modern philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Ovid, Spinoza, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche), from Christianity, psychoanalysis (Freud), literature (Schlegel, Novalis, Proust), and troubadours’ songs. In my opinion, the author should have insisted more on the Orphic mystery cults and Assyro-Babylonian mythology when depicting the roots of the idea of love. However, for the purpose of the book, how Plato and the Judaic tradition view love is revealing enough, since these sources are not only more influential in Western culture, but also a synthesis of the above.

One of the book’s shortcomings is the fact that in the chapter dedicated to this problem the author argues that “God loves them [Israel’s people] as the guardians of his law; and his ‘choosing’ of them to receive the law, given to Moses on Mount Sinai, is itself an act of his love”.³ Scholars in history of religions have concluded that the early religion of Israel (before the prophets) was based not on love, but on fear. Israel’s God as a moral and loving divinity would have been impossible to imagine before Jeremiah and Isaiah.⁴ Simon May acknowledges that Yahweh can be cruel but it resolves into “[t]his is how all love works.”⁵ Nevertheless, his argument is reinforced by the idea that not the moral comportment evokes love, but what he calls “ontological rootedness”.

What I appreciated is the writing style, which is not only eloquent, but also lyrical. The argumentation is clear and logical and the poetic language does not affect the concision. Overall, one may find the book enjoyable and challenging.

While this book represents more of a historical approach, it is worth mentioning that Simon May is currently writing a second volume on the philosophy of love, entitled *Love: A New Theory*. Although theoretical directions can be found in *Love. A History*, the second book might be a critique of the idea of love. We can assume that the author will develop the definition and directions already suggested, and that the new theory is relating love to the feeling of existential grounding or, as Simon May puts it, “ontological rootedness”.

¹ Ibid., 11–12.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ See Robert. Henry Charles, *Doctrina vieții de apoi în Israel, în iudaism și în creștinism (A Critical History of the Doctrine of a Future Life in Israel, in Judaism and in Christianity)* (Bucharest: Herald, 2009), 9–20.

⁵ May, *Love*, 36.

The book is a recommendable reading for scholars and students interested in love studies or philosophy of love. It describes the chronological development of the idea of love and the inextricable link with the historical framework. Nevertheless, it can be an enjoyable reading for everyone curious about the matter. Gathering examples from philosophy, literature, religion and psychology, it allows the reader to engage into a comparative study of the history of love.