

10/27/2023: WRITING LOVE IN THE AGE OF IRONY

Love, arguably the most powerful human emotion, is a perennial challenge to the rational grip of narrative. Add to it the extra tripwire of irony, as seen in the ubiquity of rom-coms on everyone's screens. Is it possible to give true love (rather than "true love") its due in words? In every literary culture? What literary work has succeeded in making you truly feel that emotion?

1. **Orit GIDALI (Israel)**

A famous story in the history of art forgery tells of an art collector who purchased a highly priced oil painting. To avoid paying tax on his newly bought masterpiece, the collector devised a plan: he would ask a local artist to paint over it, and later ship it to an art restorer to peel away the camouflage and expose the original.

It was a perfect plan. However, in two weeks' time the art collector received a letter from the restorer who reported:

"I have peeled away the first layer to expose the fake picture, and I kept peeling three more layers. How many more layers do you want me to continue peeling?"

I thought of this story during the first week after I arrived at the International Writing. In an attempt to show up at my best, I peeled off the remains of a temporary tattoo I was wearing. I scrubbed my skin (these stickers stick hard) and pondered—what if I peel the temporary tattoo and then continue peeling the body: what is then exposed underneath? Is the body the finite layer, this masterpiece, 'noble in reason, infinite in faculty' etc. or is it just another layer in the game of illusions?

I walk around the world with an abstract and well-repressed sense that what I consider to be real may be just a temporary façade. That some kind of transcendence is just around the corner to relieve me of my oh-too-strong belief in the truthfulness of the body, in this world of objects and matter, ready to reveal a "something" that lies underneath it.

But how can I reach this mysterious underlying "something"?

The transcendence whose warm bass voice I crave to hear has not spoken to me yet, and God knows I have waited (pun intended).

Even Science has failed to teach me what lies beyond the veil of cognition. Over 100 years ago, the mathematician David Hilbert published 23 unsolved problems. One of them challenged mathematics to find a complete set of axioms to describe the physical world, and another, to find a complete set of axioms to describe the mathematical world.

The first task is still to this day an unsolved mystery.

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Wong Yi Eva (Hong Kong), Maricela Guerrero (Mexico), Orit Gidali (Israel), Noelle Q. de Jesus (Singapore)

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The second, Godel proved impossible almost 100 years ago.

So, no answers yet from science; and no divinity (yet) talking to me. With no better tool at hand to explore my persistent intuition, I turn to my own implicit bodily knowledge—and that's where love and writing about love comes in.

In very few rare instances when I happened to be in a state of intense love, something very strange happened. I had a physical experience of melting down. I wasn't confused by the multiplicity of the world. A deep sense of warmth flooded my body and turned matter into the unity of a single wave.

Maybe this too is an illusion, a fabrication of my mind, but I do know that I had it, and that this experience, the bodily sensations defying the body, taught me that love, a wavelength of unity, is a categorically different experience of reality. It is of a different order.

How can I tap into this wavelength and entice it to return? Maybe I should use my poetry about love, my language, my verbal incantations to call upon it?

“Language” in Hebrew is:

שפה (*safa*)

It is the same word as border, or *edge*. Hebrew teaches me that I can use my language in its most sublime and intense form to stand on the edge of perception and cross to the other side. I can use poems to defy fiction. Not the fiction of the story, but the fiction of reality itself.

Kabbalah Jewish mystics believe that the mere word love has radical powers. Rav Amnoona Sava, asserts that the same four letters that form the name of love ה ב ה א are the four letters upon which the holy name, divinity, depends. For kabbalah mystics, all layers of reality influence each other. So when you combine the four letters in writing the word love, you combine the limbs of the body, you combine the spirits, the רוחות (*ruhot*), and you combine higher spheres, ספירות (*sfirot*), flowing into one another and intermingling into unity.

In his vision, Sava describes how “as complete Love ascends, it encounters one supernal noble official, appointed over 1,390 firmaments, and appointed over the flow of thirteen rivers of pure balsam, flowing from the mystery of dew above.”

Yet even without this lush promise of the rich heavens flowing into the world at the moment of assemblage of the written letters of the word love, I can simply say—writing about love, reading about love, is a way to expand the spirit, widen it, prepare it to experience a greater order. In writing, I slowly flood myself with this wavelength of love, to the point that it floods me.

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So, when asked to talk about love and irony, I left the irony out. I refuse to believe in the duality, let alone the multiplicity of the world. I want to practice melting into One.

I even refuse my private irony: I am asked to publicly talk about love in days of fear, violence, and war, and in days where my own love life is falling apart and I am falling apart.

Twenty-three years ago I looked at my husband while he slept and wrote the line: "If I had money, I would hire twenty girls to envy me." Even now, in these days when I mostly cry, I would still hire twenty girls to envy me. In the world of phenomena, I may be separate from my man and from my suffering brothers and sisters that I may or may not consider enemies. But in the depth of it, we are all inseparable, we are one wavelength of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls 'interbeing'.

If I forget this unity, if I let reality convince me with its forgery, and specifically with its temptation of pain, the inducer of over-identification with the small self, I will separate from the real vastness, from my real family, and I will inevitably start a cycle of violence.

I refuse.

I chose to feel all the pain I could feel, mine and others, but never stop in the realm of separation. I'd rather seek unity: write about love, talk about love, call the name of love until all the layers melt and an undeniable truth exposes itself. A truth that says: yes. A truth that says: one. A truth that says: us.

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