

THE LUMINOSITY OF LOVE

Ὁ ἅγιος
ΜΑΞΙΜΟΣ ὁ ὁμολογῆς



St. Maximus the Confessor

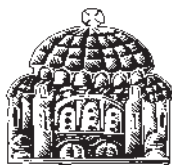
George Kordis, egg-tempera on wooden board, 2012.

“The mystery of the incarnation of the Logos is the key to all the inner symbolism and typology in the Scriptures, and in addition gives us knowledge of created things, both visible and intelligible. He who apprehends the mystery of the Cross and the burial apprehends the inward essences of created things; while he who is initiated into the inexpressible power of the Resurrection apprehends the purpose for which God first established everything.”

St. Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Theology and Economy* (1.66).

Predrag Cicovacki

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Sebastian Press
2018

Published by
Sebastian Press
Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church
in collaboration with Indiktos Publishing Company, Athens

Edited
Bishop Maxim of Western America

Prepress & printing
Interklima—grafika, Vrnjacka Banja
Fiction book series, number 3

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Address all correspondence to:
Sebastian Press
1621 West Garvey Avenue
Alhambra, California 91803

Email: info@westsrbdio.org ✧ Website: <http://www.westsrbdio.org>

Publishers Cataloging-in-Publication

Names:

Cicovacki, Predrag, author.

Title:

The luminosity of love / Predrag Cicovacki.

Description:

Alhambra, California : Sebastian Press / Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, [2018] | Series: Fiction book series ; number 3. | Includes index.

Identifiers:

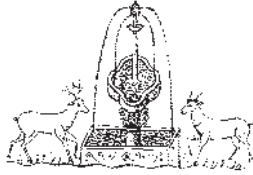
ISBN: 978-1-936773-44-2

Subjects:

LCSH: Kostić, Laza, 1841-1910. | Dunderški, Jelena, 1869-1895. | Kostić, Laza, 1841-1910. Santa Maria della salute. | Love. | Love--Philosophical aspects. | Love--Psychological aspects.

Classification:

LCC: BD436 .C53 2018 | DDC: 128/.46--dc23



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For J.,
my inspiration

Prelude

There are stories worth knowing. Those are the stories of life and death, of trust and betrayal, of love and suffering. They are worth retelling and reflecting upon. Here is one of them.

He was fifty, she was twenty-one. He was a poet, beloved among his people. She was a daughter of the wealthiest man in the entire province. He was a doctor of law, a cosmopolitan well-traveled and fluent in eight languages. Educated in the boarding schools of Vienna and Budapest, she enjoyed theater, piano, and horse riding; she was a woman whose social status, beauty, and character attracted a steady river of suitors.

They met on June 12, 1891, at the estate of her father who was the poet's friend and benefactor. The emotions were stirred instantly, on both sides. The old bachelor was enamored by the spontaneity and openness, youthful energy and beauty of the young lady. She had never met anyone like him before: a vagabond, of superior intelligence, wit, and mastery of words. They entertained and challenged each other. In whatever language they greeted each other in the morning, they continued speaking the same language for the rest of the day. Day after day, they spent hours together, astonished how quickly each day came to an end.

The boundary of propriety was never crossed. Nevertheless, it soon became obvious to everyone around them that they had fallen in love. She was refusing one suitor after another, openly saying—even to the poet's face—that she was interested in marrying only someone like him. He never made a proposal and was increasingly bothered by the depth of the mutual attraction. Some deci-

sion had to be made. After a long internal struggle, the poet decided to remove himself from the young woman's presence and life. He went to a monastery where he had hid before, the sanctuary where the head of the community of monks was a close friend of many years. Their physical separation had no effect on the emotional attachment they felt for each other. He would occasionally write or return, and then hide again, tormenting both of them.

For four long years, their relationship dragged on without any resolution: they could not separate, nor could they be together. Struggling with this painful stalemate, the poet decided to marry a woman with whom he was engaged years before, who was still unmarried and waiting for him for over twenty years. She was also wealthy enough to secure his existence to the end of his days.

The married couple visited Venice on their honeymoon. That hurt the young woman's feelings even more: the poet promised the young woman that they together would visit the magnificent church of deliverance, "Santa Maria della Salute." In her journal, the young lady bitterly lamented how he was taking another woman there, where the two of them should be happy together. She was broken-hearted and betrayed. Convinced that she would never be able to trust and love again, she questioned the reasons for her further existence.

Upon returning from their honeymoon, the young woman's father invited the newly wedded couple to visit, on the occasion of his daughter's twenty-sixth birthday. The visit never occurred. The relationship between the bride and groom was strained. After quarrels with his mother-in-law and sister-in-law, the poet was hurt that his wife could not decide with whom to side. His pride wounded, he ran away, to the same monastery to which he escaped before.

The young lady knew nothing of the marital struggles of her poet. She was alone in Vienna, spending her days and nights vacillating between despair and hope. When summoned home for the celebration of her birthday, she refused to return to the world that betrayed her. She stayed in Vienna, and died on the eve of her twenty-sixth birthday. Although her last journal entries do not al-

lude to any physical ailment, typhoid fever was given as the official cause of her death.

The poet attended her funeral. It was clear from a letter written to his wife describing the event that he was crushed. He eventually returned to his wife, and lived with her until she died of cancer, more than a decade later. His wife was a good-natured person who learned to support him wholeheartedly and tolerate his excesses. He had genuine feelings for his wife, but he could never forget his young deceased friend, his true love. A few years after her death, the deceased woman started appearing to him in his dreams. The dreams were so intense that he wrote them down in a secret journal.

Aside from those dreams, his life settled into the provincial swamp. Aging and away from the main cultural centers, the poet was nearly forgotten. Before his death, he collected his poems written over many decades with the idea of printing them all together for the first time, in one book. Just as the manuscript was to be sent to the printer, he added one more, newly finished poem, the last one he would write. At the time, hardly anyone paid attention to this poem inspired by his never-forgotten love.

The name of the young woman who inspired that poem was Jelena Dunderski. She was born on November 21, 1869, in Srbo-bran, Serbia, and died on November 20, 1895, in Vienna. (The equivalent of her first name in English is Helen, but everybody called her Lenka.) The poet's name was Laza Kostić. He was born on February 12, 1841, in Kovilj, Serbia, and died on November 26, 1910, in Vienna. The poem, written fourteen years after Lenka's death, has for the last hundred years been celebrated as the most beautiful love poem written in the Serbian language. It is called "Santa Maria della Salute."¹



As an eight-grader growing up in Serbia, in the same city where the poet had lived after he married, I had to learn this poem by

¹ See Part II, Introduction, for the full text of the poem in the original and in the English translation.

heart. I do not recall that our teacher told us any of the background related to it. Ever since I heard it recited again eight years ago, and then learned the story behind it, it has compelled me to think about love and its significance for human life. Why is this particular story so remarkable? Why are this and similar cases worth reflecting upon?

There are three moments in this story that contain the intercrossing of the archetypal and unique elements. The first deals with our deepest longing: we all want to love and to be loved. What is unique for our story is that two human beings whose age gap is almost three decades and whose social status could hardly be more different, fall so madly in love with each other. People so different were “not supposed” to fall in love; then how and why did the passions become so inflamed between them? Why do people fall in love to begin with, and why with some individuals and not with others?

Love’s promise of happiness is virtually always followed by disappointments, sufferings, and betrayals; this is the second, and even more significant archetypal moment worth reflecting upon. Despite intense feelings of attraction, there are numerous obstacles that must be faced by two people developing their love for one another and being happy together. The obstacles can be external and social, but in our contemporary world such hurdles are treated as less and less formidable. Instead, we increasingly struggle with the obstacles that are internal and psychological. Why was the poet afraid of his deepening feelings for Lenka? She certainly loved him and was ready to make any sacrifice for him. If he loved her so much, why did he run away from her, and even marry another woman?

The third archetypal moment is the most complex and the most essential; in many ways, it is the central topic of this book. This moment deals with the realization that fear, suffering, and the sense of betrayal are not the last word when it comes to love. There is some magic about love that even death of the beloved person may not impede. In fact, a negative experience like that may lead to the creation of a work of art: the building of Taj Mahal, the composi-

tion of “Tristan and Isolde,” or the writing of “Santa Maria della Salute.” Less spectacularly but more importantly, love can lead toward a fuller development of one’s entire personality. The central quest of the Occidental spirit is the fulfillment of the potential in each of us. Love is the force that can both inspire and guide us in this process.

Love can do that because it has transformative power. This power is manifested through the changes that are qualitative rather than quantitative and in the ways that are distinguishable yet related: through the transformation of those who are in love, and through the transmutation of love itself. In most of our preoccupations with love, we think about love’s power as leading toward a sexual union with another human being and a happy life for the couple in love. Besides that, or in place of it, love can also lead to a creative act, and to a union of quite a different kind. In the alchemical literature, this union is called the “androgyné” and it is presented as that of Sol and Luna, of King and Queen, of Brother and Sister. Despite its reputation as a pseudo-science obsessed with turning base metal into gold, alchemy is really about the transmutation of the base, instinctive impulses of our nature into something cultivated and spiritual. The “Philosopher’s Stone,” for which the alchemists searched, is not gold as a physical substance, but an integrated and developed personality that, due to its ennoblement, radiates like gold. This gold is so precious because it is so rare. The alchemists believed that our highest aspiration should be to become such an integrated, loving, and radiating personality. Our struggle to realize this aspiration is a love story, the ultimate love story that should concern us.

I. Fear of Love

Love makes us fully alive and brings out the best in us. It belongs to the very core of humanity: to be a human being means to be a loving being.

These fundamental insights have been reasserted in every culture and at every age. More subconsciously than consciously, to one degree or another, we all intuitively grasp their truth and recognize their value.

Why, then, are we not more loving? Why do we so often end up following a path that has no heart? Why did Laza, so deeply in love with Lenka, run away from her instead of embracing her love?

The reasons for our deviation from the path of the heart are complementary rather than exclusive. One is that there are numerous other values that are important for our lives, the values that do not involve love, or may even clash with it. We need to secure our existence, as well as that of those who depend on us. It is necessary to provide the basic material and social elements that enable our continuous and normal functioning. The importance of these factors leads us not only to regulate, but also to restrain the influence of love. Love is too irrational and unpredictable to orient our lives around it. It is more practical to treat love as a desirable but unnecessary spice of life, rather than as its fundamental and indispensable component.

There are many manifestations of love—or closely associated with love—that are not positive. Love may bring the best out of us, but it may also lead to jealousy, possessiveness, deception, hypocrisy, abuse, violence, or fanaticism. Throughout human history, we have always felt that at least one side of love is demonic, or diabolical. Put more “objectively,” love has an ambiguous nature. Is it possible to draw a non-arbitrary line between the desirable aspects

of love and those that are not? Or do we have to learn to embrace love in all of its ambiguous aspects?

Furthermore, love is demanding. It demands care and commitment, discipline and sacrifice. In addition, however much effort we put into it, our love need not be returned, appreciated, or even welcomed. It can be laughed at, taken advantage of, and abused. Such negative experiences may lead to pathological fear of love. This fear is so common that it has earned a special name: *philophobia*. It may be manifested as the fear of falling in love and loving another person; or it may appear as the fear of being loved by another person. Bitter experiences of the past, coupled with inner insecurity and lack of faith, may lead to intense fear of intimacy and fear of rejection. We may become so afraid of losing someone we love, that we refuse to love anyone or to be loved by anyone. (Alternatively, this fear may lead us not to run away from another person, but to cling to each other with desperate dependency.) This pathological fear of love precludes not only the true intimacy but also the possibility of the human growth and personal development. Instead of striving to find ourselves, we try with all our power to lose ourselves.¹

To make things worse, our technically-developed and consumer-oriented civilization provides abundant substitutes for love and ample opportunities to lose ourselves. Feeding off the biological twin-feelings of fear and desire, the substitutes for love come tailored for any purse and taste, and they are readily available: from the celebrity worship to the consumption of food and alcohol, from pornography to cyber-sex. Why ever expose ourselves to the possibility of a broken heart when with the click of a mouse or the swipe of a credit card we can get what we want and when we want it?

¹ As my anonymous reviewer put it, there is no doubt that the current problem between the genders is a direct result of what, in theological language, we call the “fall of man.” No matter how we understand the “fall,” since the first humans (Adam and Eve), an abnormality has been built into the very roots of our existence and inherited through our birth. This is the fear of the “opposite other.” And this fear has become our second nature.

Yet, to fear love is to fear life. To fear love, and satisfy oneself with substitutes for it, is to settle for far less than we are capable of. Fear of love is one of the most important reasons why there is so much greed and competitiveness, aggressiveness and violence in our world.

This is the paradox that torments us. There may be nothing we long for more than love and intimacy with another human being. But we also dread rejection and pain, and end up fearing love and running away from it. We want to be alive, we dream about living our lives to the fullest, yet we become so insecure and our hearts so hardened, that we end up hurting not only ourselves but also those we desire. The story of Laza and Lenka is highly instructive in this regard.

There are no rational ways of dispersing phobias and paradoxes. No amount of facts, reasons, arguments, or reassurances would lead us out of them. No intellectual understanding is sufficient to lead us toward a real change of heart. For that to happen, we need courage and faith. Courage is not the absence of fear, but faith that something else is more important than fear. To choose love over fear requires a leap of faith. Only by means of faith can we summon enough courage to embrace the path of life with a heart.

Faith and courage are not built through arguments and abstractions. Just as they are lost through real human experience, they can also be won through it. That is why life experience, our own and that of others, should be the beginning point and inspiration for any reflection that hopes to impact what we believe and how we live.

I. Heart

Human beings are symbolic animals who live within their symbols as much as they live within their bodies. Symbols are the best-known expressions of the relatively unknown facts. They are the spontaneous products of the psyche, not manufactured by us like names or signs. Names and signs help us deal with ordinary things, those belonging to the world-body. Symbols take us “beyond the obvious”: they bring hidden things closer by intimating the connections that range from those just under the surface to those that are metaphysical and mysterious. Symbols connect us with and give an expression to the soul of the world.

The phrase “to have a heart” is used as a symbol in several distinguishable yet related ways. “Having a heart” is associated with vitality in general, and more specifically with being courageous. Heart is also a symbol of passion, for someone or something, as in being passionate about a person and falling in love with him or her. Having a heart is further symbolic of tender feelings and of being gentle, caring, and loving. Not less importantly, heart is symbolic of the capacity for compassion, of suffering with someone who is struggling and with a spontaneous desire to lighten that suffering as much as possible. Finally, heart is the symbolic center of personality.

As Plato put it, heart is the symbolic center of the human soul. The Greeks understood soul as the animating principle of every living being (plants and animals and the world-at-large included). Plato’s novelty, and perhaps one of the most far-reaching insights of our Western civilization, was to speak of the “tri-partite” soul: the genitals and the belly forming the lowest part of the soul driven by appetites and requiring moderation as its virtue, then the

heart as the center of the human personality with courage as its main virtue, and finally the mind, or reason, which, above all, aims at wisdom.

Plato's philosophical project wavered between focusing on how the three parts of the soul can be properly balanced on the one hand, and how to develop its highest part on the other. While the former project is more basic and thus the one to be undertaken before we attempt to reach the heights of the human intellectual achievements, the Western cultural tradition has, for the most part, separated the two projects and focused on the latter and more ambitious one. In doing so, we have relegated the soul to the mind and consciousness, forgetting altogether the two lower parts of the soul as also constitutive of our human identity.

I propose that we reorient ourselves by directing our attention to the first and more fundamental of these projects. We should do it by starting from the heart of the matter, from the human heart. The place to begin our exploration of love and humanity is the passionate, excited heart.

THE EXCITED HEART

When I was a boy, I was fascinated by a tattoo my father had on his left arm. On the inner side of his arm, just below the elbow, he had a tattoo in the shape of a heart, pierced with an arrow, and with the initials J. M. inscribed in it. My curiosity was increased by my father's refusal to talk about the tattoo. Since the initials inscribed on my father's arm were not those of my mother, I naturally wondered to whom—to which woman—they belonged. Was she more beautiful than my mother? Was she his first love? Was she also in love with my father? Was she even aware that he was in love with her?

At that time tattoos were so rare, that I do not recall knowing any other man who had one. (It would have been unthinkable then for a woman to have a tattoo.) Why would my father do something so crazy?

Plato argued that love is a form of madness (*μανία*), ecstasy (*ἔκστασις*; Greek word for “standing outside of yourself”), and doing things people would not normally do if they were not in love. People in love behave like children, or worse. They are irresponsible, as if walking on clouds, as if living in their own and not in our shared world: they laugh when no one else sees anything funny, they use their own “language” that does not mean anything to anyone else, they kiss where they are not supposed to, they forget about their former friends, about their homework, about their practice, and about calling their parents at regular intervals. They spend hours and hours on the phone, talking to each other even though they just separated a few minutes ago, only to spend more time together and more hours on the phone tomorrow.

Why we fall in love with one particular individual and not any other is quite mystifying. The twelfth-century troubadours spoke about the meeting of two individuals’ eyes, but why the eyes of two particular individuals meet, and not those of countless others, that will surely always remain a mystery.

We do not like to admit that, in our passion for another unique individual, there may be much that is impersonal. A ten-year-old boy would not feel an impulse to find a mate, but this urge becomes normal and strong in an eighteen-year-old man. The urge is to find *a* mate, a physically and socially adequate mate to be sure, but not this one or that one in particular. This urge is so primal that we often associate it with animal instincts.

In the course of evolution, this drive has manifested itself differently in animals and humans. As Dudley Young explains in his book, *Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War*, due to the anatomical transformations in the body of a woman, a sexual act has changed from “a ten-second jump and a shriek” to something altogether formidable. The repositioning of the female genitals, the increased use of hands, and the standing position of both partners, have enabled the human sexual act to become an eye-to-eye confrontation, which in turn led to increased tenderness. Even if such changes were not the only ones in the transformation from

the pure release of sexual tension to lovemaking, they were indispensable and decisive. They enabled the human sexual act to become far more than just a blind push from behind, followed by the release of a physiological tension. It became an interplay of two individuals and their wills, an aspiration worthy of dedication and effort, something that draws us forward.

The changes that emerged in the process of evolution were not always adaptive. The most far-reaching changes were stimulated by curiosity, playfulness, and desire for fun. What had helped the humans separate themselves from the rest of the animal world had not been the “survival of the fittest,” but the playful experiments of those who were most daring and imaginative. Many of these experiments had no doubt misfired, and some were mal-adaptive. But some worked, and that made all the difference—with respect to love, as well as numerous other aspects of human life.

There is an underpinning to these bold and imaginative experiments that has been rarely recognized. It consists in a *desire to be more and become more than we already are*. We are so driven that we are never quite content with what we possess and with who we are; we desire to become more than what Mother Nature carved (out) for us. While the rest of the animal world followed Mother Nature’s script, we developed our own ideas as to what the world and the human life in it should be like. For better and for worse, we managed to implement a few. Love is one of them.

Love is not something that just happens to exist in nature; it was invented by human beings. Young insists that we should be more precise: love was invented by women. (Men, according to Young, invented the counterpart of love: war.) The significance of this insight that love was invented by women could hardly be overstated. To this day men still like to roam around, looking for an enemy to fight, booty to collect, a territory to conquer, or a woman to seduce. Woman has established her position in the center of the theater of love, around which male must circle and for whose favors he must compete against other males. Used to pushing and shoving to get what he likes from time immemorial, man still finds

himself at a loss as to what woman really wants and how to win her heart. The love-games have never been his strongest suit. A tattoo piercing, with her initials inscribed within a heart, may be one way to get her attention; but is it going to be enough? In our days, media teach young men that a body with chiseled muscles may take them further, but what if someone else dressed in a nice suite presented her with a golden necklace? Or a wedding ring?

From a woman's point of view, neither man's bravado, nor his biceps, nor an expensive gift may be sufficient to win her heart. It may be wise that, for once, the male population starts paying more attention to female concerns. Think, for example, of our story of Laza and Lenka: How and why did a twenty-one-year-old Lenka fall in love with a fifty-year-old man, when she had so many young suitors around her?

Lenka's journal is our main source of information about their relationship. She mused in it about their time together, about the attention he paid to her, and about the challenges he posed to her. They found a way to have long walks alone in the morning, and an additional hour or two to themselves late at night, when the rest of the household was gone to bed. The poet complimented her, but also critically pointed out the ways in which she could improve her piano playing, or her writing, or even what would look good on her and how she should pose for her next portrait. Her journal reveals:

My days are flowing with amazing quickness in *Herr* Laza's company. It is impossible to be bored next to him. What stories from different parts of the world, what human destinies, what anecdotes! From the bottom of my heart I laughed at one of his adventures from Cetinje. Compared to his life experiences, all my knowledge acquired in Budapest and Vienna seems as if made of paper. Indeed, my life experiences are thin. And I imagined myself as experienced and educated! Only through and with *Herr* Laza do I see what life is really like!

¹ Lenka's private journal has been published, in fragments or as a whole, in various publications in Serbia. It has not yet been translated into English. All translations from Lenka's journal, and from Laza's "Dream Diary," are my own.

Notice this last expression! Through him and with him, Lenka learned what life is really like; through him and with him, she wanted to experience life in its fullness; through him and with him, she was becoming a different person.

The next entry reveals yet another side of their relationship, which Lenka embraced with joy and gratitude:

Herr Laza is teaching me English and I am starting to understand this language as well, yet I am still far from being able to converse in it. He says that the most beautiful human tragedy is composed in this language. It is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the translation of which he recently published in *Letopis*. I asked *Herr* Laza to bring me his translation of this majestic tragedy, to read it transformed into his sweet words, in the language called Serbian. I promised him that I would also master English because of this tragedy, to which he added: "I hope that our story will not turn out like that." I firmly gripped his hand.

Laza and Lenka's attachment grew with every passing week. Although their relationship remained on the level of "Platonic" love, it was charged with intense erotic desires. Perhaps man's erotic desire is more obvious, while woman's is conditioned by her expectation that man must first win her heart, before she shares with him her body. As Pearl Buck instructs in a book intended for her daughters (*To My Daughters with Love*), a woman wants to love a man before engaging into any kind of intimacy with him. By her nature, claims Buck, woman must admire before she can love. She longs to love him with confidence in his mature integrity. Woman yearns to respect her man in order to love him with her whole heart, her whole mind, and her whole body; it is only when she loves him with her heart and mind that she can love him also with her body. As Plato would say, woman craves to love man with her entire soul.

Loving with the entire soul creates a kind of intimacy that both redefines the boundary of one's sense of personal identity and leads to a degree of satisfaction that can be so intense that it is rarely matched by other forms of human experience. Pearl Buck does not

venture into that realm, but Robert Nozick describes it in his book, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*:

In sexual intimacy, we admit the partner within our boundaries or make these more permeable, showing our own passions, capacities, fantasies, and excitements, and responding to the other's. We might diagram sexual intimacy as two circles overlapping with dotted lines. There *are* boundaries between the partners here, yet these boundaries are permeable, not solid. Hence, we can understand the oceanic feeling, the sense of merging, that sometimes occurs with intense sexual experience.

Nozick's remarks lead him in the direction similar to one in which Young goes following his insight that the fundamental metaphysical impulse guiding human choices is the "desire to be more." It is important to realize that this desire is not just practically directed. In its deepest layer, it is connected with the emergence of the central religious idea of something by its nature bigger and greater, more beautiful and perfect than any familiar object in our surroundings. Nozick similarly points out that sexual intimacy does not only enable us to experience a deep sense of bonding with another person and the expansion of our personal boundaries; through such intimacy we can also engage in getting to know the body and person of another as a microcosm of the deepest reality, as a clue to its nature and purpose.

Erotic love, coupled by sexual intimacy with the beloved person, may bring together all aspects of reality: from the biological to the metaphysical, from the most subterranean to the most elevated. Erotic love can lift us up to the top of the world.

THE BROKEN HEART

My father never wanted to reveal to me the story behind his tattoo, even when I grew up. My uncle did. Yes, the uncle told me, they loved each other passionately. Before his military service, they were always together, inseparable. He asked her to wait for him,

and she promised that no other man would ever exist for her. The letters went both ways, at least once a week. He was entitled to come home for a visit after every six months of his eighteen-month long service, and he always came to be with her. His second visit coincided with the first anniversary of their dating, and it was then that he had the tattoo with her initials inscribed on his arm. It was during the same visit that he learned that her parents were opposed to their daughter being so close to him; from a poor family, with an unfinished high school education and without a job, he was by no means a promising match. Despite the opposition from her parents, she vowed to wait for him and love no one else.

Soon after, her letters became less and less frequent, even as he wrote more and more. In the last three months of his service, he received no letter at all. With a heart tormented by suspicion, he returned home and quickly found out that she had married two months before. Like an obsessed man, he circled around her new home for days and nights, until he finally managed to speak with her alone. He was convinced that she must have been forced into marriage and told her that he had prepared everything for them to run abroad together. She shocked him by telling him that she was happily in love with her husband. Nobody forced her to get married, but she gradually fell in love with another man. She apologized for hurting his feelings and begged him, in the name of their past happiness together, to let her live her new life and never to look for her again.

Lenka's journal tells a similar story. Her first year of knowing Laza was blissful. They were together almost every day and could not have enough of each other. One morning, while in the company of others, Laza followed her around with the look that told her that he had a pressing question for her, that there was a burden on his heart. When they were finally alone, he asked her whether it was true that she would marry the crown prince of Monte Negro. Lenka immediately countered that such rumors had nothing to do with her wishes and feelings. Looking him in the eyes, she told him

that she could marry only a man like him, but that she had never met anyone else like him. She also let him know that, as the youngest child (of five) and her father's favorite, she would not be forced to marry for money or title; her father would respect the desire of her heart and let her marry the man of her choice.

Lenka probably overestimated what her father was willing to do for his favorite child, and how far he would let her deviate from the social norms. The poet told her nothing about it, but perhaps he knew his friend better than Lenka knew her father. To Lenka's disappointment, Laza did not follow his jealous outburst either with the declaration of his love, or with what she more eagerly expected: his proposal of marriage. Instead, and to Lenka's growing frustration, "*Herr Laza*" started secluding himself in his room in order "to work," and even leaving the estate to spend some time at a monastery (Krušedol) located about thirty-five miles away. His visits and letters became less frequent. She aimlessly wondered through the hallways and rooms of the estate, or spent hours riding horses, to pass time, to be alone with her memories and dreams.

After a long period of painful silence, a letter from him arrived just before her twenty-third birthday. Lenka read his letter so many times that she learned it by heart. She was ecstatic to receive his letter but confused by its content. Laza wrote how the distance cleared up his mind and his heart, although Lenka herself felt that everything between them had become more confusing. He loved her more than ever, he confessed in his letter, yet he should not love her. Is that what a lover should write to his beloved, she wondered.

When she summoned enough courage to talk to her parents about her desire to marry *Herr Laza*, there was tension in the air. To Lenka's surprise, her mother spoke first and asked what she saw in this man when there were so many better matches for her. To her bitter disappointment, her beloved father, the head of the household with whom the decision ultimately rested, took Lenka even less seriously. He laughed at the impatience of his daughter and avoided answering her question by telling her that, in the end,

she will have to be the one to propose, not the other way around—which was unthinkable at the time and among their social class.

And then—silence. Lenka's parents did not want to discuss it anymore. The poet was gone, her passionate letters unanswered, yet she would not give up. "I will fight for him," Lenka wrote in her journal, "and I will win him over. He needs me! I will ask him to come, immediately, here, and I will never let him go again! Not without me!"

Things did not unfold the way Lenka hoped. We do not know what exactly she wrote to him, but we can guess. One way or another, no letter came back, nor did Laza attend her twenty-third birthday party. Despite his absence, she thought of him the entire day. With a growing melancholy, she wrote in her diary that all she had, as a memory from their summer together, was a dried white rose. He picked this rose and kissed it before giving it to her, which she pressed to her heart so many times and which she kept in her journal. This dried flower was her most cherished indication that she was not imagining that once they were so happy next to each other, that every day had been like a dream.

Days and nights passed, in pain, tears, and disappointment. Laza kept himself away. Even during an occasional, all-too-rare visit, he was distant. When Lenka managed to be with him alone, he told her strange things, for instance that she should marry his friend and famous scientist and inventor from New York, Nikola Tesla. She was insulted. She did not want Tesla, regardless of his fame. She did not want anyone but him. Him alone!¹

A few months later, Lenka experienced an even greater insult: *Herr* Laza married his former fiancé. The man for whom she was

¹ Laza did indeed write to Tesla on June 12, 1895, urging him to marry Lenka. Tesla (1856–1943), who was fifteen-year-younger than Laza and who already was famous as a brilliant but eccentric inventor, was considered one of the most desirable bachelors of New York City around that time. Tesla thanked his concerned friend and responded that he was already married, that he dedicated his life to science, and that no woman was ever able to usurp the place of science in his life. Laza later (on December 31, 1895) informed Tesla of his own wedding and of Lenka's sudden death.

ready to give her life wedded another woman! An old and rich woman! Devastated and depressed, Lenka refused to attend the wedding, although her father was the best man and the whole family was invited. She escaped to Vienna, to be alone in her pain.

The news got increasingly worse for Lenka, for with his wife Laza went to Venice, to the place of which he spoke to her so many times. He used to tell her for hours of a magnificent church there, splashed by blue waves of the Adriatic Sea, blue like the color of Lenka's eyes. He told her about a painting of the black Madonna with a child which greets the visitors inside, the Madonna of peace and salvation. He imagined how the two of them would visit this unique basilica and pay tribute to the majestic Madonna. Another woman was there with him now, listening to his melodious voice, as his beloved, as his wife, taking Lenka's place. Where was the peace and salvation for Lenka in all of that?

Tolstoy said in the opening lines of *Anna Karenina* that all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. This is true for all couples in love, married or not. What is more, in the theater of love, the unhappy endings are far more common than the happy ones.

In the theater of life, struggle is normal. Life is a series of ordeals, in which we are tested, sometimes severely, to the limits of our endurance, faith, and love.

Love excites us and stirs our imagination. Only when the heart is broken and the dreams burst in front of us like soap bubbles do we realize how easily and how far we can drift away from the real world, carried on the wings of love. Despite the common saying that love makes us blind, which may hold true when the heart becomes excited, love could be a great, if not the greatest, teacher of what the real world is like. When we fall in love and all goes as in a dream, we dream of two individuals merging and becoming one. We long to become like one soul in two bodies. Carried away by our desires, we yearn for unity and oneness, convinced that it must be nothing but destiny that brought us together with our beloved.

It all looks fantastic and natural at the same time: something we have been waiting for all those years, something we “knew” must come and happen to us, something that blurs the boundaries between the real and the ideal.

It is hard to explain why the expectations of perfect love, of an unbreakable bond, and of the happiest union are so deeply ingrained in our souls. The answer has to be entrenched deeper than a steady diet of romantic stories that the media feed us with all our lives. It is furthermore easy to overlook the fact that a romantic connection is not simply a dual relationship. Love virtually always turns out to be a triangular or, even more precisely, a multi-member relationship. It includes other interested parties, social norms and expectations, as well as the ideals and aspirations of those who fall in love.

None of that complexity seems relevant until at least one heart feels broken. Yet, love enables us to discover reality, even if with a broken heart we stubbornly refuse to do so. Instead of looking into the world straight on, we more often choose to keep pushing our head in the sand and blame our destiny, or our partner, for betraying us.

If it is true that love demands courage and maturity, a broken heart requires them even more so. Love hurts, and love that hurts the most is the one that looked so perfect—like no other love has ever been. In the wisdom of his old age, Joseph Campbell wrote that love itself is a pain: “the pain of being truly alive.” That pain of being truly alive means embracing our life experiences and cherishing them—with their high tides and low tides. English painter and poet, David Harkins, describes this experience in a more detailed manner in his poem “Remember Me”:

*You can shed tears that she is gone,
or you can smile because she has lived.
You can close your eyes and pray that she'll come back,
or you can open your eyes and see all she's left.
Your heart can be empty because you can't see her,
or you can be full of the love you shared.
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday,*

*or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.
You can remember her only that she is gone,
or you can cherish her memory and let it live on.
You can cry and close your mind,
be empty and turn your back.
Or you can do what she'd want:
smile, open your eyes, love and go on.*

THE HARDENED HEART

With a broken heart, my father ran away. He went to live in a different part of the country, became a teacher and taught in a small mountain village in Bosnia for a few years. Eventually, when he met my mother, just graduating from a teacher's high school, they fell in love and married. Only then, with a wife, a son two-years-old and another child on the way, did my father return to Sombor, the town where he grew up and to which he longed to return. When I was a teenager, he had the tattoo removed. He was embarrassed by it, because it reminded him not of the person he wanted to forget, but of a part of his life he outgrew. My parents have been married for fifty-plus years, and at the age of eighty-four, my father is remarkably vital and healthy. The scars on his left arm are barely visible, and for the last five decades his heart has—for the most part—remained where it should be.

Lenka was not so lucky. The separation from her beloved poet, his marriage and, to her eyes, his ultimate betrayal, were too much to bear. When her family informed her of the news of his marriage, Lenka was crushed:

Everything is finished! He is married. But, his betrayal of our relationship, of our words to each other, would be less painful had he personally informed me, had we seen each other once more. Nothing from him, only the news of that ... Oh, heaven! It is an act by which he likely wanted to hurt me, to destroy me to the end—could he have been more cruel? And to invite my

father as his best man! A perfect crime, without any trace left! (My father accepted, of course, and in that moment [when I heard the news] I wished to disappear. To disappear for a long time, and not only while he is getting married, but to disappear forever!)

Less than two months later, Lenka's father summoned her to come home from Vienna. She longed to return, until she heard that the newly-weds were invited to her twenty-sixth birthday party. *Her* birthday party! The humiliations were just piling up and becoming unbearable. Lenka decided not to return and excused herself with illness. Was she really ill? Was she having the symptoms of typhus, which was officially the cause of her impending death?

In her journal, Lenka does not mention any illness. Instead, she writes about her "determination," about her "final decision," about her "parting gift." There are two entries written on the last day of her life. They are probably not written both at once, but they point in the same direction. The first says:

I do not know yet, and cannot see to the end but ... I feel that everything is decided, and since I felt this, there has been peace in me; it has made me strangely serene, as before. As if everything has suddenly fallen into its place. If that is the price of my earlier serenity, I gladly go in its direction. I am only waiting now for my birthday. Everything is as pure and clear, like a crystal. This is the only possible thing. I am pacified and serene, after all. After such a long time. Instead of him giving me a birthday gift, I will give him a gift. An eternal gift. Which will tie us forever.

Then comes a bit of an empty space, followed by Lenka's very last entry, written on the same page and on the same day. It is clear that something was broken in her heart, and she thought the loss was irreparable. Why, then, continue to suffer? Why continue to live? In her words:

Tomorrow is my twenty-sixth birthday. What have I experienced in these last five years? Only suffering. Love is suffering

and I will not be able to love any more. Then why live without love? To sit forever in my parents' home? For I cannot love any more. Yes, tomorrow is my birthday. To myself and to him, I will give the most precious gift: the gift that is eternal and that cannot be forgotten. At least as long as he is alive. He will know. He will understand everything.

After Lenka's premature death, there were many speculations as to how she died, including that she had died during an abortion. Her family always claimed that she died of typhoid fever, and in one entry of his Dream Diary, written more than ten years after Lenka's death, Laza seemed to believe the same thing. Yet his poem written in Lenka's honor, "Santa Maria della Salute," did not mention typhoid fever but indicated that she died of a broken heart. It is possible that she both had typhus and also was deeply depressed and committed suicide. In one of her journal entries, written about year and a half before her death (summer of 1894), she mentioned that she bought sleeping pills in a pharmacy in Vienna, and that the pharmacist warned her not to take a higher dose than prescribed because it would be "a slippage from one sleep to another." Lenka described herself standing in front of the pharmacy moments later, thinking: "From one sleep to another? Maybe that is exactly what I would need."



Many of us experience the pain of a broken heart. At least in principle and in the long run, it is good for our mental health and life-affirmation that it is so. Many people with a broken heart do not follow the path of either my father or of Lenka, but linger somewhere in between. When the wounds do not heal, there are two typical ways to proceed. One is to recognize that we need love and that we must prepare ourselves better for the next love-adventure. Because we want to be loved so badly, there is a danger that we may give too much power to the opinion others have of us. In our market-oriented world, this means that we need to make ourselves more desirable. Just as we "beef-up" our resumes to make ourselves wor-

thier candidates for a job, we improve our appearances to make ourselves look more attractive to a potential “buyer.” New clothes and shoes, haircuts or makeup, piercings and even new tattoos can help our case—or so we hope.

A less optimistic alternative is to come to believe that we do not need love, after all. To the statement, “But surely people always want love,” a wise-guy character (Gus) in Salley Vickers’ novel, *The Other Side of You*, responds: “They don’t. They want candyfloss and reassurance. They want security and pats on the back and someone to tuck them up in bed and cuddle them. Love isn’t that. It’s difficult. And demanding. And a nuisance. And bloody absent much of the bloody time.”

All true, as any recently divorced, separated, or broken-hearted individual would testify. Instead of dreaming about another, luckier love, it is more “realistic” to harden our hearts, so that they cannot break again. “I am a rock,” sang Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, “and a rock feels no pain.” The song was simply destined to become a great hit. Besides the beautiful accompaniment of Simon and Garfunkel’s voices, it hit the never missing broken-hearted population right in the nerve by advising: become like a rock, become numb, and you will feel no pain. Nobody can hurt you anymore.

This memorable song was released in 1966, exactly half a century ago. Today’s version of it might be something along the lines of: “I am a smart phone,” “I am a computer,” or, simply, “I am a machine.” I am a machine with no heart; I am part of the dead technological world where things are measured not in terms of the depth of their feelings but in terms of their efficiency. Although our world clearly suffers from a “love deficiency disorder,” we keep hearing the stubbornly repeated reassurance that what the world needs is not love but good technique and discipline. Who needs a heart, who needs love, when we have machines and are becoming machines ourselves?

Our market-oriented world complicates the matter. We do not need to play the role of sellers (selling ourselves), but the role of

buyers (buying pleasure for ourselves). To the frozen heart and the soul starving for love, we respond by a shameless commercial exploitation of love and, even more so, of sex. What Vickers' character Gus does not say is that the "candyfloss" of our time is sex. We are not only over-stimulated by it, but sex is readily available. Whatever people need, the magic of the market delivers!

While the Victorian age tried to have love without sex, we want sex without love. Sex has become our magical substitute for love. We have commercialized and sanitized it, so that it can be viewed as a form of "therapy." Our tireless sex industry is making sure that our desires for more sexual pleasures are never satiated, even if, in the process of making us chase more fun and orgasms, they become ever more perverse.

As Rollo May observes in his book *Love and Will*, we have learned to become "sexual athletes"; we can almost effortlessly switch directly from work to fun, without getting the heart involved in either form of activity. Based on the decades of psychiatric practice, May calls our society "schizophrenic" and characterizes a typical contemporary schizoid personality as intelligent, articulate, efficient, successful at work, but detached in personal intercourse and afraid of intimate relationships.

Instead of the intimacy that Nozick describes, instead of yearning to find a kindred soul with whom we can expand the borders of our personality and experience the greatest closeness of which human beings are capable, we look for an exercise partner. When you think about it, does it make that much difference whether an exercise partner is needed for running, or tennis, or sex?

Frederick Salomon Perls captures this contemporary attitude:

I do my thing and you do your thing.

I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,

And you are not in this world to live up to mine.

You are you, and I am I,

And if by chance we find each other,

It's beautiful.

If not, it can't be helped.

Perls' point is no less honest and insightful than Nozick's: "I do my thing and you do your thing ..." If we don't find each other, "it can't be helped." And if "it can't be helped," if our "love life" is as mechanical and emotionally detached as our work, then we have succeeded in damaging our humanity to a considerable degree. If the fear of love and the fear of life lead us to shrink back toward infantilism or primitivism, what happens to our humanity? What happens to our lives? Is life without love and a path without heart really what we want?

I wish my father had been willing to share with me the story behind his tattoo, and also to tell me how he handled the pain of the broken heart. It must have hurt a lot, yet his heart did not freeze. The pain did not make him fear love and run away from it. Since this happens to many other people, how did he find the courage to love again, and probably do so more maturely, rather than to look for a substitute for love?

If only Lenka had revealed to us in her journal whether she ever felt the fear of being loved. She certainly did not feel the fear of loving another person; if anything, to her poet her eagerness to love must have sometimes seemed overwhelming. Was she ever afraid that, young and relatively inexperienced as she was, she would not be wealthy enough (in the spiritual sense) to adequately return the love of a more mature man? Lenka's journal does not reveal such fear. What was her confidence based on? Did she feel that, guided by the love of the man she adored with such complete devotion, she would grow to be his match? Or at least his support and his confidant?

Lenka unquestionably believed that if she married her "*Herr Laza*," she would be able to flourish and also enable him to continue creating while enjoying the warmth of the homely hearth. She was convinced that, if married to him, their love and mutual support would be strong enough to overcome the numerous obstacles and differences between them.

Were Lenka's convictions well grounded? Or were they just an expression of a naïve youthful enthusiasm?

2. Hearth

The first experience of fire must have been related to the thunderbolt descending from the sky, at the time and place we could neither predict nor control. From the very beginning, our ancestors did not isolate fire from a cluster of the related *pneuma*-like phenomena (πνεῦμα). They understood that fire and blood, wind and breath, sexual drive and love have much in common: they are the energies that flow, rather than solid, material things. Such energies are precious, yet precariously hard to control.

Our ancestors eventually succeed in domesticating fire by placing it on the ground and surrounding it by stones and rocks, by building a hearth. Since the winds blowing around could take our fire out, in due course they added the walls and a roof around the hearth as well. The presence of the hearth made it easier to find the right distance from fire: being too close would burn us, while standing too far would leave us cold. It also brought a sense of order, permanence, and closure.

The desire for order, permanence, and closure characterize our social life and differentiate it from the unpredictable, uncontrollable, and open-ended natural processes. The domestication of fire and the building of hearth may have thus been the first monumental victories of the socializing impulses over the unregulated drives of nature. One way to express this relationship between society and nature is to say, with Lao-tse, that “high stands on low.” The Western version, however, had been fundamentally different: “high stands on law.” This relationship was often articulated in terms of the victory of *logos* (λόγος) over *eros* (ἔρως). Heraclitus, who spoke of “the ever-burning fire,” compared a structure, order and closure

imposed by logos with a line, a wall, and a law; the law is the wall, he said, that establishes a line that separates right from wrong, true from false, the desirable from the undesirable. This logos reveals to us the *nomos* (νόμος), the law and the law-lines that differentiate. Understood in this original sense, eros and logos work against each other: eros brings together and unites, while logos differentiates and separates.

Nobody knows for sure when we domesticated sexual passion and love (and violence!?), but we did it in ways analogous to the one we used with fire. Biologically and psychologically, we have both sexes in us. To avoid any confusion, we drew the law-lines between the appropriate and the inappropriate sex and love and erected the symbolic walls between them. One of the first such walls separated outbreeding from inbreeding. Darwin, Freud, Durkheim, Morgan, and Levi-Strauss disagree how exogamy originated, but they concur that allowing marriage only outside one's narrow social group (kin) was decisive for the establishment of human society.

Drawing of the law-lines around the sexual and love flames, together with the taming of fire, enabled us to create a map of reality in order to orient ourselves in it. In this process we treated fire, sexual passion, and love (and violence) as our tools, as having an instrumental value: their value consists in the protection, maintenance, and advancement of human society. In the second stage of the development, eros and logos did not work against each other but together: logos selected which of eros' desires are acceptable and then found a way to make them realized. What delineates, reveals, and differentiates may at the same time obscure, hide, and deceive. The Greeks personified this secondary sense of logos as "Metis." This goddess of skill, craft, and wisdom was a cunning and deceitful deity; sometimes she even outsmarted herself, just as we do.

A further course of social development brought a third stage in the relationship of eros and logos. Logos now assumed the central position, while eros was relegated to the periphery, sometimes expelled from the socially erect hearth altogether. Logos became so

important that it looked like its own purpose; it became wrong to violate the law regardless of what the law regulated and what the circumstances and motives for the violation of the law might be. Whether that *logos* reveals or conceals, it is the law and it is the final word. With respect to our discussion of sexual passion and love, when they are bounded within the institutional walls we call marriage, this *logos* is so sanctified that *eros* suffers, even suffocates or petrifies, within its bounds. By our nature, we seem to desire many erotic adventures and sexual partners. For better and for worse, the dominant *logos* of our social life has been that of monogamy, regulated through the institution of marriage.

We live in an age that is profoundly disoriented. Since our social institutions have lost a needed wisdom and authority to guide us toward a balanced life, we have to reexamine the cunning wisdom behind our own social inventions and laws, as they pertain to our efforts to tame sexual passion and love. All too often the institution of marriage holds the wedded partners as prisoners, even when their hearts' desires have long parted and all that is left of their marriage are the empty walls, with no fire between them. Instead of becoming a home in which its inhabitants flourish, a hearth circled by the walls becomes a cave in which they are trapped. Could it be that marriage was an invention of frightened human beings, motivated originally by no better motives than the fears of remaining alone and the selfish regards for ownership? Are order, permanence, and closure that we try to accomplish in our social life through the institution of marriage really as indispensable as we have been tacitly assuming for centuries? What if they themselves are the veils that obstruct more than they liberate us from the tyranny of the natural drives and instincts?

Perhaps all these concerns could be expressed in the most focused way through the following two questions: Are our social regulations and institutions the optimal ways to harness the energies of sex and love? Can society absorb and secure the energies of sex and love without suffocating or petrifying them in the process of their domestication?

A VEIL OF CUSTOM

Desire and fear are the natural engines driving our behavior related to sex and love. My father's tattoo was an expression of a youthful longing for love that will last forever. Marriage is a social institution that regulates how such a love can be sealed eternally; it also determines when such a bonding is appropriate and when not. In its extreme cases of prohibition, society establishes certain taboos that should prevent inappropriate love relations and sexual encounters from happening. How do we get from tattoos to taboos?

In discussing these issues anthropologists use a distinction between chaos and pollution. They believe that, as a child of nature, the primitive man must have lived in the world full of chaos and pollution. Chaos literally means a place that is no-place. Symbolically, it means a wasteland, a lack of order. Such lack of order, or the lack of a clear distinction between the center and a periphery, creates a feeling of confusion and disorientation.

Pollution is not a spatial but a temporal phenomenon; it is an event in time that points to the contamination of something that should be preserved unsoiled. Pollution has two main manifestations: dirt and blood. Dirt may be wiped out, but what to do about unclean blood?

The primitive man must have been greatly puzzled by blood, since it played a prominent role in all mythologies and religions of the world. What baffled him was not just what that mysterious "substance" is and where it comes from, since it so different from ordinary material things. The main puzzle was always related to stopping the shedding of innocent blood. Once violence is unleashed, there arises the bewildering problem of how to contain its deadly tendency from further spreading, and how then to cleanse its dangerous pollution.

Pollution is not due to violence only, but to sex as well. To this day, "puritans" experience sexual intercourse as something dirty if it does not aim at reproduction. Even those not so puritanical agree

that when sex is promiscuous, it leads to chaos. In addition, we experience sex as polluted in a far more disturbing sense when it involves those who should be outside its reach (for instance: children or mentally ill). Moreover, just as the unleashing of violence signified to the primitive man a coming into presence of the usually absent divinity, the outpouring of erotic energy has similar symbolism, in many of its manifestations. Think, for example, about a womb in which a child is conceived and out of which it comes to the world. To the primitive man, the womb must have been the first sacred space, however bloody and violent was the affair of giving birth.

While speaking about pollution in her book, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas maintains that primitive people did not differentiate between sacredness and uncleanness. The separating lines had yet to be drawn with any precision. The lines had gradually become sharper, even though the gray areas remain. Continuing this line of thought, René Girard defends a view that violence is at the heart of the sacred. Girard claims that the scapegoat motive comes from the conviction that violence must be used to drive off violence. What he does not observe is that a similar approach was applied to sex: sex was used to drive off sex. Still incredulous to the modern mind is the practice of religious festivals in many parts of the world—including the ancient India, Greece, and Judea—during which in one night there would be an unrestrained and seemingly chaotic sexual intercourse among those present, involving the participation of married men and women from the most respected families. The rationale behind such festivals was that one promiscuous night like that was both needed and sufficient to ward off the chaotic and polluting danger of sex for the rest of the year. (The remnant of those festivals is the carnival season, which comes before the Lent.)

The transformation from nature to society had to involve establishing some sense of social orientation and widely accepted law-lines. Initially, there may have been only one line, which separated the permissible and the socially approved behavior from that

which was not. In the second stage, out of one line emerged two. Let us say that one is fixed in the north-south position, while the other is diagonally intercrossing it, with the angle between them slowly increasing (if looked from the top), until, finally, we get two lines crossing under the angle of ninety degrees. Symbolically speaking, then, our orientation relies on two axes: north-south (from top to bottom) and east-west (from right to left). The north-south axis corresponds to the division between the sacred and the profane; the east-west axis represents the distinction between right and wrong. The sacred-profane distinction is created to avert the dangers of pollution. The right-wrong line deals with the threat of chaos. We can visually represent this figure as follows:

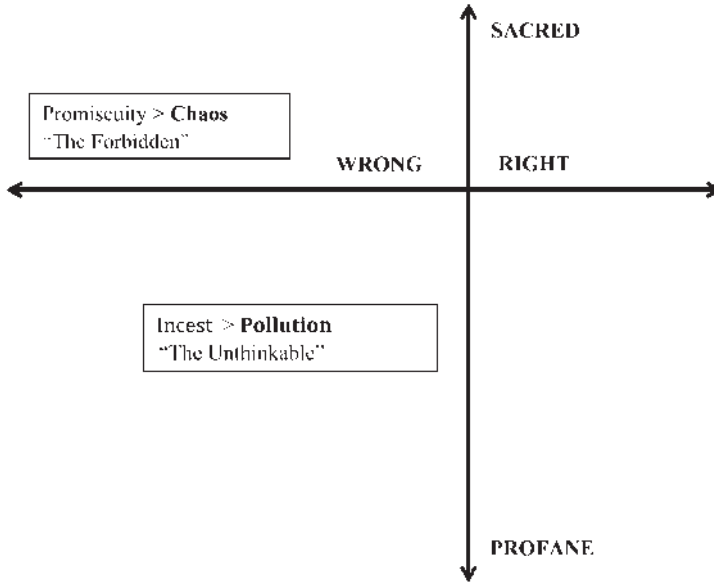


Figure 1: *The Orientation Cross*

How did we get to this cross-shaped structure of orientation with regard to sex? The blind drives of eros pose numerous threats, but there are two central dangers against which any society must protect itself. One deals with incest, the other with promiscuous

sex. At one point or another, the polluting dangers of incest must have been perceived as more serious of the two. To form a society is to form a sense of kin: the line must be drawn between those who are in and those who are out. The most frequent bonding unit is family and virtually every known society has tried to eliminate sex among the members of the same family—unless, of course, they are husband and wife. The greatest taboo is to allow sexual intercourse among those who are closely related by blood: especially parents and children, but also among the siblings.

Sexual promiscuity is perceived as a danger for fear that it may lead to an utter chaos. Yet, unlike incest, there are exceptions to this rule. Whether their power is based on political, monetary, or religious basis, the most powerful male members of virtually every society feel entitled to special privileges; they want to be above the law. While little has changed in the course of evolution with regard to the incest taboos, the social regulations as to promiscuity vary from one society to another, and from one era to another.

The domestication of sex and violence (and later love) was far more important for the transition from nature to society than the domestication of fire. The sense of orientation developed in the process of taming sex (and violence) led to the establishment of two socializing impulses which characterize any society to this day: rationality and morality. In the early stages of the development they were probably less distinguishable than nowadays. Rationality in general deals with an establishment of the foundational order and structure. The rationality impulse concerns more directly with the sacred-profane axis, and it deals with the establishment of taboos far more important than just the ordinary law-lines. Violating the sacred is irrational in the strongest possible sense: society treats it as undermining the possibility of our common living. In short, incest is something that should be *unthinkable*.

Morality is more directly focused on the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil. The social impulses of rationality and morality establish a veil of custom that marks the victory of

society over nature. The veil screens our desires and fears with a discriminating line between the permissible and impermissible, obligatory and non-obligatory.



Should the veil of custom placed over the natural energies be thin or thick? Is the veil to be thin enough to allow for the intimations of what is on the other side? Or should it be so thick to conceal the ostracized tendencies as much as possible?

Our answers to these questions determine our attitude toward sex and love. If we can absorb and transform the sexual energy without blocking it or killing it off, we hold a more favorable opinion about sex (and love); sex can then be positively incorporated into our religious practices and beliefs. If, by contrast, we approach the sexual energy with the negative attitude characteristic of Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity, sex is generally ostracized. Such a negative attitude usually leads to a division between the body and the soul, with the sexual energy associated with the body and restrained to a limited number of cases and situations. This kind of orientation also affects our sense of identity, both as human beings and as unique individuals.

Numerous religious traditions assume that sexual energy is not just a biological drive but also the metaphysical root of man's being—“high stands on low.” It is thus something not to be restrained or eliminated, but rather preserved and ennobled to the greatest possible degree. The best-known religious example of such admiration for sexual energy is Hinduism; its central religious symbols are *lingam* (the male organ) and *yoni* (the female counterpart; the womb). The “pagan” religions in general contain many sex-related rites, which are practiced in the course of worship of their most honored divinities.

As Edward Carpenter sums it up in his book, *The Origins of Pagan and Christian Beliefs*:

Sexual relationships are so deep and intimate a part of human nature that from the first it has been simply impossible to keep

them out of religion—it being of course the object of religion to bring the whole human being into some intelligible relation with the physical, moral, and if you like supernatural order of the great world around him. Sex was felt from the first to be part, and a fundamental part, of the great order of the world and of human nature; and therefore to separate it from religion was unthinkable and a kind of contradiction in terms.

Sexual energy is thus considered as something that must be assimilated into a cultured life, rather than eliminated or severely restrained. The pagan religions that incorporate sexual energy have been focused either on fertility, or, in more sophisticated cases (as in Taoism and Hinduism), on the union of the two separate sexes as representative of the overall cosmic union. Their message has been, roughly: if the begetting of children is something divine, so are the organs and the acts on which it depends.

Christianity's answer is that the begetting of any child may or may not be divine, but the begetting of the Son of God certainly was; that was an act of the Immaculate Conception. Christianity also advances its own peculiar view about the unity of the opposite sexes. The moralizing impulse of Christianity insists on a dualistic worldview; insofar as this dualism could be overcome and the union with God accomplished, it could be done by spiritual means only. Christianity purposely disentangles itself from sex as much as possible and shifts the attention in the direction of love, understood as *agape*. St Paul was the first Christian to take seriously the Greek association of sexuality with a demonic force. Just like a display of violence, the erotic longing can go awry and the demonic madness can take over. This is why the Christian veil of custom has to be so thick.¹

¹ It should also be noted that Paul was so preoccupied with the expectation of the Parousia or Second Coming that he recommended that people not get married. He saw that “the appointed time has grown very short,” that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and he wanted to finish his missionary work in the known world of his time before the Lord's Second Coming.

St Augustine further developed this line of understanding of sex and love. As his autobiographic *Confessions* reveal, he himself was for a long time under the spell of the erotic demon. But he learned how to exorcise it and he wanted to lead others away from the erotic madness and toward the love of God. The demonic appeal of sexuality, according to St Augustine, results in our turning toward the body and in deviating from our God-given spiritual nature. Evil is but a deprivation of goodness. Our sexuality has to be repressed so that we can return to the original goodness, to the source of love, and become spiritual beings. St Augustine was so convinced in the power of God's love and its benevolent influence over our lives that he coined a memorable phrase: "Love God and do what you will." The love of God is a veil that separates our animality from our humanity. It justifies all our endeavors, as long as they be performed with the love of God in our hearts.

As elevating as this view appears to be, it makes us wonder whether our sincere love of God would justify even the incorporation of an occasional noble lie into the veil of custom. Perhaps a noble lie about the sanctity of marriage?

THE NOBLE LIE OF MARRIAGE

Laza Kostić married Juliana Palanački on September 22, 1895. He was fifty-four, she was forty-six, and the local jesters soon created a little rhyme about the blissful couple that, when their years were added up, they were one hundred-years-old. Other than that small embarrassment, everything else was socially appropriate. Neither the groom nor the bride had been previously married. They first met twenty-five years before, while Laza was the best man in a wedding in the town where Juliana lived. At the age of twenty-nine, he was already a doctor of law, one of the central figures of the political movement of the Serbian youth, and a much-admired poet. In addition, Laza's appearance was impossible not to notice and be impressed by: tall and powerfully built, with his unruly hair,

twisted mustache, and penetrating eyes, he was beautiful in some unusual, proud, and almost superhuman way that marks and separates. The twenty-year-old girl from a wealthy family could not take her eyes off him during the entire celebration. When it was all over, he could barely remember meeting her, being at the center of attention of so many people and especially young ladies. She remembered him with all the excitement of the young woman in love. Already well into marrying age and pressed by her mother and aunt, with whom she lived, to decide on a suitor soon, Juliana declared that she was going to marry the poet—or no one else. The mother and the aunt thought that it was an expression of the folly of a spoiled girl, which would come to pass. Juliana was more determined than they predicted.¹

The poet learned about the devotion of the young woman, whose face he could not remember, only years later, during another visit to the same town in which Laza had dear and influential cousins. Without a mother from early on in his childhood, it was essentially his cousins who raised him and supported his education. (Laza had a living father, but he was a military officer and, during Laza's childhood and youth, he was away from home virtually all the time.) Being shifted from one set of cousins to another, from one school to another, there was no place where Laza felt he belonged. Even as an adult, he had no home, just as he had no steady income. His cousins paid for his education all the way to his doctorate in law, and then they withdrew their funding, since they expected that the brilliant young man would now be fully capable of supporting himself.

Laza tried various jobs here and there, but nothing seemed to compel him. Whether he was practicing law, teaching high school, engaging in diplomatic service, or working as a journalist, in his

¹ Juliana was born on September 25, 1849, in Sombor, and died on October 25, 1909, in Vienna. Without much education, idle and without any job, Juliana was nevertheless an avid reader of Laza's books and knew many of his poems by heart. Wealthy and good-natured, she dedicated a good portion of her inheritance to numerous charities. Juliana never had a child of her own, but her heart was especially touched by the destiny of orphaned children and the lack of education and opportunities for girls.

heart of hearts he was a poet. Poetry brought him significant fame but hardly any income. The constant lack of money was becoming a pressing concern.

Laza was also becoming disillusioned with politics. Occasionally, he was able to observe it at the highest level, as when he was a personal secretary to the Serbian representative, Jovan Ristić, at the Berlin Congress (June 13–July 13, 1878). Laza could then directly observe how the leading politicians of Europe, presided by Otto von Bismarck, bicker over the territories of foreign nations, without the slightest regards for the millions of people with whose lives and destinies they were bargaining, as if they were the wooden pawns on a chess board.

Laza was involved in politics from his early twenties. He was one of the most prominent leaders of the movement dedicated to bringing more political and cultural autonomy to all Serbs, who then lived dispersed in several countries and under different rulers. While Belgrade and the south of Serbia was under Turkish control, the northern province of Vojvodina (where Laza was born) was under the auspice of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. (The Serbs also lived in Macedonia, Monte Negro, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Croatia.)

Born with a rebellious, Promethean nature, Laza was often getting in trouble with the law, both for his open anti-Austrian and anti-Hungarian speeches, and also for the criticism of the official political circles in Serbia. Already jailed three times in Budapest (in 1870, 1872, and 1876), Laza barely escaped a five-month sentence in Belgrade by running across the border (in 1883). In his forties, he started feeling more like Odysseus than as Prometheus and was wondering, even in his writings, whether his life was not turning into a never-ending Odyssey.

In 1884, being already well into his forties, Laza thought that it may be time to settle down permanently and bring his wanderings to closure. He was not in love with Juliana, but he was certainly touched by her lasting affection for him. Like a faithful Penelope,

she had already been waiting for him for fourteen years. Juliana was not a beauty even when she was in the first bloom, but she was not bad looking either. As the only child of a once very successful (but at that time already long deceased) lawyer, she was well-to-do and could support his extravagant life-style. Juliana could also pay off his accumulating gambling debt that was becoming an embarrassment.¹ He had already traveled extensively through a number of the European cities and lived for significant periods of time in Budapest, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and St Petersburg. Juliana lived in Sombor, a town on the frontier of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was one of the cultural capitals for Serbs living in the province of Vojvodina. Located exactly mid-way between Belgrade and Budapest, this prosperous town did not look like a bad place for him to settle down.

Despite the protests of Juliana's mother and aunt, a verbal agreement was reached that the two would marry. A lavish dinner was organized for the family members and friends at which the poet was expected to officially propose. Everyone showed up, except the groom-to-be. He was playing cards somewhere, and remembered the dinner only hours after the appointed time. Since, by then, it was too late for the visit, he calmly continued to play cards until the next morning. The next day, he appeared with a bouquet of flowers, ready to apologize. Instead of being received, the bouquet was dutifully returned to him and he was told never to show up again.

While this appeared to be the end of this scandalous affair, unbeknown to her mother and aunt, Juliana and Laza established correspondence. They wrote to each other sporadically, but neither was willing to stop the correspondence. When, seven years after

¹ At the time of his marriage, Laza's debt was estimated to be around 8,000 forints. To illustrate how much it was, his friend, Dr Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, lived at that time modestly in Vienna, in a rented apartment and with a family of four, with an annual income of 2,400 forints. In the provincial town of Sombor, living in the house belonging to Juliana, Laza and Juliana usually spent around 5,000 forints per year. Once Laza got married, his lavish life-style was not a problem any longer, since Juliana's dowry and inheritance were estimated to be around 150,000 forints.

the scandal, Laza left the service of the prince of Monte Negro and was about to return to Vojvodina, he wrote to Juliana that he would be passing through Sombor and that he was eager to see Juliana again. Whether or not that visit ever happened, Laza soon met Lenka and Juliana seemed to have been completely forgotten.

The relationship between Laza and Juliana would likely never have resumed, had it not been for Laza's cousins and Lenka's father. At that time, during the four torturous years of the relationship with Lenka, Laza was mostly residing in a nearby monastery. Not sure about what to do with regard to Lenka, nor having any other place to go or job to do, Laza seriously considered staying there permanently and becoming a monk. It is certainly unusual to make such a move at the age of fifty-five or so, especially after living such a dynamic public life, but there was no legal or religious obstacle to such a transformation. After all, Laza was already living continuously with the monks for more than three years. It was quite likely that this would remain so, had not first Laza's influential cousins from Sombor, and then Lenka's father (who was also Laza's namesake), come up with a different plan.

Puzzled by his friend's relationship to his daughter, seeing the poet paralyzed and his daughter determined to marry no one else, Lenka's father proposed a solution for this impasse. Realizing that his friend Laza never lost respect and some affection for Juliana, unbeknown to Lenka, her concerned father talked to both sides (Laza and Juliana) behind the scene. Laza later wrote in his poem, "Santa Maria della Salute," that during this period he suffered a "titanic struggle" within his soul. Gradually, his reason convinced his heart that the marriage with Juliana was the best course to take. After waiting for him for so many years, Juliana was happy to fulfill her life's dream. Her mother and aunt grudgingly agreed to the wedding, provided that Lenka's father be the best man and the guarantor that the poet would behave like a responsible husband—and show up on time for the wedding ceremony.

With the pomp that wealth can afford, the couple was married in Sombor's church of St. George. Plump and aged, Juliana looked

slightly comical in the elaborate white dress with a long veil. The groom also looked overdressed, while at the same time having forgotten to comb his long, unruly hair, and oil and twist his mustache. According to the reports preserved, he looked detached and uncomfortable. Yet, socially speaking, all went well: the feast for the guests was magnificent, and the best man threw around plenty of coins for the beggars and children and donated so much money to the church in which the ceremony took place, that local people talked about the wedding for months.



The marriage of Laza and Juliana was a marriage of convenience. Through their own will, they engaged in a lawful relationship of two mature individuals. Why were they married in a church? What does religion have to do with marriage?

A short answer is that such is the custom in virtually all countries and societies. So be it, but why such a custom? Is marriage not a contract-like social affair of two individuals? Why involve religion into this social bargain? And if it is a social bargain, how can religion “sanctify” marriage and pronounce that what a divinity brings together no human has the right to separate?

By sanctifying marriage, does not the church engage in what Plato called a “noble lie”? Yes, but why? To provide stronger “glue” that would keep the wedded couple together? Should not the Church be concerned with spiritual rather than social affairs?

If we look at the teachings of Jesus, he does not seem to have anything to say about marriage. Nor does he have much to say about family, state, church, or any other social institution. If anything, it may be—as Tolstoy interprets the message of Jesus—that he opposes them all. There is a strong indication that, when Jesus commands: “Follow Thou Me,” he is recommending the path similar to that of the Prince Gautama who left his young wife with their child, as well as the kingdom he was to inherit from his father, to live in the forest and eventually become the Buddha—the awakened one. Jesus tells his observers to leave their parents and follow

him. He tells them to leave their families and businesses, to abandon the kingdom of this world. Does not Jesus remove the veil of custom, rather than sanctify it?

Jesus does speak in favor of love. Love is the centerpiece of his teaching. But there is nothing in the love that he preaches that relates specifically to marriage or family. The opposite seems to be the case.¹

Recall again our coordinate system, with the up-down axis marking the sacred and the profane, and the right-left line standing for right and wrong. If we use the crossing of the vertical and the horizontal lines to represent Jesus' teaching on love, we get something like this. On the up-down axis, at the top we have the love of God, and at the bottom, the love of the world. On the right-left axis, on the right side we get love for one's neighbor and on the left side, love of oneself. Generally speaking, cross symbolizes the balance of the high and the low, as well as the right and the left. Jesus' cross represents the four kinds of love that he advocates. When Jesus demands that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, this places the vertical line in the middle of its horizontal counterpart. As for the placement of the horizontal line with regard to the vertical one, it may well be that Jesus thinks that the love of God has precedence over the love of the world. In this case, the standard representation of the Christian cross would get it right: the horizontal line is not placed in the middle of the vertical line, but closer to its top. His ministry demonstrates, however, that the love of this world is not to be forgotten or neglected; it is in this world and in relationship with its creatures that love must be shown.

¹ It is true that Jesus did not promote a romantic "gender identity," even a "theology of gender." Nevertheless, as one of my anonymous reviewers pointed out, the Church, as a eucharistic community, is and *must* be the place where otherness of a natural or social kind, such as the opposition of the sexes, can be transcended. The transcendence of the biological *hypostasis* and the fear of the "Other," however, cannot be achieved through man's self-perpetuation in "natural" terms. In the present circumstances (i.e., in our fallen existence), the relationship between the sexes is "blessed" by the Church only and exclusively in the form of marriage in the Eucharist.

I. FEAR OF LOVE

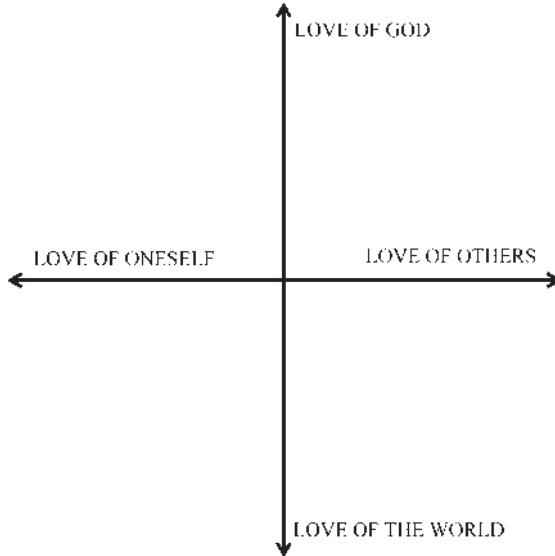


Figure 2: *Jesus' Cross of Love*

What does the symbolism of Jesus' cross of love imply about marriage and love in marriage? A "covenant" that can never be broken? Does it give any preference to monogamy over polygamy? To marriage over free love? To a heterosexual over a homosexual relationship?

We can understand some of the motives behind the Christian support of (heterosexual and monogamous) marriage, even though Jesus does not endorse it. Marriage gives stability to the common life. It also provides a convenient forum for the satisfaction of sexual desire. Like mature love, marriage is not about a transitory bodily passion; it is not a love affair. Through marriage, we learn the importance of selfless love and sacrifice. The symbol of marriage, the wedding ring, is represented by a circle encompassing two individuals committed to each other. Ideally, a married couple conceives a child and raises it with love. What better way to establish a family and maintain it than through marriage? One can even say, with Pearl Buck, that it must be true that marriage, if entered

with due consideration and with deep love, is still the most fulfilling and rewarding of human relationships.

We have heard such sentiments expressed so many times that we usually do not even pause to consider them. Yet, if we think about it, we realize that in the presence of mature and deep love, any form of relationship will be fulfilling and rewarding: it is love, not marriage, that makes it such. Friendship can provide a stable relationship as much as any marriage. Nor do we need marriage to raise children, or to have a healthy and gratifying sexual life. Why, then, such a glorification of marriage?

There is the other side of the coin as well. Dysfunctional marriages are closer to being a norm than an exception. Although marriage can be blissful, it is more often a curtain for the abuses of women and children. Anything that happens within marriage is the affair of the marriage partners (and their children). Is there any reliable indication that more good than evil has come out of marriage? The marriage ring indicates the relationship of two selfless individuals, yet in how many marriages one of them (usually a husband) is not in the center of it, dominating, controlling, and so often abusing the marriage partner (and their children)?

Society promotes marriage as perhaps the only healthy form of the adult life. The pressure on young men and (especially) women to marry is enormous. The expectations that marriage will lead to a happy life continue to be widely endorsed, despite all the facts that indicate the countless traumas that may occur behind the marriage veil. Society sees in marriage the preferred way of self-preservation and self-promotion, and has been turning a blind eye to the problems that have existed within marriage at any age, in any society. We legalize marriage and even sanctify it. Yet, no persistence and dogmatism can legalize and sanctify love. Despite all the proclamations to the contrary, love is marginalized in marriage. Love is just an instrument, used as long as it works, forgotten when it does not.

The wedding ring reveals as much as it conceals. Since we have such a hard time bringing marriage and love together, it is an im-

perative to consider which of the two is more important: marriage or love? From the social point of view, it is definitely marriage, and the social morality takes precedence over the claims of love. But is the social morality the highest good toward which we should aspire? Do we want to raise obedient or loving persons?

THE NOBLE LIE OF ROMANTIC LOVE

The twelfth- and thirteenth-century predecessors of Romanticism, the troubadours of Provence, introduced a new aspect of love into European culture. Opposed to loveless marriages arranged for political or economic reasons, the troubadours ignited a tradition that is now captured by the word “*Amor*.” Whether or not it is a coincidence that the word is a reversed spelling of “Roma”—Italian for Rome—the troubadours opposed the church sanctification of those unholy marriages in which women were treated as mere pawns of their “Lords.” Many of those lords were absent from their hearths for prolonged periods of time, for instance when participating in the Holy Crusade against “the pagans and the infidels.” (The “infidels” included Orthodox Christians, which was Laza, Lenka and Julian’s religion). With their music, stories, and glances full of longing, the troubadours filled in the gap created by the absent lords, who were preoccupied by their sacrilegious mission. In their absence, the troubadours reawakened the dreams and hopes of the neglected and idle ladies. They revitalized the promise of love.

Of various forms of love—those between masters and servants, brothers and sisters, parents and children, and married spouses—the illicit love has always been the most exciting and the most prosecuted. Mythology and literature of all cultures demonstrate that hardly anything is as appealing as the “forbidden fruits,” despite, and partially because of, the risks involved. It should be clear that the troubadours risked a lot, including their lives. For what, exactly?

The transition from the natural to the social world has followed the trajectory from passion to obligation. Marriage is bondage, a so-

cial contract sanctified by religion. How does one unglue something glued to last forever and resist any temptation? And, when there is a temptation and a possibility to crack holes in the marriage veil, why would anyone risk something like that, considering the harshness of the punishment incurred on the violators discovered?

Like any obligation, marriage drains emotions and excitement. When they are gone, dullness and emptiness settle in. Marriage often becomes boring and uninspiring. Illicit love brings the spark back; it makes us feel desired and alive again. The affairs that the troubadours instigated brought the passions and dreams back to ladies often much younger than their spouses.

The arranged medieval marriage was an obligation imposed and sanctified from the outside; it was a social institution in which the sides were to fulfill their contractual obligations. Women especially were raised to enter the marriage as virgins and to remain loyal to their husbands. We can call it the “Mona Lisa Smile Syndrome,” which means that women had a role to play, and that, regardless of who they were or what personal gifts they possessed, their lives were reduced to that socially determined role: it was to please their husbands, to give birth to their children (preferably sons), to show off for social occasions, and to remain faithful.

If woman invents love, man counters it by inventing marriage; if woman is a symbolic representation of the forces of nature, man is a representative of society, with its contracts, laws, and taboos. While marriage gives woman some security, it puts man in control. Woman gains a sustained source of economic support for herself and her children, but man gains more. Not only is he expected to make the most important decisions in marriage, but, traditionally, husband is the owner and his wife is his possession; woman and children are the property of man. When we say that traditional marriages were arranged between two families, we should be more precise and state that they were arranged between the male heads of those families.

The troubadours were males, with few exceptions, but they were not in power. They were determined to live by different values. One

of the greatest appeals of the troubadours to the wealthy medieval ladies were their devotion and loyalty. Regardless of whether their love was ever to lead to physical consummation and notwithstanding the risks involved, the troubadours proclaimed their loyalty to their ladies, until death separated them. This was an obligation introduced from within, voluntarily. This was also the kind of obligation that abhorred any institutional backing and any external punishment.

There is one further element that has been misunderstood by the later adaption of romantic love as the foundation of marriage. To grasp it properly, let us return to the cross as the symbol of love. The vertical line connects the love of God to the love of the world (as God's creation). The horizontal dimension stretches between love of other human beings (brotherly love, *agape*) and love of oneself. Jesus himself did not de-value either of the extremes, although the later Christianity made its preference unambiguous by declaring this world the "vale of tears" and by denouncing the love of oneself as selfishness.

If we combine these two symbols, the circle (representing marriage, as in the wedding ring) and the cross of Jesus (representing four forms of love), we get the following figure:

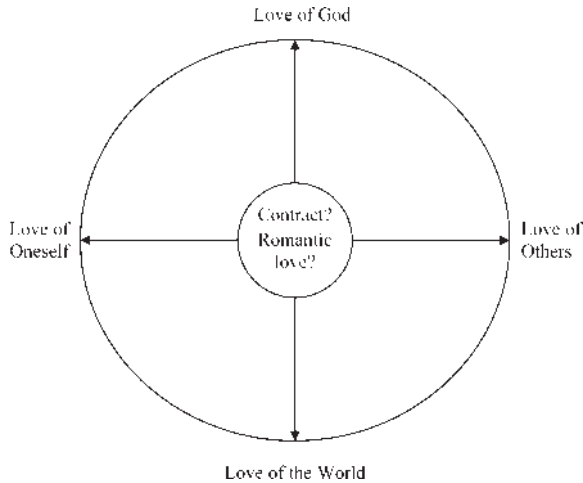


Figure 3: *Marriage and Love*

Consider now the center of the cross, which is also the center of the circle, and which we have been neglecting so far. In the Christian cross, the crucified Jesus occupies the center. He is there as a unique individual and as a bridge between the two worlds: the divine and the earthly. He is there also as the unity of the other pair of opposites: love of others and love of oneself. But who or what is at the center of the marriage circle-cross? A legal contract? Romantic love? Or something altogether different?

Marriage as a social institution is a great equalizer: what matters is not who the partners are, but what their obligation is. Law is equally valid for all, regardless of who they may be individually. Law is especially good glue in a society in which human beings are compared to individual atoms and in which the mark distinguishing them is their private property. We can see, then, why standing at the center of the institution of marriage—and of social life in general—is a contractual obligation. Human beings are the instruments of society: they are supposed to serve society, rather than the other way around.

The later development of political philosophy led to a reversal of the idea that individuals should serve society. Immanuel Kant's ideal of autonomy—every rational individual's capacity for self-legislation—undermined the social contract based on property rights and led to the development of human rights. Combined with the idea of romantic love, according to which the partners in marriage chose each other based on their passion rather than on any prearranged agreement, the individual choice becomes treated as more important than the social norms. If the individuals who love each other could not be united in life because of the social obstacles, they would not allow the social norms to defeat them and would rather be united in death than to live separated from each other. With Tristan and Isolde, or Romeo and Juliet, we get a new potential contender for the center of the cross.

Western society has made an unprecedented concession to individual preferences, romantic feelings, and the promise of love.

The idea of an arranged marriage has not only virtually disappeared from the Western world, but it is also considered inhumane in many of its quarters. The romantics won—or so it seems. What is clear is that they seriously undermined the institution of marriage. The divorce rate in Western countries, in which marriage is based on individual love, is alarmingly high; in some societies, like the US, it lingers around fifty per cent. Something about marriage based on free choice and romantic love went awry. Have we faithfully carried out the legacy of the troubadours, only to realize how fundamentally flawed it is? Or have we distorted what they meant by love? Is not romantic love as much of a noble lie when considered as the basis for marriage (or even of a long-term relationship), as it is a social contract?

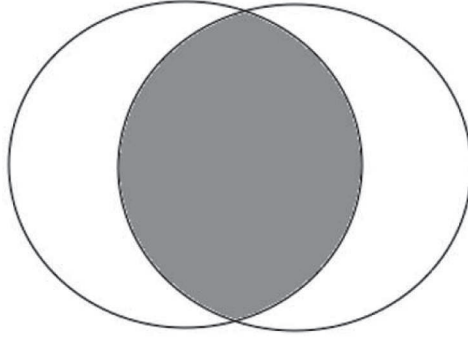


The troubadours did not attempt simply to return love back to blind passion. Nor did they want to reduce love between two individuals to some version of the brotherly and sisterly love that is indifferent to who the persons in love are. *Amor* of the troubadours opens the door for loving another person as a unique individual. I love you for who you are, and I place my love for you in the center of my being, in the center of all of my relations to the world. I do not do that because your eyes are bluer than the sky, or your hair redder than anyone else's. The troubadours shifted our attention to the inside, to the soul, to the spiritual. I make a commitment of trust and loyalty to you and put our relationship in the center of my life because I recognize in you my soulmate.

We misunderstood the troubadours because they operated with a different logic. While our logic of social relations is binary and exclusive (either-or), their logic was unitary and inclusive (both ... and ...). For us, one and two are different, and what is one cannot be two, or the other way around. For the troubadours, these things stood differently. As Erich Fromm succinctly put it in his book *The Art of Loving*, "In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two."

People who are not married are “single,” in the sense of the unconnected or detachable atomistic units. When two of them become married, they become one—or so the wedding ring is supposed to mean. Their respective families marry them off and they are now forming one new single family. This is all “logical,” and yet it does not function quite that way in reality. As the experience of countless marriages testifies, glue applied from the outside does not hold for very long, because the spouses cannot entirely ignore their individual characteristics, passions, interests, and former friends. After a while, the relationship deteriorates to what Salomon Perls describes as “I do my thing and you do your thing ... You are you, and I am I.” Except that they cannot just so simply pack and leave after they do their individual things. They are married; they are not two, but they are not one either. In a loveless marriage, it feels as if they are neither one nor two.

Nozick suggested that in sexual intimacy with the beloved person the partners admit each other within their boundaries, or at least make these more permeable. Such sexual intimacy, he recommended, is properly diagramed neither by two entirely separate circles nor by one single circle. Rather, it is best symbolized by two circles partially overlapping, with the dotted lines marking the area of the overlap. The troubadours intimated that something like this happens every time one finds a soulmate, and not just in moments of sexual intimacy. That is the true novelty of their understanding of love. Two persons, the soulmates, are not glued by social institutions and laws; they are not like the two circles imposed over each other from the outside to form one big circle. Instead, through the meeting of the eyes and the development of mutual trust and loyalty, they open up their hearts beyond the limits of their own personalities and create those partially overlapping circles. They become one, as Fromm aptly says, one yet remain two.

Figure 4: “*The Paradox of Love*”

Fromm calls this relationship “the paradox of love.” (It is here represented by the figure often called “*mandorla*,” which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.) Our ordinary rationality (and legality and morality) does not allow for paradoxes and calls them contradictions. To claim that something is both one and two defies the most important of our laws of logic: the principle of non-contradiction. But life does not unfold according to the laws of logic. The rationality that wants to be in dialogue with life and an instrument for its understanding must be capable of overcoming the exclusive “either-or” logic and embrace life-paradoxes.

Robert Johnson clarifies the difference between paradoxes and contradictions in his book, *Owning Your Own Shadow*:

Paradox is that artesian well of meaning we need so badly in our modern world. All the great myths give instructions on this subject and remind us that the treasure will be found in one of the least likely or popular places. What good could come from Nazareth? What of value could be buried in our own backyard? In the inner life, what good could come from your own shadow? Strangely, the best can come from this neglected quarter. We will go to almost any length to avoid this painful paradox; but in that refusal we only confine ourselves to the useless experience of contradiction. Contradiction brings the crushing burden of meaninglessness. One can endure any suffering if it has

meaning; but meaninglessness is unbearable... [Paradox] is a powerful embracing of reality. All religious experience in its historical form is expressed in paradox; observe the Christian creeds that have been formulated in such paradoxical language. While contradiction is static and unproductive, paradox makes room for grace and mystery.

Johnson does not relate the embracing of paradoxes to the troubadours and their understanding of love. He thinks that the ability to stand paradox applies even more widely. A willing embracement of paradox makes room for grace and mystery, which is why paradoxes are the part and parcel of every religious and spiritual tradition. As an example, Johnson reminds us of the words from John's Gospel (12.24): "Verily, verily, I say unto you except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

Going back to the troubadours and their contribution to Western culture, it is important to recognize that they also prepared a ground for what later in literature became known as the process of individuation. The troubadours appreciated the women they loved for who they were, and not for their royal blood, or for the dowry they could bring to marriage. They did not regard women as property to be owned and freely manipulated, nor as the puppets playing a socially prescribed role. Probably for the first time in the history of the West, women were seen as unique human beings, with individual characteristics, dreams, and aspirations.

I find the language of personality more adequate to describe their insight than the terminology of individuation. Personality signifies a development of both unique and general dispositions and gifts. I also believe that the development of personality is essentially due to the positive influence of love. Love stimulates us, like no other force and source of energy known to us. It stimulates us to grow and develop to the fullest, as well as to encourage and support those we love to grow in the same way.

The troubadours had the inklings of these views, but they did not advance them very far. Had they been more articulate, they

could have said that the social institution of marriage is based on an exaggerated value attached to social contracts and an overzealous protection of them. This miscalculation was due to our misunderstanding of the relative positions of life and love, of security and freedom on the scale of values. Using Nicolai Hartmann's terminology, we can say that our values are arranged not according to one unified scale—which, if possible, would make our lives much simpler—but according to two mutually irreducible scales. One of them deals with the relative strength of values; according to this scale, all values are either strong (basic, fundamental) or weak. For example, love of others, self-love, security, and justice are strong values; love of God, personal love, freedom, and wisdom are not. According to the other scale, which is as important as the first one but independent of it, values are arranged in accordance with their height: some values are high, some are low. Freedom and trust are high values, while security and justice are low. The values of love of God and personal love are high; the values of life and the love of the world are low.

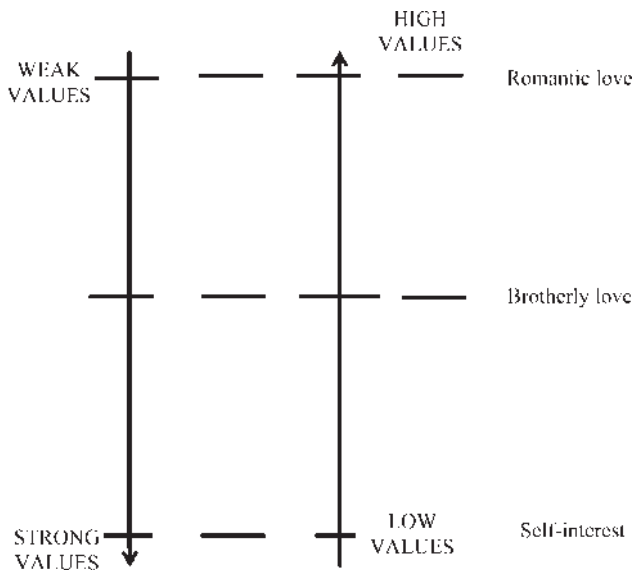


Figure 5: *Hartmann's Inverse Scales of Values*

Our misunderstandings regarding those values are due to our lack of realization that strong values are normally low, while high values are weak. The values behind the institution of marriage are strong but low. As such, those values are not readily compatible with the values of romantic love. When society wants to assure our transition from nature to culture, when it wants to protect us from the instabilities of erotic drives, it establishes marriage as an institution. Society thereby places the emphasis on strong and low values. Romantic love just does not fit into this framework. The value of romantic love is high and weak. As much as society wants to prevent this kind of “madness,” the appeal of this high value never ends: the history, art, mythology, and religion of every society attest to that. As life-experience testifies, however, the high and weak value of romantic love may be just as unsuitable as the basis of marriage as a social contract; one may be as much of a noble lie as is the other.

Is there, then, a way of reconciling these extremes? And should we try to reconcile them, rather than to look for something different—whether it be an all-together different basis of marriage, or an abandonment of marriage as an institution? The poet whose life and love story we are following was wrestling with the same issues. Can we learn anything from his struggles?

BEHIND THE VEIL

Lenka was in love with her poet and wanted to marry him; him or no one else. Laza was in love with Lenka as deeply as she was with him, but his marriage proposal was not forthcoming. Morally and rationally speaking, there would have been nothing wrong with their marriage. Nevertheless, because of the age difference and the gap in the social status, their marriage would have been considered as bordering on the unacceptable. Lenka was aware of the social hurdles that stood between them. With the innocence of her youthful soul, she was convinced that they could all be overcome. Lenka believed that love is the highest of all values. At least ini-

tially, Laza endorsed the same ideal and encouraged Lenka to believe it. When the time came to put this ideal to test, things got more complicated.

Laza understood the social pressures and obstacles better than Lenka did. He had to encounter “the stains of civilization” in various forms in the course of his life, and was well aware how powerful they could be. Laza knew that, in any age and in any society, what is outside the law and the social norm is considered subversive and dangerous. Those who live by heart in defiance of the entrenched customs should expect to be ostracized by their society. Is that why he never proposed? Or was it because he was afraid that the consumption of his erotic desire and the common life with Lenka would, gradually but inevitably, reduce their relationship to something trifling and ordinary? Did he perhaps come to believe (as Plato seemed to in his *Phaedrus*) that, paradoxically, love can lead to the initiation into the highest wisdom only those who renounce their desire to possess the beloved person?

Judging by Lenka’s journal, the most important conversation they ever had about marriage occurred in the early spring of 1893, less than two years after they had met and fallen in love. Laza had already been withdrawing for almost a year and they were rarely seeing each other. Lenka described Laza as “visibly deteriorated, as if exhausted through some inner-struggle, and careless in dress and appearance.” He looked so worn out that even her mother later wondered, “what she could possibly see in him that would attract her.” Lenka was not focused on his appearance because she had something more important pressing her. “We had a serious and torturous talk,” she wrote in her journal. The first part of that conversation Lenka transcribed as follows:

“Please get married, *Freulein* Lenka, free me and end my suffering and longing.”

“But *Herr* Laza, why should I not marry you? My heart had long ago and unchangeably selected you.”

“I am old and not worthy of you. I am not worthy of you in any way.”

“What can be more worthy than the spirit you have, *Herr* Laza? Is that not the greatest treasure in the world and are you thus not the richest man in the world? My heart is longing for such treasure alone! I do not need anything else, and of that other treasure I have enough for both of us.”

“Marriage is not only spiritual, *Freulein* Lenka,” he said with sadness. “Marriage is also a physical intimacy ...”

I interrupted him: “When a woman is in love, she is ready for everything and in her love she will do anything for her happiness. Are you afraid of something, *Herr* Laza?”

Unfortunately, after this line, the page from Lenka’s journal is torn off, and on the next page it continues with the following reflection:

After that he left.

He did not write to me for a long time. And even when he writes, it is not the same. What happened to the bursting plays of his divine mind, which I adored to listen to? In unimaginable longing, I close myself in my room, and then I read, and read over and over again his poems, I touch with my hands his dedications, I touch the ink of his signature—as if I want thereby to bring him closer and tie him to myself forever.

Lenka believed that, in Laza’s eyes and perhaps also in the eyes of others, their social status was the greatest obstacle for their marriage. She wanted not only to express the strength of her desire to spend the rest of her life with him, but also her conviction that her main focus was on their spiritual bond. It is exactly this spiritual gift that in her eyes separated *Herr* Laza from all other young men who were flirting with her and hoping for her hand. Could it be that, despite her youth, Lenka possessed an uncommon wisdom that made her see past both the noble lie of an arranged marriage and the noble lie of a naively understood romantic love?

Laza’s main concern was their age difference. He knew that an even greater difference in age did not prevent the amorous advances of men with younger women. Well into his seventies, Goethe

proposed to a nineteen-year-old girl, Ulrike von Levetzow, despite being fifty-five years her senior. (He was rejected.) Laza also sometimes entertained his audience by telling them about Benjamin Franklin who, at the age of seventy-two, met *Madame* Brillon in Paris and began his gallant courtship of this married lady who was forty years his junior. *Madame* Brillon was flattered by the great man's attention, and she neither rejected nor forbade his steady advances. Perhaps inspired by the playful spirit with which Franklin did everything in life, including love, she promised to be his wife in heaven, provided he would be more faithful than he was in this world. In this world, the two of them ended up playing chess every Wednesday and Saturday evening, with an occasional meeting of their eyes above the table, of their hands on the table, and of their feet under it.

Laza's love for Lenka was no game for him, and the difference in age worried him to no end. There is no specific rule, in virtually any society of the world, that precisely determines what age difference is acceptable for marriage partners, and when that gap is so big that it starts disturbing us as not just inappropriate but as almost incestual. Aristotle recommended as an ideal marriage combination man of thirty-seven and woman of twenty. His idea was that man is then at the height of his physical and mental abilities to form and lead the family, and that woman has the freshness of the body to bring and raise him healthy children. Laza was familiar with Aristotle's teaching, but he was long past thirty-seven, and the difference between him and Lenka was not seventeen but virtually thirty years.

At the time of the recorded conversation, Laza was fifty-two-years-old. We do not know whether he had any specific ailment with regard to male potency, but we do know that with his irregular sleeping and eating habits, his health was never very good. Even if he were healthy and full of erotic energy to please a young woman like Lenka, he could not be sure how much longer it would last. Nor was the life expectancy of that time as high as it is today. When

Laza died, he was sixty-nine-years-old; had Lenka lived, she would have been around forty at the time of his death. Clearly, this is something that should not be dismissed too lightly. Yet, was it so important to prevent him from wishing to live with the only woman he ever loved with all his heart?

Lenka asked him directly: "What are you afraid of, *Herr Laza*?" Unfortunately, precisely at this moment, the page is missing and we do not have Laza's answer. How did he respond? Of what was he so afraid?

If Laza was afraid of changing his habits and losing his freedom, he would not have married Juliana later. Alternatively, if he was afraid of Lenka's independence and the strength of her character, why did they not turn him away from Lenka at the beginning of their acquaintance?

Laza was afraid of something, but that, most likely, was an internal rather than an external reason. Was Laza afraid of love? Of loving or of being loved?

The truth be told, Laza did not have much luck, or much experience, with love. His mother died when he was so young that he could not remember her. In one of his dreams in 1905, he was sucking Lenka's finger. "When I let her finger go, I was more satisfied than a babe nursed by its mother!"

When, as a young man, Laza fell in love for the first time, the girl he loved died of tuberculosis. The second one married someone else, as did the third.

Juliana loved him, persistently if not passionately. Laza respected her deeply, but there was no indication that he was erotically and romantically in love with her. Juliana was more like a sisterly figure to him than his soulmate and lover.

Laza loved Lenka, yet he also struggled with that love more than with any other. When they separated for the first time, after about a year of spending virtually every day together, he wrote her a letter, a portion of which Lenka reported in her journal: "A distance clears the heart and the mind. I love you more than ever, but

I should not love you ... You have penetrated into my eyes, into my heart, into my brain, and I am trying to push you out of myself. That is why I ran away from you."

Understandably, Lenka was perplexed and disappointed: "Why? What is the obstacle to our feelings? Because he is poor? That's not important to me. I am throwing myself in front of his feet. I think my father would accept [that I marry him]. I will write to *Herr Laza*."

Lenka did not comment on the most puzzling sentence of Laza's letter: "I love you more than ever, but I should not love you." What is the force, what is the authority of that "should"? Love is not a matter of law, of obligation, of duty; love and duty are contradictory. Love is an expression of one's freedom; it is a gift given unreservedly.

At the beginning of their conversation in the spring of 1893, Laza urged Lenka to marry (someone else) and free them both from their obsession with one another. In his diary, many years later (in 1905), he admitted that, "had Lenka married [someone else], that would have been my death." But Lenka had no such intention.

Two and a half years later, after their crucial conversation, Laza married Juliana. Was that a new attempt to free Lenka and himself of each other?

After an especially vivid dream of Lenka (in 1905), he wrote in his diary: "By marrying another woman, I proved to Lenka how much I loved her, so to free her, to give her a chance to find a younger man who could make her happy for her entire life." Immediately after these words, he wrote about his "unheard of sacrifice."

Was Laza in denial, even so many years after Lenka's death? Was he justifying his choice, even though he must have felt with his entire being that he had made a mistake? Mixed with a sense of guilt, this denial continued for years to come. In 1908, less than two years before his death, he reported an "important dream" in his diary. In their loving embrace, Laza asked Lenka: "Do you understand now why I married [Juliana]?" He wanted to add, he reported, "because of too much love, so that you are free, so that you

are able to choose a younger man, more capable of offering you the earthly joy!" In this dream, Lenka looked at him with a look full of understanding and tenderness, and, while pointing at Laza's wife, she asked him: "And now, what is to be done?" Laza replied: "I will get divorced." He wanted to add, but again did not, that "[Juliana] is too good of a person to prevent me from being the happiest among mortals."

Hermann Hesse wrote once that to fear is to give someone power over us. In Laza's case, we could perhaps say that to fear is to allow something power over us. It is hard to resist the impression that Laza was afraid of love. And it seems that he was both afraid of being loved, and of loving. Despite Lenka's willingness to make any sacrifice in order to live with him, it appears that, deep inside of his soul, he was afraid that her passion and devotion would not last forever. A big part of his fear must have been the fear of losing her, just as he lost his mother and all the women he had loved before Lenka. He could not bring himself to trust that the sight of his old and fragile body would not make young Lenka turn away and search for the love of someone younger. Laza was not able to bring himself to appreciate the depth of Lenka's love. He was not able to let her devotion and loyalty overcome his fear.

I believe that Laza was even more afraid of his own ability to love Lenka and make her happy. There was some doubt lingering in him, gnawing at him and making him confess: "I love you more than ever, but I should not love you." Just as Lenka reacted, so must we: Why not? Was their love immoral? Perverse? As the troubadours showed us, people in love defy the accepted laws to pursue illicit love. Laza did not have to violate any written law to marry Lenka and live together with her, yet he backed away from her and their love. Even if he had to defy the unwritten laws and conventions, some decisions just have to be made by gut feelings, not by reason. They have to be made by the heart, and not through our calculations as to who might be offended by him pursuing his deepest inclinations and where the path with a heart would take him.

In early January of 1893, just before their most serious conversation, Lenka wrote: "What happened to that unlimited faith in our love, in him? Did I love a chimera?" And later, when she heard of his marriage and his honeymoon in Venice, she lamented not only the treachery of their love, but also Laza's betrayal of himself: "Could my poet fall down that low? Have all of our ideals fallen down with him as well?"

In her sorrow, Lenka recognized something that we rarely understand in connection with love and its (broken) promise. To articulate that, recall the Golden Rule, which is the backbone of morality. In its negative formulation, it instructs us not to do to others what we would not like others to do to us. In its positive form, this Rule urges us to do to others what we would like them to do to us. Perhaps it is also a part and parcel of the Golden Rule that we love others in a way that we want to be loved, and expect others to love us in the way we love them. There is something even more important at stake, both with respect to Laza and Lenka's love story and our understanding of love in general. In analogy to the Golden Rule, we can formulate the following principle. In its negative formulation, it warns: Do not betray yourself and do not betray those you love (the most). The positive formulation would revert it: Be true to yourself, and be true to those you love (the most).

All of us with any significant life experience know that there are periods when we have betrayed either ourselves or those we love the most. For example, hardly any one of us did not have to, at one point or another, free ourselves from our parents and their imposing love. If not rejected, their love would have overwhelmed us by turning us into their shadows, or into the extension of their unfulfilled dreams and ambitions, and against our own potentials and ideals. When that is the case, it is the sign of personal maturity and integrity to deny our parents, to betray them in order to be true to our nature and our unique gifts.

What happened to Laza and Lenka was so instructive because their conflict had even profounder implications. Those of a weak-

er nature than Laza could be expected to bend under the social pressures and marry someone like Juliana. But in the case of such an extraordinary person like Laza, who spent his entire life in rebellion against the social *mores*, the main pressure came from inside. It came from his own insecurities and fear.

Fear and love do not go together. Their combination is a volatile mixture that has to explode sooner or later and hurt all those involved. Fear is a negative attitude toward life, and it leads to a number of harmful feelings. At its least negative, fear leads to an exaggerated desire to secure one's existence, or one's relationship with someone. When the former is the case, we run away from love and attempt to sustain our existence by means of various substitutes for love. When the latter occurs, we attempt to secure love, as we try to domesticate fire, by surrounding it with the walls of legal and moral obligations. Yet, an enclosed and secure place is not conducive for the maintenance and growth of love. While taming our natural impulses and averting the dangers of pollution and chaos, we fall victims of their social equivalents: suffocation and petrification. The walls of marriage so often lead love between the married couple either to suffocate in the absence of *pneuma* that would feed it, or they petrify love into a dead thing, into a stone.

When it comes to the domestication of love and controlling it through the confines of marriage, society relies on a three-step mechanism: marriage as a promise of healthy life and happiness, marriage as a legal contract, and a legal repercussion for the violation of the marriage contract. The central problem with the institution of marriage as backed by these three pillars is that the first one is based on a lie: it is not marriage that secures or validates love, but love that makes marriage, and any other human relationship based on love, fulfilling. As Nicolai Hartmann asserts in his monumental *Ethics*, "Love is the most positive of all human emotions; among life's manifold riches it possess the highest intrinsic value, it is the purest and most elevated joy, the deepest happiness." Why, then, are we so obsessed with marriage?

Despite our deeply entrenched customs and convictions, it is very difficult to domesticate love in our traditional, conventional, and institutionally entrenched ways. Instead of trying even harder to do it, either by threatening harsher punishments for the breach of marriage, or by adding more mirage-like expectations of how true marriage must lead to eternal happiness, we have to rethink the proper role of marriage. If so, we also need to rethink the proper role of family. Perhaps, like ancient Greeks, we should separate marriage and family on the one side, from erotic love and sex on the other. Their example shows that marriage in our sense (monogamous and heterosexual, and sexually exclusive) is not at all necessary for a highly developed civilization. In Athens at the time of Socrates, for example, marriage was considered as primarily an economic association. The upper-class Athenian male of that time typically had sex with both other males and with females. (Similarly with the upper-class women.) Married man usually had sex with other women besides their wives—whether their slaves or other women who charged for sex. (Prostitution was legal and prostitutes numerous.) Could it be that such liberal moral and legal arrangements are more conducive toward the development of personality than our highly restraining norms?

If we return again to our age and face our veil of custom, another important realization should have also become clear to us: just as sex is not essential for love, neither is marriage. This is not to deny that both sex and marriage could be important as the manifestations of love, but only to negate that they belong to the essence of love. The socially adapted conventions regarding marriage and sex need not be entirely rejected, but we should not allow ourselves to be deceived by them. We need to use them as instruments, instead of being used and manipulated by them. The obsessions with such conventions and their violations make it difficult to realize in what consists love's real challenge. The essential thing is not whether we are in conflict with socially sanctioned conventions with regard to marriage and sex, but whether we find

ourselves at odds with the very core of life, with what and who we love from the very core of our being. If love is indeed so fundamental to us, if it is the deepest longing of every human being to love and to be loved, in our search for love's innermost nature we should follow the same path that helped us transform from brutes into human beings, perhaps the only path more powerful than fear: that of an aspiration to become as integrated and loving a personality as possible.

II. The Miracle of Love

There is a meaning of the word fear that relates it to something positive rather than negative. The word then is “awe,” and it evokes an overwhelming feeling of reverence, produced while encountering that which is extremely powerful or sublime. If love can emerge from awe and reverence, it would be a different kind of love from the one we have discussed so far. This different kind of love would be like fire purified by spirit and radiating in its beauty, not like fire rising out of the earth’s belly, or like fire domesticated by the earthen hearth. This kind of love would surely be something of a miracle.

Religious people speak of being in awe of God and His wrath. Although we normally associate miracles with God’s power and intervention—like parting seas, burning bushes, or the immaculate conception—the original meaning of the word miracle is much broader. In the minimal sense, miracle refers to what is not ordinary, calculated, or predicted. It thereby suggests something to wonder at, unexpected yet wonderful. We can wonder at something that does not have to be related to any specific god of any religion. But it has to be associated with a transcendent force of some kind. More precisely, it has to be something that pulls us above the surface of our everyday lives and its social promises, contracts, and threats of punishment for their violation. It must be something that forces us to lift our eyes up: above the life exhausted in the struggle for survival and toward something worthy that inspires our faith. This faith consists in us focusing on our aspirations, rather than on our desires, on pursuing the ideals evoked by the higher parts of our soul, in Plato’s sense of the tri-partite soul. It consists in a renewed belief in our ability to become more humane than we usually are.

Examples of such miracles are not too difficult to find, even within the realm of relatively mundane experience. An estranged

son suddenly repents and returns to his parents after years of alienation; a drug addict turns around and abandons his addiction; two neighbors not speaking to each for years suddenly reconcile... Common to all such events, and the reason to wonder at them, is a change of heart. A miracle, then, is not only concerned with an unanticipated event that happens, but also with our changed attitude toward it, with us seeing something in a new light. The basic assumptions of such a spiritual approach are two: the ability to open up beyond ourselves (instead of seeing ourselves as the center of the world), and the ability to act following our natural and spontaneous impulses (instead of pursuing our self-interest). To be spiritual, then, means that we should not wish for success or happiness, for immortality or salvation; we should wish for nothing at all but a pure and wakeful mind and a brave and strong heart.

As it relates to love, the key in this change of perspective is this: not to experience love in the way in which we experience our everyday life, but the other way around. We are not the earthly beings that have spiritual experiences but spiritual beings having earthly, human experiences. Instead, then, of looking at love from below and judging it by our “earthly” values, let us look at life from above, from the point of view aspiring toward the greatest heights and inspiring us to overcome the earthly obstacles to it. Hartmann sums up this transformed attitude as follows: “The whole art of living consists in retaining this point of vision as a perspective and remaining under its spell. A life of love is a life spent in the knowledge of what is best worth knowing, a life of participation in the highest that is in man.”

To illustrate the impact this transformation may have, let us return to the story of Laza and Lenka. When Laza was obsessed with the considerable difference in age between them, and thus likely afraid of what this would mean for their physical intimacy, that he may soon not be able to satisfy and perhaps even retain his youthful lover, he lost faith in the transformative power of love. And where there is little faith, there is also little courage and even less love.

Did not Laza fear God's wrath afterward? Although he was a Christian by upbringing and readily celebrated Christian rituals and holidays—he even seriously considered becoming a monk—there were two notable deviations from orthodoxy in his spiritual outlook. Like the Greek pagans, Laza believed that the world was alive, animated by spiritual energy. According to his mixed Greco-Christian attitude, the world was not so much made *by* God as it is made *of* God. This God-world is to be both feared and revered. For just as there must be love greater than selfish love, there must also be fear that is greater than selfish fear that focuses on not being hurt, or on not losing something that we claim as ours. Laza came to realize that there must be some power purer and more noble than anything that is part of our ordinary human world, and that there must correspondingly be fear of offending that power, of not being attuned to it, and of thereby soiling something that is sacred.

There is an additional sensitive issue concerning the gender of the central divine figure. Laza rarely spoke about God in the way most Christians do—as a male divinity. Like pagans who worship Mother Nature, Laza came to admire the feminine energy and the loving and caring characteristics of the divine force. If that transcendent power of which we have to feel awe and reverence and with which we must try to attune should be “given a face,” it could be the face of the Mother of God. He worshiped Mother Nature as a sublimated feminine figure, as she was personified by Maria, the Mother of God, who, paradoxically, was also the miraculous Virgin Mary. Laza thus brought into an intimate connection the natural and the spiritual aspects of reality, while at the same time relegating their social counterpart far into a background.

After Lenka's death, a change of heart took place in Laza with respect to both his faith and his fortitude. It eventually led him to create his love poem, “Santa Maria della Salute,” in which he begged the holy Mother for forgiveness and reunion with Lenka, once and forever. This fruit of the spiritual transformation of Laza's love could not make Lenka physically alive again, but it enabled him to experience their love in a different light. While the poem is unquestion-

ably a testimony of the alchemical transformation of Laza's love and his "last will," it raises as many questions as it offers answers. Three of them are the most pertinent for our discussion. First, what did the awakening of Laza's spiritual love really accomplish in terms of healing the wound opened by his betrayal and deepened by Lenka's death? Second, can our aspirations and ideals lead us toward a more humane way of life than our customary pursuit of our desires and appetites? Third and most importantly, can there be a spiritual solution for the widespread fear of love and the devastation of humanity it causes?

Before we give a due consideration to these questions, let us first familiarize ourselves with the "child" of Laza's love for Lenka. I quote his poem first in its original Serbian version, then in an English translation.



Лаза Костић: *Santa Maria della Salute*

Ојроси̑и, мајко свети̑а, ојроси̑и,
 шии̑о наших јора њожалих бор,
 на ком се, уси̑ук свакој злоси̑и,
 блаженој ти̑еби њодиже двор;
 њрезри, небеснице, врело милоси̑и,
 шии̑о ти̑и земаљски саїреши сїтвор:
 Кајан ти̑и љубим њречис̑и̑е ску̑и̑е,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

Зар није леи̑и̑е носии̑ леи̑о̑и̑у,
 сводова ти̑војих њос̑и̑а̑и̑и сїуд,
 неіо їрејући свет̑ску їрехо̑и̑у
 у њеи̑о сїалии̑и срце и луб;
 Тону̑и о броду, ти̑руну̑и у њло̑и̑у,
 ђаволу јелу а вра̑у дуд?
 Зар није леи̑и̑е вековати̑ у ти̑е,
 Santa Maria della Salute?

Ойросїи, мајко, мноїо сам сїѣрадѠ,
 мноїе сам їрехе їокајѠ ја;
 све шїїо је срце снивало младо,
 све је їїо јаве сломио ма',
 за чим сам чезнѠ, чему се надѠ,
 све је їїо давно їейѠ и їра',
 на уїод живу їакосїи жуїїе,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

Тровало ме је їодмукло, їњило,
 ал' иїак нећу никоїа клей;
 шїїо їод је муке на мене било,
 да никої за їїо не криви свей:
 Јер, шїїо је души ломило крило,
 їїе јој у јеку душило лейї,
 све је їїо с ове їлаве са луде,
 Santa Maria della Salute!

Таг моја вила їред ме їрану,
 лейїше је овај не виде вид;
 из црної мрака дивна ми свану,
 кѠ їесма славља у зорин свийї,
 сваку ми махом залечи рану,
 ал' їїежој рани насїїаде брид.
 Шїїа ћу од миља, од муке љуїїе,
 Santa Maria della Salute?

Она ме їледну. У душу свесну
 никад још їакав не сину їлед;
 їїим би, шїїо из їїої їоїледа кресну,
 свих васиона сїїойила лед,
 све ми їїо нуди за чим їод чезну',
 јаде їа сладе, чемер їа мед,
 сву своју душу, све своје жуде
 —сву вечносїї за їїе, дивни їїренуїїе! —
 Santa Maria della Salute.

Зар мени јадном сва ѿа дивоѿа?
 Зар мени блаѿо ѿолико све?
 Зар мени сѿаром, на дну живоѿа,
 ѿа злайна воћка шѿо сад ѿек зре?
 Ох, слаѿка воћко ѿанѿалска рода,
 шѿо ниси мени сазрела ѿре?
 Оѿросѿи моје ѿреине залуѿе,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

Две се у мени ѿобише силе,
 мозак и срце, ѿамей и сласѿи.
 Дуѿо су бојак сѿраховиѿи биле,
 кѿ бесни олуј и сѿари храсѿи.
 Найокоп силе сусѿаше миле,
 вијуѿав мозак одржа власѿи,
 разлоѿи закон ѿамейи хуге,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

Памей ме сѿеѿну, ја срце сѿисну,
 уѿекох мудро од среће, луд,
 уѿекох од ње—а она свисну.
 Помрча сунце, вечиѿа сѿуд,
 ѿаснуше звезде, рај у ѿлач бризну,
 смак свеѿа насѿа и сѿрашни суд.
 О свеѿски слоде, о сѿрашни суде,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

У срцу сломљен, збуњен у ѿлави,
 сѿомен је њезин свеѿи ми храм.
 Таг ми се она одонуд јави,
 кѿ да се Боѿи ми ѿјави сам:
 у души бола лед ми се крави,
 кроз њу сад видим, од ње све знам,
 зашѿо се мудрачки мозѿови муѿе,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

Дође ми у сну. Не кад је зове
 силних ми жеља наврели рој,
 она ми дође кад њојзи ѿве,
 ѿајне су силе слушкиње њој.
 Навек су са њом ѿјаве нове,
 земних милина небески крој.
 Тако ми до ње ѿпросише ѿуше,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

У нас је све ко у мужа и жене,
 само ѿто није бриѧа и рад,
 све су милине, ал' нежежене,
 сѿрасѧи нам се блажи у рајски хлад;
 сѧарија она сад је од мене,
 ѿамо ћу биѧи досѧа јој млаг
 ѿде свих времена разлике ћуѧе,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

А наша деца ѧесме су моје,
 ѧиѧх сасѧанака вечѧѧи ѧраѧ;
 ѧо се не ѧише, ѧо се не ѧоје,
 само ѿто душоу ѧродије зрак.
 То разумемо само нас двоје,
 ѧо је и рају ѧриновак драѧ,
 ѧо ѧек у заносу ѧророци слуѧе,
 Santa Maria della Salute.

А кад ми дође да ѧрсне ѧлава
 о ѧоѧ живоѧа хридовиѧ крај,
 најлеѧи сан ми ѧосѧаће јава,
 мој роѧац ѧено: "Ево ме, нај!"
 Из ниѧѧавила у славу слѧва,
 из безѧенице у рај, у рај!
 У рај, у рај, у ѧезин заѧрѧај!

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

*Све ће се жеље њу да њробуде,
душине жице све да њројуде,
задивићемо свейске колунје,
бојове силне, камоли њуде,
звездама ћемо њомериј њунје,
сунцима засун сељенске сјунде,
да у све куње зоре заруде,
да од милине дуси њолуде,
Santa Maria della Salute.*



Figure 6:
Laza Kostić



Figure 7:
Lenka Dunderski

Laza Kostić: *Santa Maria della Salute*¹

*Forgive me, O Mother Holy, I pray
For mourning our mountains, stripped of pine,
Those woods that became, despite our dark day,
Part of Your Mansion, a Holy Shine,
And, Source of Mercy, forgive, as you may,
This, my earthly sin, this guilt of mine.
Repentant, I kiss the hem of your dress,
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*Is it not better to bear Beauty's weight,
Hold up your arches, solid as rock,
Than to feed the hearths of the world's hot hate,
Burning to ash the heart and its bark,
Than to sink like a ship, rot at a gate,
Like the devil's own fir tree or oak?
So much lovelier the eternal rest
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*Forgive me, O Mother, I've born such hurt,
Much sin I've repented and renounced.
All my young heart had dreamed is but naught,
Ripped up by the walking world, denounced.
All that I yearned for, all hope my youth bought,
Crumbled to ashes, dusty accounts,
All in fulfillment of some malign jest,
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

¹ Translation by Dorian Cooke and Milne Holton; modified by P. Cicovacki.

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

*Poisons, corruptions have hurt me within,
Yet I'll injure no man with my curse.
Whate'er I've suffered, from lash or snake's sting,
I'll have no man bear the blame or worse.
The power that broke this spirit's bright wing,
Choking its breath as it flew on course,
Sprang from this mad head, this mind of unrest,
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*Then my secret nymph stood there at my side.
Oh, such a sight had my eyes ne'er seen!
From the black darkness, a poem in her pride,
Broke dawn's glory in a dazzling sheen,
Healed in an instant all my wounds beside,
Yet left deeper wound, sharper pain.
Now how could I bear this joy in my breast,
Dear, Maria della Salute, so Blessed?*

*She looked on my face, and none has yet seen
Such a shine that sparkled from her eyes.
On a frozen landscape the light of that mien
Could warm mountain tops, melt snow and ice.
Now my heart's every wish was there to glean
Sorrows and sweetness, gall and fresh spice,
Hunger and thirst and the wants of my breast
Eternity be yours for this bequest,
You, Maria della Salute, O Blessed.*

*Was all of this splendor for such as me?
This gift like a miracle mine?
All these golden fruits, now ripe on the tree,
Indeed all for me, in life's decline?
O rarest fruit, you, so sweet to see,
Why were you not ripe at the harvest time?
Forgive me, for I'm a sinner confessed,
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

*Two forces struggled for mastery in me,
Mind against heart, against flesh's yoke,
How long did they fight in this awful way,
Like the tempest against the old oak?
Finally passion grew weak in the fray,
And the grooved brain made its last attack.
You're the hinge of the mind; you hold it fast,
You, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*My mind constricted, compressed my own heart;
I fled its pleasures, mad in my flight.
Oh, how I fled, so hurt at the start.
Cold rose round my sun and quenched its light.
Stars darkened, and tears burst from heaven's part;
'Twas the world's end, Judgment's awful night,
The crack of doom, the world's trial at the last,
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*All broken hearted, my mind scored with fears,
I hold her memory a holy shrine.
Now in years later, whene'er she appears,
It's as though God's face were here, Divine.
Within me the ice of agony thaws;
Through her I see; all knowledge is mine.
Why are our wise minds perplexed and distressed,
O, Maria della Salute, Blessed?*

*In sleep she comes, all silent, refusing
The loud rabble-cry of my desire.
When she will speak, the time of her choosing.
At her command she holds strange power,
And all around her, in clouds suffusing,
A heavenly pattern of charming hours.
And my path to her is thus paved and pressed,
By Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

*We hold one another as man and wife,
Without unhappiness, without care,
Halcyon days, with no fever of life,
Our passions cooled by heavenly air.
She's older now, and there is no strife;
The past is as mute as unsaid prayers.
For here my own age is blessed by the best,
By Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*For us our children are poems I have made,
Timeless traces of our elation,
A written text, neither sung, nor e'en said,
Only the soul's ray's penetration.
Only two know where the secret is laid,
Rare is heavenly revelation.
It's what rapturous prophets have expressed,
O Maria della Salute, Blessed.*

*When the time of my doom comes round at last,
When I break my head 'gainst life's jagged stone,
My dream will be born with Death's rattling brass;
Then I'll hear ringing cry, "Come home!"
From nothingness into glorious grace,
From limbo to the heaven's full bloom,
To heaven and into her arms so warm.
Then that yearning will rise within my breast,
And my heart-strings will quiver without rest,
And the moving stars in the skies above,
Both the men there and gods will gaze aghast,
We'll alter the path on which the stars move;
We'll melt in our warming sun all the frost,
Till the dawn's red glow lightens every cove,
And all the ghosts are by love obsessed,
Dear Maria della Salute, Blessed!*

3. Healing

A devastating outbreak of plague hit the city of Venice and its surrounding lagoons in 1630. Close to fifty thousand people died in the city itself, and around a hundred thousand including the city's surroundings. The epidemic of the "Black Death" was so ravaging that, hoping for health and deliverance, the city fathers decided to build a church in honor of the Blessed Maria, considered to be the protector of the Venetian Republic. The building started in 1631, and the church was finally consecrated in 1681. To this day, every November 21, on the Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin, the entire city senate walks to the church, Santa Maria della Salute, to pay the tribute for the deliverance from the deathly disease and the restoration of health.¹ Venice may have never fully recovered the commercial and political power it had during the several centuries preceding the outbreak of this epidemic, it may have never wholly reestablished its reputation as "Venus" among the stars of our civilization, but it has remained one of the most beloved cities in the world. The church, popularly called "La Salute," is to this day considered among the most magnificent buildings in the world.

The outbreak of plague in Venice was by no means unusual for the time. The Black Death had been devastating Europe and ravaging at least one third of its populations since 1347, when it had been unintentionally brought by Sicilian sailors from the shores of the Black Sea. The spread of the epidemic and the resulting deaths were symbolic of the dissemination of fear and doubt that marked

¹ Was Laza aware of that date, which happens to coincide with Lenka's birthday?

the end of one of the most stable periods of Western civilization: the Medieval Era. Built like an impenetrable fortress around the Church of Rome and its infallible dogma, the medieval civilization seemed not only dedicated to God but relishing in the divine blessing as well. Nevertheless, through a number of seemingly coincidental events, the monolithic fortress of the majestic medieval worldview started to crack into more places than could be patched. At the end of the fifteenth and in the beginning of the sixteenth century, new geographical and scientific discoveries created a pandemic that was spiritually more devastating than the Black Death was physically. Those who tried to reconcile the new discoveries with old dogmas, the rift between science and religion, were ostracized as heretics and prosecuted. Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), a priest and a scientist, a poet and a philosopher, was imprisoned and tortured for years. Finally, as a warning to others, the unrepentant Bruno was burned alive at stake in Rome, on Valentine's Day (February 17, 1600), at the piazza Campo di' Fiori ("Field of Flowers"), facing the Vatican City.

Decades before Bruno's death, around 1520, another rift opened. This time it occurred within the Western Church itself. The crisis broke out over the right of believers to apprehend the Bible in their own way. By rebelling against the authority of the Pope as the ultimate judge of the meaning of the holy script, Reformers like Luther and Calvin took their personal opinions as a base on which to rebuild the entire structure of religion, and followed their own subjective views with regard to what constitutes a proper Christian way of life. The rise of Protestantism led to one of the most fiercely fought wars that devastated Europe for more than a century. It was ended in 1648 by the Peace of Westphalia.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Western Europe appeared to be disintegrating. Its foundation, the Western Church, was undermined from without and within. If the Western European civilization had any hope of a recovery, it needed some potent medicine—some miracle! —that would offer a completely

new way of orienting in reality and restoring our trust in it. A number of “drugs” were offered, but only one came to dominate Western civilization for centuries. While it definitely succeeded in redirecting the human life toward new values and dogmas, its unanticipated long-term consequences included an increasing mechanization and dehumanization of human life. The name of this process of de-sanctification of reality was “Modernity.”

THE PROSE OF LIFE

The world at the end of the Middle Ages must have felt like chaos, with a lot of blood spilled and polluted. Swirling around like a wind, the Black Death could appear suddenly and wipe out an entire community. Or it may not appear at a particular place at all, despite its devastation of the neighboring cities. The Church of Rome’s moralizing cries that the disease was a punishment for the past sins sounded hollow. Its religious dogma, with its visions of heaven and hell, was losing its credibility in the face of new discoveries and the internal conflicts within the Western Christian community. The crusades against the infidels were now conducted not in the far-away lands but at home. Just about the only claim the Church of Rome made that still seemed true was that this world was a “vale of tears.” Perhaps the world was also a “Divine Comedy,” but it definitely felt like a human tragedy.

A collapse of the old is always an opportunity for the birth of something new. What emerged from the ruins of the Middle Ages was, indeed, quite novel. I never found its Promethean novelty captured more vividly than by Gerald L. Bruns. In the first paragraph of his short essay, “Toward a Random Theory of Prose,” he writes:

Modernity begins with the recognition that the object before me is not a sign but a random particle. And it is all there is; nothing is behind or beyond it, nor is anything underneath. It is opaque and irreducible, one singularity among others multiplied excessively in every direction. The universe is made of such things.

The historic task of modernity, starting in the seventeenth century and continuing to this day, has been to develop a theory of rationality adequate to a universe of randomness—and not only a theory but a program of strategic operations capable of entering into the heterogeneity of things and bringing it under control. One could say that with modernity the task of reason was no longer to interpret the world but rather to overcome it—to reduce it conceptually, to grasp and contain it within an order of general laws and technological systems, finally to intervene in its operations and to turn it to productive account. To make sense of the world, we must penetrate its incoherent surface and lay bare its deep structures; we must grasp not its hidden meanings but its inner workings. Grammar is mastery. And with this idea comes the invention of politics, whose task is to produce a cultural system free from internal contradictions, social fragmentation, and endless crises of legitimacy.

An outbreak of plague must be seen for what it is, and not as a punishment of God, or any similar excuse that only increases our sense of helplessness. According to Bruns, any such crisis must be approached in a rational and practical way, by understanding its inner workings, rather than by relying on prayers begging God for help. The world's randomness must be accepted and controlled. For that, we need neither religious faith nor any other form of idealism, but a new theory of rationality. This is what Bruns clarifies next:

[M]odernity begins with the discovery that the book of the world is written in prose. A poetic universe is, philosophically speaking, a universe of correspondences. In a poetic universe, every fragment is a luminous detail. It resonates with the supersensuous. It is in perpetual transport from the everydayness of its material appearance to the sphere of the [transcendent] where it is really located, and its impact upon consciousness constitutes a moment of vision or the sense of embracing the totality of all that is. There are overarchings everywhere. But a prose universe is just one damn thing after another, like an attic or junkyard or side of the road... Prose belongs to the world of flesh and skin.

And the goal of the prose art, and indeed of modernity as a whole, is “to make the stone stony.”

Imagine that: “to make the stone stony”! While Bruno wanted to combine the poetry and the prose of life together, Bruns would have none of it. In the light of his own explanation, perhaps Bruns should have said that the goal of Modernity is to remove any non-stony aspect of the stone, so that we can see it for what it is and experience it as stony. Significantly, what has to be removed is not just any poetic correspondence to some transcendent meaning or purpose, but also all human emotions and symbolism. The virtue of modern rationalistic approach is that it is dry and precise, reductivist and quantifiable. No sentimentalism is needed or allowed.

Nor does Modernity allow any hierarchical understanding of reality. There is no heaven and hell, this world and another world. There is no Plato’s cave of shadows, nor the world of perfect Ideas above it. To be sure, Modernity has produced a fair share of miracles, from medicine and genetic manipulations to electronic communication and space travel. Nevertheless, the bulldozer of Modernity has leveled the face of the earth and left it equally stony for all.

This Promethean rearranging of our world has profound implications, in both politics and economy. In 1651, three years after the Treaty of Westphalia established sovereignty of a state over the rights of any church to interfere in any state’s internal matters, Thomas Hobbes published his *Leviathan*; he laid there a blueprint of the “hearth” around which a modern sovereign state is built. We are wolves to each other, claimed Hobbes, who need a state to tame and civilize us. All flames of passion, individual or social, are dangerous, with the potential to burn us and undermine the common life. Only individual and collective restraints, governed by law and backed by the threat of coercion, can serve as the walls protecting a sovereign state.

Hobbes’ distrust of human nature and his insistence on social contracts became the mantra not only of political but also of economic life. While much of the economic interactions of the past

were based on trust, this too had to change. Human beings are not trustworthy. We are self-interested animals, whose economic interactions should be regulated by contracts backed by the threat of punishment for their violations. We are free and rational enough to estimate the costs and benefits of our exchanges and transactions; whether we miscalculate or not, we have to live with the consequences of our freely undertaken obligations. Although we all have the same starting positions, the world is a battlefield in which those smarter and faster, more daring and lucky, succeed.

With the hindsight of several centuries, we can see that the experiment of Modernity has failed. Despite Bruns' assertion, Modernity is not based on any "discovery that the book of the world is written in prose"; it is not a fact but a "working hypothesis" that stakes everything on man's rational power to rearrange the world in accordance with our own vision. Modernity has indeed attacked the superstition and freed the people from some imaginary predetermined purposes of existence, but it has also impoverished the world by turning everything into a stone-like thing.

Modernity has made our lives unimaginably easier because of its technological advances. It has also brought us to a brink of self-destruction because of its environmental neglect and the production of weapons of mass destruction. Modernity has seduced us into thinking about the world, and our relations toward the members of the world, in terms of quantities, mechanical properties, and profit. Our reason, understood as an ability to calculate what is in our interest and manipulate the world to our advantage, has turned out to be shortsighted and inadequate. While we have learned how to handle the Black Death, we have become victims of our own illusory faith that we can be the masters of the world. In this process of mastering "the junkyard of reality," we have become bloodless and heartless, spiritually numb and homeless. It is no wonder, then, that the fear of love has been spreading among us in a way more devastating than the Black Death. And it is no miracle that we are so prone to look for a substitute for love, which keeps us within the familiar territory of narrow self-interest and cold calculations.

The imposition of Modernity has bred pollution and chaos of the spiritual kind. We have become strangers in this world in which everything is made to look inhospitable and threatening. Our habitual distrust of reality, of each other, and of our own nature, may have safeguarded our physical existence, just as it may have multiplied our power and wealth, but it has left us as human cripples—afraid to love or be loved, unable to trust and cultivate what is noble in us, and too cynical to strive toward the best and the highest. Everything in our world feels random and disconnected, profaned and deadened. We have been so damaged that we need to wonder whether we are still capable of holding anything as sacred. Are we able to love, whether ourselves, other human beings, or our world as a whole? Can we still recognize that the church Santa Maria della Salute is far more than a random pile of stones, or that the poem with the same name is far more than a random collection of letters?

THE POETRY OF LIFE

For a few decades, Laza could not think of the church Santa Maria della Salute in any other way but as worse than a random pile of stones. He lamented its building because the securing of the platform on which it was built required around 100,000 wooden piles, almost all of which were taken from the other side of the Adriatic Sea, from the Slavic world from which he came. It is easy to imagine the devastation created along the coastline in order to provide so much wood to support one building. In addition, the church was built mostly of the stone and the marble dust taken from Istria, again from the other side of the Adriatic. To crown the insult, the central icon decorating this Catholic church was a Byzantine work which originated in Greece and which was brought to Venice from Crete, in the seventeenth century. This 12th (or 13th?) century icon was called in Greek: “Panagia Mesopantitissa” (Παναγία Μεσοπαντίτισσα), literally meaning “Madonna the Negotiator.” Laza knew that the way the piles, the stone, and the icon were obtained did not

involve much negotiation. It was the right of the stronger to impose its will on the weaker. Several of Laza's poems, written while he was in his thirties and forties, provided him with an outlet to the initial repulsiveness toward what he felt this church symbolized.

To approach life as poetry does not necessarily mean to write poems. Laza severely criticized the so-called "political" poems as using the wrong medium to deliver their message. If so, his own poems, in which he lamented the building of La Salute, were equally misdirected.

It is quite possible never to write one verse, and yet to experience life as poetry. Many of the leading scientists, including Einstein, Heisenberg, and Schrödinger, were poets in their hearts who, despite working within the scientific framework of Modernity, refused to perceive the world as a mass of randomly piled stones. Quite the contrary, they were capable of experiencing the world as miraculous. Laza clearly underwent a change of heart with regard to La Salute and eventually perceived it in a poetic way, for he not only told Lenka in great detail about its sublimity, but also took his wedded wife there on their honeymoon. How did he switch from the prose to the poetry of life?

Laza knew that a poet at heart approaches the world with fresh eyes every day, as if seeing it for the first time. When we see something with the eyes of a poet, we do not perceive it as useful or not, expensive or not, technically complicated or not. We suddenly realize that the world does not exist in shades of gray, nor is it all black or white. The world and people in it are full of colors, like a rainbow. The poetic approach to reality consists in letting any object we face unveil itself to us: in its individuality, uniqueness, and its unrepeatability. Let it be and come to us, however unstable or impermanent its nature. Unlike scientists, looking for an objective perspective and searching for the universally valid laws of nature, we know that, if we change the point of view, we will see something different; if we look at it a bit later, when the light illuminating it is varied, we will again see something else. Anyone who enjoys a sunrise or a sun-

set would understand that, Laza thought; anyone with a keen eye for the moods of a person they love would know what he was talking about.

What we perceive in the poetic way appears to us as a gift, and not as a bargain or an exchange. What we get through an exchange has a price. When we experience something especially beautiful or sublime, we intuit right away that we received a gift unique and priceless. It can be temporary, it can be fleeting, it can be imperfect, but it moves our souls, it evokes our emotions, and it makes us feel alive.

This realization may hold the key to why there is such pervasive fear of love in our age. To understand that, think about a bargain again. I offer you what I have and you offer me a fair price. We make a deal, sign a contract, and execute an exchange. Contracts and money are an expression of our distrust—of each other, and of the reality in which we live. Our word, even our reputation, is not enough. Regardless of who we are, we lie and cheat. Today a price we negotiate seems fair, but tomorrow it may not—I may find a seller willing to pay me more for the same thing. Or, what I promise to sell you may change or disappear as a result of the changes in the environment. That is why we need contracts and lawyers, courts and prisons, handcuffs and guns, police and military. Our bargains and exchanges are voluntary, but their executions have to be secured by the appropriate means. In the course of the centuries, our mistrust of each other has only increased and we have become obsessed with bargains and exchanges. We think in these terms not only when we think of the workings of nature (causes and effects) but also of morality (promises and obligations made and fulfilled) and of our personal relations (marriage included).

A poetic approach to reality needs none of that apparatus. To experience life as poetry demands that we forget about ourselves and our interest; it requires that we step up toward the world and open ourselves to it. Miraculously, when we approach the world with a pure mind and a brave heart, we feel invigorated. We receive

something with no price tag, with no strings attached. Such an experience creates in us a sense of trust. It serves as a foundation of faith. The poetry of life consists in approaching the world as something alive and animated, as something that warrants our trust in its working even though we cannot fully comprehend it and even less control it. The poetry of life is the attitude of awe and reverence for the miracle of reality. It lifts us up to the realm of the spiritual.

Compare for a moment the spiritual realm with a rainbow. Like a rainbow, the spiritual realm ascends from the ground (the level of natural impulses), climbs up to the social level (the world of institutions and exchanges), then ascends higher toward the sublime (the realm of aspirations and ideals), only to find its way back to Mother Earth. Depending on our position with regard to the ascent or descent, we would have a different perspective of the panorama below us, including the position of love in reality. Those who fear love stay much closer to the ground than those who are not afraid of the gravity of the soul and love's flight.

Laza's love for Lenka made him experience how dizzy it gets up there, near the top of the rainbow. To be there makes us vulnerable. In his last poem he admits that this is how he felt, and this is why his last poem feels like an intimate confession. Exposing oneself like that requires an enormous amount of faith and no less courage. Before we see, in more detail, how he succeeded in doing that in his poem, while failing in his confrontation with Lenka as a living person, let us prepare ourselves for this central discussion by first considering a better known example that reveals some key moments of the experience of life as poetry.

Christianity is rightly called the religion of love because Jesus puts love in the center of our lives. Recall, however, that Jesus offers two radically different precepts regarding love. We have already mentioned his *agape* conception: love your neighbor as you love yourself. This imperative is of a great significance in a world like ours, so bent on self-interest and taking advantage of others. What to do, however, about the often-quoted yet hardly comprehensible commandment to love our enemies?

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

Love your enemies and pray for those who prosecute you,
So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven;
for He makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Mt 5:44–45).

From the point of view of the natural and social aspects of life, this is just absurd! It is precisely our enemies we should not love. Is it even possible to love those who harm us? Does one not have to become a saint, or perhaps an angel, in place of a human being, to live in accordance with this commandment?

Had this precept not been issued by Jesus, it would be considered an example of madness. This is precisely what it is, just not of clinical madness but of what is called “divine” madness. Although the forces acting in the natural world are blind, they nonetheless serve the survival and maintenance functions of any organism. Similarly, the actions in the social world are intended for the achievement of our practical goals. What purpose could the love of our enemies serve? Does it not work precisely against our social orientation toward survival and prosperity? How can Jesus commend something so paradoxical?

Before we can answer these questions, notice first the distinction between strangers and enemies. Strangers are those who are not part of our world, with whom we have not had any previous encounter. In the old times, in all parts of the world, there was an unspoken rule about hospitality toward strangers—at least for a night or a day. Enemies are not strangers but those known to us. Moreover, they are known to have done, or intending to do, serious harm. Strangers are accepted and treated in good faith. Enemies are those who violate the trust implicit in that good faith. They break a promise imbedded in all life, in every relationship among human beings.

This is a fundamental point, essential for understanding love, spirituality, and what it means to be a human being. Life is a promise, just as exchange is a promise, and just as love is a promise. Promises are made, and they are broken. They are broken for a va-

riety of reasons, some of which we have already discussed in Part I. What matters here is what happens *after* a promise is broken—that is what makes the difference between the natural, the social, and the spiritual levels of life.

At the natural level, there is nothing to do: life makes a promise, the promise is broken, and life goes on, as if nothing happened. Like wind or rain, the epidemic of “Black Death” comes and goes. Millions of people die, just as millions of people are born, yet life goes on.

At the social level, after a promise broken, life cannot be “business as usual.” Those who break a promise need to be dealt with appropriately: damage must be repaired, a breach of an agreement punished. Rules are rules, contracts are contracts, laws are laws, and they must be respected. Otherwise, the whole foundation of social life is undermined.

The most fascinating thing happens at the spiritual level. There are two layers of response here. The first is a “delayed” version of the social justice model: trust is regained, because there is justice in the world, after all. And if not in this world, then in the “other” one. Maybe not right away, but sooner or later. Maybe my love and sacrifice would not be appreciated in this relationship, but they will definitely be in another one, in the right one. Then we can go on, still believing in the ultimate justice of life, helping strangers, and hoping for the true love.

In this first layer of the spiritual response, the focus is still on me. How could my friend betray *me*? How could someone who promised to love *me* forever fall in love with another person? Even Jesus cried from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken *me*?”

In the second layer of the spiritual response, there are two new elements. First, the focus shifts away from me and toward others. Second, instead of being dual, the relationship becomes triangular: besides myself and other people, there is also a higher and not fully comprehensible force involved. This someone or something “third”

may correct the humanely made injustice and restore faith—or it may not. Jesus switched from the first to the second layer of spirituality when he stopped wondering about himself being forsaken and asked God not to blame either those who put him on the cross, or those who were mocking him for being there: “Forgive them, for they know not what they are doing!” There is an analogous triangular relationship in the biblical story of the prodigal son: the brother of the prodigal son does not forgive, but the father does: “My son was dead, and now he is alive again! Let us celebrate!”

At the second layer of spirituality—we can now say: the level of spirituality proper—enemies are not seen (just) as enemies, and victimizers are not seen (just) as victimizers. If we are not too scared to look at their faces, what they will reveal to us is their sorrow, struggle, confusion, or ignorance. Which enemy was not previously betrayed by his former friends and neighbors? Which victimizer was not previously a victim himself? Which child ever received enough attention and love?

Instead of perceiving the world like a wounded and self-preoccupied child, our spirituality leads us to see it from a broader perspective. It enables us to recognize that the Father in heaven “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” When we detach ourselves from our narrow point of view, when we redirect our gaze from our selfish interests and wounds toward the faces of the world and the cries of those hurt, we spontaneously come to feel within our hearts something crucially important: more than justice, this world needs mercy and forgiveness, pity and compassion; more than anything else, this world needs love. It needs our ability to regain our appreciation for the gifts we have received, rather than our laments that some of them are taken away from us. It needs our devotion, rather than our turning the world into a random pile of stones and hardening our hearts into stones, because the love promised to us is no more.

This appreciation of the poetry of life is beautifully captured in Kent M. Keith’s poem “Anyway”:

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

*People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;
forgive them anyway.
If you are kind, people may accuse you of having selfish
ulterior motives;
be kind anyway.
If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some
true enemies;
succeed anyway.
If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;
be honest and frank anyway.
What you spend years building, someone could destroy
overnight;
build anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
be happy anyway.
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
give the world the best you've got anyway.
You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God;
it was never between you and them anyway.*

The only point that needs refining here is the last line, by adding the word “only” after “never”: it was never only between you and them anyway. Like other spiritual relations, love is not dyadic but multidimensional.

THE POETRY OF LOVE

Falling in love is our usual entrance into the poetry of life. When the heart in our chest starts beating faster, none of the common problems of life seem to matter much anymore. We become smiley, dreamy, and light—ready to take off from the ground and climb toward the top of the rainbow.

The faster our heart beats and the higher we climb, the better we set the stage for the transition from the poetry of life to the po-

etry of love. Greater love makes a correspondingly high promise of happiness. And when we fall in love in the way that carries with it the certainty that a love like that can be experienced only once in our lives—if we are ever so lucky—the expectations are sky-high. It is just that, unlike in fairy tales, we do not end up living happily ever after, but rather encounter difficult, seemingly overwhelming obstacles to our love. And with such obstacles, usually one of the two scenarios happens: either one side betrays the other and ends the relationship, or the passions continue to soar despite the obstacles, and one or both lovers end up dying. There is a price to pay for great love, just as there is a reason why tragic art represents the culminating achievement of Western civilization.

The emergence of seemingly insurmountable obstacles sets the stage for the poetry of love. In struggling with such obstacles, a love may be born that assumes the elements of myth, a love that in its tragic confrontation of the sacred and the profane leads to the clashes that become absorbed into the collective unconsciousness of mankind: Orpheus and Eurydice, Amor and Psyche, Abelard and Heloise, Petrarch and Laura, Dante and Beatrice, Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet ... Laza and Lenka hoped that their love would end up in a different category, but their lives and their love unfolded in a direction they did not predict. This is why their story, tragic as it was, belongs to the poetry of love.

The poetry of love usually combines extraordinary love with some form of betrayal. This point is worth reflecting on, since betrayal makes a special stamp on all distinguishably human experiences. Think, for instance, of Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Although in the preserved (but virtually unknown) Gospel of Judas he claimed that he was the truest disciple of his Master and the only one who had carried out his wish, in the Christian tradition Judas remains an incarnation of evil. In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante proclaimed treachery—the act of betraying a loved one—as the worst of all possible sins. He even gave the name “Judecca” to the inferno's innermost core, reserved for those who commit such deeds. Together with a

death of one or both lovers, a betrayal of the one we love remains one of the most difficult love-knots to untie. Since we have already considered some of the reasons for which Laza betrayed Lenka, let us turn to the other side of their love-knot—Lenka's death.

Laza did betray Lenka, but did she have to die?

Lenka knew that Laza never stopped loving her. Had he fallen in love with another woman (whether the one he married or any other), it would have been easier for Lenka to accept his treachery. Had that happened, Lenka could have consoled herself with the realization that this, after all, was not the true love of her life. Her difficulty appeared from the opposite direction, from the realization that Laza rejected her because he loved her so much, more than he ever loved any other person in his life. What hurt Lenka was not the rejection of love, but the betrayal of promise. Laza himself had encouraged her to believe that, just as for each one of us there may be one true calling in life (in terms of a profession and, more broadly, a way of life), for each one of us there may be one person who could help us experience unlimited love and achieve greatest happiness. Both Lenka and Laza had the exceptional gifts of nature that may have been the prerequisites for such blissful love and life. In addition, they had the luck to find each other before they bound their lives to another person in marriage. Theirs was not the forbidden love of the troubadours, but free and accepted love that promises that together they may find the pot of gold on the other side of the rainbow. Theirs could have been the love of which dreams are made.

When Laza withdrew, married another woman, and took his wedded wife to see La Salute, Lenka lost her will to live. With her entire soul, Lenka wanted out of the world that used to look so blissful before, the world in which such betrayals were possible, the world with which she could not identify any more. If Lenka were not alone in Vienna at that time, if her older and trusted sister Olga was around and she could advise her, maybe Lenka would not have acted so impulsively. Be that as it may and however difficult such decisions are, Lenka found the courage to withdraw into the darkness of the night.

There is no need to blame Lenka for her desperate decision. After all, she was honest and brave. Her expectations and standards were as high as they are in few of us. She did not turn to alcohol; nor did she run into the arms of the first man she could find; Lenka would accept no compromises and no substitutes for love. Nevertheless, Lenka failed the test of love. She could not forgive, nor could she find the way to sustain her love and perhaps gradually redirect it toward some other worthy person or cause.

In Wagner's "Twilight of the Gods," Brünnhilde says of Siegfried (the central hero of the entire opera cycle, "The Ring of the Nibelung"): "None was more true, yet none more false." This paradoxical statement is worth reflecting on, for it not only sums up Lenka's experience with Laza but it also deepens our understanding of the nature of love. The ultimate test of love does not happen when all is going in accordance with our wishes. It only occurs after a major friction, or a great disappointment. To reach the level of the spiritual is to come to realize that many events and decisions do not occur in a straightforward and linear way. In fact, hardly any of them do. Our choices are almost always between two positive values, or two negative values. That means that no matter what we chose, there is no guiltless choice and guiltless life. Nonetheless, some choices are easier to make than others, and some are better than others. Lenka's choice was difficult to make but not the best.

Just as Lenka had high standards and expectations, so did Laza. He did not betray Lenka through some thoughtless, selfish love affair. Nor did he ever show any disrespect toward Lenka and her family; their friendship and close ties continued after Lenka's death. (Lenka's older brother, Gedeon, was one of the last who visited the poet on his deathbed.) Lenka should have accepted that Laza made a wrong decision, but not because he wanted to hurt her. Yet, Lenka was so hurt, and felt so betrayed that she could not but feel sorry for herself and commit something that contained an element of revenge. When Laza and his wife were invited to come to Lenka's birthday celebration (issued by her father), she experienced it

as an additional insult. Instead of putting herself in the position to receive a birthday present from Laza (and his wife), she decided to offer him her own most spectacular gift—her life. Lenka's last journal entries reveal to us the thoughts of a wounded and not fully mature person. She reached the first level of the spiritual, but its central layer eluded her.

What was she supposed to do to reach that highest level? And how far did Laza advance?



It is usually the prerogative of males to make heroic self-sacrifices. Males were traditionally warriors. Since Serbia was geographically located at the crossroads of the empires, the history of this small country is woven into frequent battles and wars. The role of man was to fight and his glory was to die on the battlefield. The woman was the one who stayed behind and continued to carry the torch of life. Laza greatly admired the spirit of Serbian women and their quiet sacrifice, which consisted not in dying but in remaining alive—to serve, to love, and to heal.

In the Serbian literary tradition, there are two notable exceptions to this ideal of the feminine endurance. Laza thought these examples are as sublime as any in the European cultural tradition. One deals with the life-sacrifice of a lover, the other with motherly love. They are important to know, because Laza combined both in his poem “Santa Maria della Salute.”

The first example comes from the Serbian folk song “Omer and Merima,” which in some of its elements resembles Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.” Omer and Merima are a young couple who are deeply in love, but Omer’s mother thinks that her son deserves a better match. She arranges for her son to marry the beautiful and wealthy Fatima. On the wedding night, the groom and his bride are left alone for the first time, and Omer cannot but recognize that Fatima is more beautiful than his Merima. Despite this recognition, it is Merima who is in his heart, and that same night Omer dies of sorrow for the woman he loves and who he will never be

able to claim as his own. Merima only hears the bad news when the procession with Omer's body passes by her house on its way to the burial place. She stops it and asks for the coffin to be opened so she can see for the last time, and kiss for the first, her beloved Omer. Upon seeing and kissing him, she drops dead over his body. Instead of spending the rest of her life in mourning for the lost love, in her death Merima joins her beloved Omer, never to be separated from him again.

As Laza pointed out, in *Romeo and Juliet* the movement is "from the eyes to the heart." Romeo's parents had already chosen a bride for him; yet, once he sees the beautiful Juliet, he is incapable of giving his heart to any other, including the one to which he was promised. In Omer's case, the movement is "from the heart to the eyes": Fatima may be a hundred times more beautiful than Merima, but it is Merima who is in Omer's heart and no beauty of this world would change his love for her. Omer's sacrifice is so touching that Merima cannot retain her traditional, passive feminine role. Omer did not betray their love, although he could have done so easily, with seemingly all the benefits for himself. Unlike the traditional marriage vow in which we say that when God has joined two individuals together no man can divide their union, the poetry of love operates on a different principle: when two hearts are joined together in love, when love is so strong that the two are not separate beings any more, no force in the world—not even death—can untie them anymore.

The second example that Laza often used relates to the most celebrated event in the entire history of Serbia. It took place on June 28, 1389, on the "Field of the Black Birds." (The advocates of the prose of life call it the "Battle of Kosovo.") On that day, the Serbian army attempted to stop the impending invasion of the Turkish army. For centuries, the Serbs perceived their historic role as the last line of defense of the European civilization. This is why on the eve of this battle virtually every Serbian man and every Serbian boy who could bear arms was there on the Field of the Black Birds to

fight until death. Despite their epic bravery, the Serbs could not stop the Ottomans.

Like Venice at the time of the Black Death, the Field of the Black Birds was covered with thousands of dead and maimed bodies at the end of the battle. The Turks suffered heavy casualties, which included their leader, Sultan Murad. On the Serbian side the army was virtually wiped out, from its leader, Tsar Lazar, to the last man in the ranks. The cost was so severe, and yet the sacrifice so noble, that the Serbian folk tradition to this day symbolically commemorates the battle through the death of the Duke Bogdan Jugović and his nine sons. The central person of the epic, however, is the wife of the duke and the mother of nine fallen boys— “Ma-jka Jugovića.” She prayed to God to give her “the wings of a swan and the eyes of a falcon” so she could fly over the Field of the Black Birds and see for herself whether all ten of her beloved suffered a heroic death. God could not but grant her this wish. Upon her return, the proud mother did not lament her loss, nor did she question her faith. Mother Jugović bore her loss in the conviction that their sacrifices were both necessary and dignified, and did not even let a tear of lamentation go down her cheek. Yet, when a few days later two ravens brought from the battlefield the arm of her favorite son, Damian, and dropped it into the mother’s lap, even the heart of this mother could not take it anymore. In the Serbian cultural tradition, she became the symbol of love.

In his thirties and forties, Laza wrote and lectured about Mother Jugović as a symbol of femininity and motherhood. He proclaimed her superior to the Blessed Mary, who was favored by both the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches. Laza changed his mind only after the death of Lenka and the years of reflecting on her death and their unfulfilled love.

After Lenka’s death, Laza could not stop thinking about her. He realized that death may be the end of life, but it is not the end of a relationship. What is more, after Lenka began appearing in his dreams, Laza started believing that, in some way, not explicable by science or common sense, Lenka was still alive. With her appear-

ances, she was as if giving him a second chance. In his dreams, Lenka was sometimes just the way he remembered her, but more often she was transformed. Her behavior was also different. Without necessarily rejecting physical tenderness, she was leading him to understand love in an even subtler way. Throughout the years of keeping his Dream Diary, Laza came to realize that fear of love, betrayal, and even death, do not have the last word when it comes to love. They are not the end of love. In fact, they are sometimes needed in order to open the possibility of love in a more sublime way. These dreams, puzzling, unpredictable, and miraculous as they were, led Laza not only to strengthen his love for Lenka, but also to discover the level of faith he had never known before. Throughout his previous life, Laza refused to believe in the biblical statement that “blind faith can remove mountains.” Lenka’s coming to him in his dreams, combined with his memory of her devotion to him and her refusal to marry another man, touched something in Laza that was dormant before. After years of guilt, Lenka’s death now appeared to him as an exceptional sacrifice and inspiration, as something that cried for an appropriate response on his part. A new creative power surged within him, and he managed to write a poem that is comparable to the great achievements of the European culture.

“SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE”

Learning Laza’s poem by heart as an eight-grader was a perplexing experience. As a child, I had neither enough life experience nor the familiarity with great works of art, like Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde,” or his “Ring of the Nibelung,” to establish a point of comparison. Yet even a child can feel the presence of something extraordinary.

Listening to this poem being read aloud decades later drew me instantly closer to it, without yet having the right words either to describe the poem or my experience of it. The first impressions il-

illuminate more what this poem is not, than what it is. As with visiting La Salute in Venice, when entering the inner space of this poem, we instantly sense that we are not in the presence of a sheer quantity; it is rather some unnamable quality that radiates from it. Not an “earthly” quality, nothing practical, useful or tangible, and yet not something quite otherworldly either. It is as if the two planes of existence, the profane and the sacred, intertwine and produce something sublime.

A few more readings reveal a structure of the poem and its well-crafted form. The poem consists of fourteen stanzas, perhaps because it was written fourteen years after Lenka’s death. When we recognize that the stanzas I and II create the first unit, then the stanzas III–IV, V–VI, VII–IX, X–XII, and XIII–XIV are easily grouped together. There is a thread connecting them, unfolding and transforming at the same time. Following this thread shows us how something simple and rough is being refined and ennobled, how something immediate and concrete is elevated toward the heavenly heights.

In the first two stanzas the atmosphere is that of humility. We can imagine the poet on his knees, his hands folded in prayer, his heart full of repentance. Stanzas III–IV are dominated by a sorrowful tone. We are witnessing a confession. There is much pain in the poet’s heart, and we hear about life’s promises unfulfilled and idealism lost. Then, in V–VI, the eyes lift up, the tone rises, and we hear about the first miracle: she comes to his life and appears to him in her majestic beauty, catching him unprepared. Had Laza not already been disillusioned about life? Had he not been approaching his last years? Why, and from where, was this youthful gift coming? Stanzas VII–IX describe the immense struggle between the opposing forces within him, his resolution of this battle, his withdrawal, and her death. The atmosphere is apocalyptic. There is a sense of doom: all is lost. Then another miracle occurs in X–XII, an even greater miracle than her unexpected appearance in his late life. Death is not the end of love. A new plane of existence appears in front of him, some-

thing truly not of this world, yet interwoven with it. The poet ascends toward the spiritual realm, and he elevates us there with him. Faith is regained, blind faith that makes him see for the first time in his life. Then comes the majestic finale, overcoming death, the cosmic reunion of lovers, involving ecstasy of the divine, the human, and the entire creation. Life and death, betrayal and reunion, reality and dreams are brought together in the majestic symphonic finale. The hymn of love resounds in all corners of the universe and the music of the spheres celebrates their heavenly marriage.



After this final spectacle that engages all of our faculties, we need a certain distance in order to start talking about this poem and its significance. Initially subdued, the colors of the poem explode like fireworks in the spiritual sky. The poem is a celebration of love, so strong and so pure that betrayal, suffering, and death could not extinguish it. In fact, these obstacles seem to have added more fuel to love's pyre; they not only tested the strength of his love, but they also transformed it. Raw passions are transmuted into pure gold. This is the difference between the prose and the poetry of life, between chemistry and alchemy.

This spiritual world is in this poem represented through the figure of the Blessed Mother. The church is named after her and symbolizes her sublimity and the central icon above the altar represents her, and she is also the person to whom the poet's confession is addressed. We suspect furthermore that she has something to do with the appearance of Lenka, if not the living Lenka, then at least the Lenka in the poet's dreams. Finally, Mary and Lenka merge into one of those two-in-one figures that engages Laza in the sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*; ἱερός γάμος).

The figure of Mary was not frozen in time. She underwent various alchemical transformations, both historically and in the poet's soul. From the pagan goddess of fertility to Aurora, from Isis to the Queen of Sheba, in the first Christian eon she was transformed into Eve, the temptress and evil one. Mary fared much better in

Eastern Christianity than in Western because she was revered there as the sinless Mother of God. The Crusaders brought the cult of Mary to the West, and in the second Christian eon, her cult suddenly started to blossom among Western Christians as well. Paradoxically, the culminating period of this veneration may have nearly overlapped with the plague in Venice. Just a few years before the outbreak of this epidemic, a poor and uneducated shoemaker, Jakob Boehme, was, before his death, visited by a mysterious feminine figure, a bride of God, who urged him to listen to her. She taught him that, when an era dominated by male's quest for power and greed for gold comes to a crushing end, we have to turn to a feminine deity for love and wisdom, for support and healing. Boehme baptized this divine feminine figure as "Sophia." She was for Boehme both the bride of God and God's playmate, or, as he also liked to put it, "the mirror of God." God was a symbol of the unity of opposites and the task of every believer was to restore the integral wholeness which is characteristic of God, to experience through faith the rebirth as an "adrogyn." The love of God, which we call faith, is nothing but the healing of the man's dividedness from within, through his acceptance of his entire nature: body and heart and mind. Unlike the hermaphrodism, which is a physical or chemical mixture of the various elements of (human) nature into one mechanical whole, androgyny is an alchemical transformation that leads to the integral spiritual wholeness of man in accordance with the image of God.

Boehme's alchemical mysticism was too radical for many traditional believers. Yet, they also felt the pressure coming not only from the chaos and pollution into which the Christian world descended, but also from Modernity's efforts to turn Mother Earth into inanimate matter and a random pile of stones. While confronting the greatest crisis in the history of the Venetian Republic, the city fathers appointed a young, twenty-six-year-old architect, Baldasare Longhena, to build a church in honor of the Blessed Mary in a novel style. Instead of copying the traditional shape of the Latin

cross, Longhena designed the church in the shape of a crown. The church Santa Maria della Salute represents the coronation of Mary. The title of Laza's last poem indicates that he, too, saw her as his healer and savior.

Laza had a long history of struggles with the archetype of the feminine: he was both attracted to and repulsed by it. There are biographical reasons for that. Laza lost his biological mother at the age when he could preserve no memories of her. As Melanie Klein argues in *Love, Guilt and Reparation*, a child experiences its mother's death as her betrayal. The mother is a life-giver but, whether she lives or dies, she is also the first person to wound the child. Being in the mother's womb, and then, after birth, sucking her breast and feeling the warmth of her embrace, must be the most primordial and powerful experience of paradise. The mother's love creates the first, and on our souls most deeply imprinted, promise that life is going to be an oasis of joy.

Later, the role of the mother is to withdraw her breast and to push the children away from her protective embrace, so that they can learn to walk on their own. This "Paradise Lost" may easily be the most traumatic experience of their lives. If the mother is alive, after her "betrayal," she must continue as supporter and teacher. But if the mother dies, someone else has to play that role. Whoever that is, and however loving that person may be, it is "not quite the same." The child, even if loved and supported by an adopted mother, may continue to nurture doubts and insecurities for the rest of its life. Much about the child's first love, the mother's love, and its reaction to the (apparent) loss of this love, affects relationships with any other love later in life.

The most severe tests in any person's life always deals with the sense of betrayal: whether us of ourselves, or us of those we love, or their betrayal of us. The greatest test of love is how to handle such betrayals. Following Laza's betrayal, Lenka was devastated, perhaps because she had never been betrayed like that before. As the youngest of five children in a prosperous family, the extraordi-

narily gifted and charming Lenka was everyone's favorite, and she was almost certainly indulged in this regard.

Laza was far more used to betrayals. In fact, it is not easy to point out any one of his loves—either for his parents or for the women he fell in love with—which did not add another wound to his soul. Not accidentally, Laza was a wanderer. Until the age of fifty, he never had a home to go to. Nor did he ever have a loved one to return to. Then Lenka emerged, as if falling into his arms from the sky. Struggling with what to do, Laza dropped her. He thought he did it gently enough. He thought this was the best solution for all. But Lenka died. This must have been a trauma so great that it can compare only to the loss of his mother. This time Laza was an adult and he himself contributed to this loss. This time he was the one responsible for the betrayal.

Laza got married and found a home. Juliana was neither a lover nor a motherly figure, but more of a sister. She tried as much as she could to provide the missing home for Laza. That was a home for his body, just as Juliana's family grave provided a home for Laza's mortal bones. Laza's soul continued to wander; he was a prodigal son who betrayed the person he loved the most. When he became aware of what he did, Laza's cross became hard to bear. His acceptance of his responsibility and his repentance opened a way for another miracle—the re-appearance of Lenka. Not in the way he would have preferred, but nevertheless alive in a different sense, linking him to a different world.

To his credit, Laza embraced this second chance. This time, his love for Lenka was stronger than any fear, than any obstacle. His soul went out to meet Lenka, and his faith strengthened like never before. Of course, this Lenka could not be "his" former Lenka. She half-merged with another figure, looming in the deepest layer of our unconsciousness—the Mother Figure. Lenka of "Santa Maria della Salute" is a combination and a partial overlap of two feminine archetypes: the lover and the mother. In the biblical story of the prodigal son, the father welcomes the son back and em-

braces him. In Laza's poem, it is the prodigal Mother who forgives and restores the son's broken love. In Laza's poem, as in Boehm's mystical vision of Sophia and as in the Venetian church of healing, it is the Mother who welcomes back the son's wondering and wounded soul. Laza had finally joined his beloved and experienced the promised bliss. He had finally found enough faith—to look forward to his death and to union with his beloved, for all eternity.

4. Health

On the day Laza Kostić finished “Santa Maria della Salute,” June 3, 1909, he made a short note: “This poem is the apotheosis for Lenka and my swan song.” “Apotheosis” is the word that literally means deification; more broadly, it also means immortalization, or idealization. In his last poem and in preparation for his death, Laza wanted to elevate Lenka to the pedestal of the sacred feminine. Why?

The individual closest to Laza in the last fifteen years of his life was Dr Radivoj Simonović. He was the personal physician of Laza and his wife Juliana, but he was also far more than that. During the time when Laza was writing his most famous poem, his wife Juliana was struggling with what turned out to be an incurable cancer. Dr Simonović was with Juliana and Laza as much as possible, for Juliana was in constant pain in the last three months of her life. Dr Simonović assisted Laza with transporting Juliana to a sanatorium in Vienna, but to no avail. Juliana died there on October 25, 1909, with Laza helplessly watching her last struggle. A year later, Dr Simonović took the dying Laza to the same Viennese sanatorium, in which Laza eventually died, on November 26, 1910.

Dr Simonović was the most trusted friend to whom Laza left his correspondence, as well as his unpublished papers. Among the unpublished ones was Laza’s secret “Dream Diary.” Dr Simonović claimed that he burned some pages from it because they were dealing with matters too private to publish. After Laza’s death, many of those who wanted to hear more about the poet’s life found themselves knocking on Dr Simonović’s door. He never refused anyone, but neither did he reveal much, at least not explicitly. One young

scholar who was eager to learn as much as possible about Laza and compose a book about him, Dr Simonović advised to write about the poet with due respect and in favorable light, and then added: "Never in my life have I met an unhappier man [than Laza]."

Despite his wife's agony, and then the last struggles of his own, it is hard to imagine that a major reason for Laza's unhappiness was not related to his relationship with Lenka. Laza's betrayal of her and her premature death opened a wound that could not be healed by usual means, if at all. Metaphorically speaking, Laza dropped Lenka, and just about the only thing he could later do was to elevate her, higher than she would ever reach had she lived.

This is what the process of healing requires. An illness, or a wound, is a result of a severe imbalance of some elements or forces within an organism. In our "Modern" Western civilization, this imbalance comes from too much reliance on the rational-mechanical way of dealing with reality. We have turned the whole world into a heartless heap of stones that has no meaning or purpose. In his relationship with Lenka, Laza made an analogous mistake: he allowed the mundane concerns of their difference in age to pollute his devotion for the only person he ever loved with his entire being.

When there is such an imbalance, the healing process requires an injection of a high dose of the suppressed element. In Laza's life and in the course of the development of our civilization, the suppressed element has been that of faith. Lack of faith is usually accompanied by a lack of courage and the consequent lack of love. To have courage is to stake ourselves for what we believe in. Laza did not, and a catastrophe resulted.

In our civilization, we have similarly brought ourselves to the edge of the abyss with our mistrust of the real and our misguided attempts to "fix" reality in order to satisfy our needs. When we realized that our rationality and our mechanical way of life were undermining our humanity, we panicked and turned toward further nihilism and a relativization of all values. (We call this panicky reaction "Post-modernism.") We numb ourselves with various sub-

stitutes for love and humane emotions and stuff ourselves with pills, alcohol, drugs, and mindless entertainment, so that we may function as efficient machines for another day, another month, or even another year. It cannot be much longer until this process of self-betrayal comes to a crash.

To his credit, Laza realized that our healing demands that we reawaken love, recover faith, and rediscover the sacred. They are what is so sorely missing in our civilization and what is creating such a disastrous imbalance in our way of life. That is why his swan song contains such a strong dose of these missing elements.

Healing and health are two very different processes. Healing deals with restoring a disturbed balance in the sick part of the organism, health with maintaining the balance of the entire organism. We suffer from the costly illusion that restoring the balance is more difficult than maintaining it. It is just the opposite. When sick, we have a variety of medical procedures available to us. When healthy, we are left on our own. Our society operates under the premise that our health is given and natural, just as it presumes that each one of us is a complete and mature person. These “noble lies” are as damaging as the noble lies of marriage and romantic love. They harm us by preventing us from understanding what needs to be balanced and integrated within us in order to maintain health and to develop our personality. Such noble lies make it difficult for us to even suspect how challenging these tasks are, or how important health and fully developed personalities are for the possibility of loving. Loving is our ultimate task, for which all other work—the maintenance of health and the development of personality—is but preparation.

In our Western civilization, the only culture that understood the importance of balance and health was Ancient Greece. While we naively think that we can always “sober up” in time for work, the Greeks understood that when the balance is disturbed, there is always a price to pay. Above the entrance of the central temple in Delphi, there were two inscriptions: “Know thyself” and “Nothing

in excess.” They are the key for a healthy and balanced life, and they were inscribed above the temple because there is nothing more difficult than achieving and maintaining balance and health.

Throughout his adult life Laza was inspired by the Greeks. He admired Heraclitus the most, and liked to quote his prophetic saying: “The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of justice, will find him out.” His own life experience led Laza to recognize the truth of these words. It also inspired him to wonder about some issues that did not preoccupy our worthy ancestors.

After the death of Lenka and with her appearance in his dreams, Laza began to wonder whether we correctly understand what it means to be a person: does love not create such an intimate connection that it is hard to say whether we are dealing with two fully separate persons, or whether they unite into one new being? He then realized that between two persons in love there emerges a third entity, so that those in love cannot truthfully be considered two, nor as one being, but as both one and two. Laza’s last poem shows how blurred the boundaries between various persons can become. We need to understand this crucial issue better.

Dr Simonović’s remark that Laza was an unhappy man reminds us of two more topics that must be discussed in a book on the significance of love for our lives. The first begins with a deepened reflection on the topic of betrayal: did Laza not become aware of the difference between betraying Lenka and betraying himself? If “Santa Maria della Salute” was an apotheosis for Lenka, if it somehow managed to mitigate the wrong he did to Lenka, did it also help him find a way to trust himself and be true to himself? What does it even mean to be true to oneself and why is that so fundamentally important?

The last issue concerns happiness and unhappiness and how they relate to love. In his youth, Laza liked to quote Goethe’s saying that “only the soul that loves is happy.” After the initial blissful period with Lenka, he must have discovered the other side of it: there

is so much suffering involved with loving that it must make us wonder why we want to keep love on such a high pedestal. What good did it do to Lenka and Laza? What good can it do to any of us? Why not just jettison love and focus on happiness?

IN SEARCH OF INNER-CALLING

While commenting on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Laza questioned the sequence: *Inferno*—*Purgatorio*—*Paradiso*. Although this arrangement works nicely in a literary work, real life seems to offer a more prosaic succession: Paradise Found—Paradise Lost. Yet things are never that simple either, and, with some unusual twists and turns, Laza's own life followed neither his "prophecy," nor Dante's. Laza's life can roughly be divided into several stages:

1. 1841–61: the years of innocence and youth;
2. 1862–77: the years of greatest artistic creativity and success;
3. 1878–90: the years of wondering and disappointments;
4. 1891–95: the years of struggling with love for Lenka;
5. 1896–1910: the years of marriage with Juliana, until death.

A symbolic culmination of Laza's happy early adulthood happened on March 29, 1877. He was then a thirty-six-year-old poet and public intellectual from Serbia who lectured at the acclaimed Viennese Scientific Club. Speaking in eloquent German on "Female Characters in Serbian Folk Poetry," he discussed their nobility by comparing them with those of Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe. Laza painted in vivid colors the idealism permeating Serbian folk poetry. He spoke of female characters whose sense of loyalty was unwavering, even in the face of the gravest obstacles presented to them in their harsh lives. In their patience and persistence, in their sacrifice and suffering, these characters were unknown to the cultivated European audience, yet there was something about them that was irresistibly appealing and worth closer attention. Laza's lecture turned out to be a great success.

To those who knew him then, Laza's future must have looked as nothing but bright. In Serbia, he was one of the most popular poets and public intellectuals. He was good-looking and witty, eccentric and charismatic. Not accidentally, one of his nicknames in his youth was "Alcibiades."¹ His gifts and erudition were fascinating. Besides Vienna, he traveled to Budapest, Prague, Moscow, Petersburg, Berlin, and Paris. In addition to his native Serbian, he was fluent in German, French, English, Hungarian, Russian, Greek and Latin. He adored Leonardo and Rembrandt, Goethe and Dostoevsky, Beethoven and Wagner. He had already published numerous poems and four short stories. He wrote a few dramas and translated Homer, Shakespeare, and Moliere. He liked luxury and elegance. He was never vulgar or banal. Laza belonged to the highest nobility of spirit.

Besides the fact that Laza lived beyond his means and without any steady income, there was another problem that preoccupied him even more. He was at that stage in life when he knew that his potential was significant, but he could not know just how great it was. The success of his lecture at the Viennese Scientific Club encouraged him to think about establishing himself as a European artist and intellectual. Laza wanted to measure himself against the best.

For a variety of reasons Laza did not succeed in realizing his ambition. He wrote poetry in his native language; his own translations of some of his poems into major European languages, as well as a few he intentionally wrote in French or German, did not have the same artistic merit. For a while, inspired by Wagner, he thought about writing a drama that would be turned into an opera. Laza finished his drama, "Gordana," but could not find anyone to com-

¹ Laza's friend and mentor, painter and writer, Novak Radonjić (1826–90), was "Socrates." Fifteen-year older than Laza (who was twenty-three when he received the nickname "Alcibiades" from his mentor), Novak was critical both toward himself and Laza. Although considered by others as a talented and accomplished painter, at one point he stopped painting because he thought that he was lacking a sufficient talent. As for Laza, their correspondence reveals that Novak criticized him for being too self-preoccupied and indecisive.

pose music for it. He wanted to stage it in Paris, yet the theaters there were not familiar with the author or his work. In that period, he spent an enormous amount of time studying on his own the Western philosophical and literary traditions. It was the era of Darwin's revolution in biology and of the so-called psycho-physicists, who attempted to unveil the secrets of the relationship of soul and body by exact scientific means. At first fascinated by these projects, Laza eventually came to believe that both fell significantly short of what they hoped to accomplish. He wrote two philosophical treatises criticizing these and other prevailing views and revealing his own, but never completed them. In the same period, he tried to contribute to the leading European newspapers, by writing articles and letters. Some of them were published, yet that led to no offer of a permanent journalistic affiliation with any of the papers.

Increasingly frustrated, Laza turned his attention closer to home, to the Balkans. The outcome was more or less the same. After initial promises of the position as a university professor of law in Zagreb and Belgrade, nothing came of it. His political engagement brought him a rude awakening into the world both unprincipled and corrupt. Moving from one place, project, and profession to another, he ended up living in Monte Negro, as an editor of a marginal paper. After seven years of torturous seclusion in the mountains of Monte Negro, he was happy literally to escape from there, rushing immediately to Vienna to inhale some cultured air, and then eventually returned to Serbia, in the early summer of 1891, when he met Lenka. As Laza confessed in "Santa Maria della Salute," at that time he was a disillusioned and weary man.

Hermann Hesse wrote in *Demian* that man is only afraid when he does not live in accord with himself; he is afraid because he does not follow his own inner-calling. When Laza (at the age of fifty) met Lenka and fell in love with her, he was definitely not in harmony with himself. He was not following his own inner-calling, because he could not figure out what it was.

There are different ways to understand what being in accord with oneself means and what one's inner calling is. The central point,

however, should be clear. As adults, we must discover the moving power of our lives. We must find that center of our being, the central potential that we as human beings and as unique individuals carry within ourselves and around which we must organize our lives. Laza's problem was the typical "Alcibiades' paradox": he was gifted in many fields, but unsure which of them was the most significant. When distracted by success and fame, it can be even more difficult to attune to the core of our inner-being, to discover our central potential that should be our vocation, our bliss. Laza dispersed his energy in various directions, he kept looking left and right, and his failure to discover that central moving power frustrated him more and more. By the time he met Lenka, he was a homeless wanderer. Living without a guiding vision or balance, Laza had no faith in anything transcendent and had plenty of disappointments in the civilization within which he floated anchorless. Despite the miracle that the appearance of Lenka brought, he just could not find a way to integrate this unexpected love into his life. Instead of judging him (again), it may suffice to quote his own words: "In great minds, mistakes and illusions are great as well."

IN SEARCH OF HARMONY

It is puzzling that Laza's inner-journey did not result in deeper self-knowledge and his discovery of his inner-calling. This is surprising not just because he was so gifted, but because he had the "theoretical" tools to do so. If that can be a partial excuse, however, Laza was part of the civilization that had been in discord with its own central ideals for centuries.

Laza found his deepest inspiration in ancient Greek literature and philosophy. He considered this tradition to be unmatched in the entire history of the Western world. His knowledge of Greek was so good that he attempted the first translation of Homer's *Iliad* before he turned twenty. Besides Homer and the tragedians, Laza was fascinated by two pre-Socratic philosophers: Empedocles and Her-

acritus. Unlike religion, which interprets the origin and the meaning of existence by introducing some divine force, Greek philosophers explained the same phenomena by immanent means. While the very first among them, like Thales and Anaximander, were looking for a natural substance out of which the world was built, and some later, like Democritus and Leucippus, searched for the indivisible atoms, Empedocles and Heraclitus believed that the world's origin and workings were due to the laws that turn it from chaos into cosmos and prevent it from slipping back into disarray. (Expressed in a modern way, not fully adequate but properly illustrative, they understood the world in terms of energy rather than matter.)

Empedocles brilliantly postulated that there are two governing principles of the cosmos: love and strife (φιλία and νεῖκος; an attractive and creative force, and a repulsive and destructive force). For Empedocles, they were not reducible to good and evil; they were conflicting yet complimenting. Because of these two clashing forces, the universe had to be understood in dynamic rather than in static terms: as eternally becoming, rather than as complete and frozen in its being. According to Empedocles, the cosmos was equally “a unity in plurality and a plurality in unity.”

Heraclitus developed these poetic and prophetic insights by speaking about the eternally burning fire and the logos which governs the universe in such a way that “no one can step in the same river twice.” Laza believed that, although most of his fragments spoke about the cosmic order, Heraclitus was actually more interested in the human condition, in the soul as our true self. Heraclitus came to believe that the pattern of cosmic order and the pattern of human life was one and the same; the cosmic fire burns in us as well, as we ourselves are also an illustration of the paradoxical plurality in unity and unity in plurality. Laza was in awe of such views. They belonged, he thought, among the deepest insights ever reached in Western civilization.

The more Laza thought about that, the more he realized that the main course of the subsequent intellectual history failed to de-

velop these insights. It is even more accurate to say that it has consisted in an attempt to run away from these perplexing insights of Empedocles and Heraclitus. What is so fundamentally unsettling in their dynamic view of reality is that it does not promise any closure. We want a meaning of life as something predetermined, woven into the fabric of reality. We hope for a life that is so well-structured that it can approach perfection. We long for a love that would be so perfect that its only proper ending could be that “they lived happily ever after.” Despite our stubborn insistence, we cannot achieve any such closure. Life offers no such promises, no protection against the sudden turns of fortune, no position that can freeze into a never-changing and forever-valid stance. Nor can social institutions, entrenched by their laws and threats of punishment, ever lead to life—or love, or health—secured once-and-for-ever.

Interestingly enough, the explicit criticisms of Empedocles and Heraclitus did not directly mention our pathological fear of life without closure. Although such concerns always lurked in the background, the criticisms went after two related but distinguishable targets. The first was complaining about the lack of any final purpose in the universe in the views of Empedocles and Heraclitus. There had to be some divinely preordained goal to it, some ultimate design that would justify its existence. Is not the universe, and our lives in it, guided by an irrevocable destiny?

Such criticisms came from both the later Greeks and Christian sources. Among the Greek philosophers, it was possible to find a few who maintained just the opposite view—that the cosmos had no inherent meaning whatsoever. Such voices were initially marginalized. It was only centuries later, when the religious way of thinking fell into disrepute and Modernity started slipping toward nihilism, that the view asserting that the world had no meaning or purpose became accepted as the mainstream. One illustration of it is the insistence that the world is nothing but a random pile of stones. The prose of life can be harsh indeed! Laza was so appalled by that kind of prose that he sometimes went to another extreme and claimed: “Everything in the world happens because of—beauty”!

Empedocles and Heraclitus's way of thinking allows, however, for a third and rarely explored possibility: the world has no meaning predetermined for it from the outside, but this does not imply that the world has no meaning whatsoever. The denial of the pre-existing external meaning leaves enough room for its meaning to be introduced from the inside, in the course of its dynamic process. (As Heraclitus expressed it, "Our character is our destiny.") This meaning is not final and static but has to be changed and adjusted from within. This is what the poetry of life and the poetry of love are about. In his balanced mood, Laza thought that this was the right approach, the one he was hoping to develop further.

The second point of attack was concentrated on the view that offended the logic of our rational thinking by postulating that the world embodied unity in plurality, and plurality in unity. The criticism was that this simply could not be the case, for it would destroy the internal coherence of our rational thinking (as well as the coherence of our legal and moral "systems"). In order for us to conceive of the world in a rational way, it has to be either unity, or plurality. There is no third option.

Wallace Stevens poetically caricatured this logic of either-or as the "click-clack of reason." This logic lacks not only any trace of humor, but it is also detached from the flow of real life, which is full of paradoxes, antinomies, and miracles which the click-clack of reason cannot explain. What to our reason may look like incompatible alternatives, the flow of life presents as mere alterations. Nevertheless, this click-clack approach has become so pervasive that it has affected virtually all aspects of life, including health and healing. One way of thinking about health and healing is in terms of self-regulation of our immune system, the other in terms of forceful intervention from the outside. The first way is ancient and natural; the system is never completely pure, nor does it require a sterilized disease-free environment. In natural circumstances we are often exposed to bacteria and viruses of different kinds, and our organism is resourceful enough in defending itself by not allowing

them to overtake and infect the entire system. The balance of a healthy organism is that of water in a river, as it is always flowing. Sometimes, it is true, a flooding occurs. Given enough time, the water and surrounding environment will regulate themselves.

We live in a world that has neither patience nor trust to allow our organism to handle its own disturbances. We believe in direct interventions needed to eliminate harmful elements. The most extreme procedure, symbolic of this way of thinking, is surgery—a forceful incision in the body and removal of the infected tissues.

We have adapted this model of forceful intervention in many other aspects of life. There are special institutions to separate mentally ill patients from “normal” adults. There are nursing homes to free career-oriented people from taking care of their parents. There are prisons to segregate criminals from decent citizens. Then there are “humanitarian interventions,” “preventive wars,” and “regime changes” needed to improve the lot of suffering and struggling humanity. We are all for freedom, peace, and love, and in order to establish or maintain these things, we use force and torture, killing and war.

Laza was vehemently opposed to this one-sided (“either-or”) way of thinking and living. While reading Darwin’s work and coming upon his phrase “the good effects of intercrossing,” Laza not only remembered the thoughts of Empedocles and Heraclitus, but came to believe that *intercrossing* represented the most fundamental principle of the universe; it underlined and governed all of its phenomena, organic as well as inorganic. (If it is the fundamental principle of the universe, then it must be the governing principle of our souls as well—of the inner life as well as of the outer life.)

Mathematicians and scientists frequently talk about intercrossing in connection with the connecting of lines, which cross at one point and then diverge, or when talking about the processes of breeding animals of different kinds. Laza realized that intercrossing was a far wider phenomenon. Every tree branch showed an intercrossing with its trunk or with another branch. Every bite

that we took into our organism was an example of the intercrossing that transformed, in the same measure, our body, as it is itself transformed. Every meeting of the eyes, every caress, every embrace and kiss illustrate the principle of intercrossing.

After undertaking a detailed investigation that convinced him that intercrossing was the basic principle of all phenomena, Laza identified two main manifestations of intercrossing: symmetry and harmony. Heraclitus understood symmetry in terms of the contrasts between day and night, satiety and hunger, summer and winter, peace and war. In this spirit, in his most important philosophical essay, "The Basic Principle," Laza defined symmetry as "conjoining, a composition of the opposites of two parts, more precisely of two halves of one whole, or two or more things that are confronting each other, in space, but also in time." (Our modern name for this process would be "synergy" rather than "symmetry.")

Harmony is even more frequently used in connection with various aspects of human experience, but it is also less understood. Laza accused Leibniz of making our increasing confusion complete because of his doctrine of the "pre-established harmony" that could not have been violated even by God in the process of creation and governance of the world. The truth with regard to the nature and origin of harmony is, however, just the opposite. Harmony is no "heavenly queen" of any kind and her origin is humbler than that of Cinderella. As Laza pointed out, in the Western tradition the word "harmony" (*ἁρμονία*) first appeared in Homer's *Odyssey*, and it was used there to mark the joints by means of which two planks were connected when making a boat; one log was fitted into the groove of the other, simultaneously pressed down by the edges of the groove. The "contribution" of both parts is identical: the elevated places of one of them curves into the bent places of the other. Bending is mutual and reciprocal. A bent part of one log pressures the corresponding part of the other to the same measure to which it is bending. The sharpened part of a log, by fitting into the groove of the other, finds itself pressed by the edges of the groove. Structur-

ally, the same thing happens in any bone joints of animals and human beings: one bone is fitting into the shape of another, and that is why they are so harmoniously working together.

Laza made the insightful observation about the intimate reciprocity of symmetry and harmony. Graphically, we can represent this relationship as follows:



Figure 8: *Symmetry and Harmony*

Symmetry and harmony are nothing else but a completion, a corrective, and a control of one another. Their connection is the intimate reciprocity. As Laza summed it up, “Harmony is synthesis of symmetry. Symmetry is analysis of harmony.”

It is not difficult to see what implications Laza’s insights have for the relationship of love and strife, and also how they should be applied to our lives. Instead of making an either-or choice between love and strife, we need to recognize that their relationship is not exclusive but complementary. Even Darwin observed in *Descent of Man* that, “the season of love is that of battle.” Love and strife need and complement each other, as male and female, plus and minus, light and darkness, or Sol and Luna. By pulling the world in different directions, love and strife are symmetrical. Although they are so opposed, they cannot exist without the other; only in their intercrossing can there be any harmony.

A surprising confirmation of Laza’s view can be found in marriage. We are prone to think that a good marriage is one in which there is no strife and the partners live in peace with one another. Those of us who have been married long enough know that if there is no arguing in marriage, this is one of the surest signs that love is gone as well. Paradoxically, then, love does not mean the absence of strife. A relationship without strife is dead: without life and without love.

It is puzzling that Laza, who published these thoughts long before he met Lenka, seemingly forgot about them when he had to make a commitment to her. Of course, a marriage with Lenka would involve strife, and of the most diverse kind: differences of age and countless others, not all of which he could possibly anticipate. Laza acted as if he was “sparing” Lenka (and himself) of such conflicts. This is the same mistake that parents make in thinking how to protect their children and attempt to do so by overprotecting them. Such attempts always backfire, and Laza learned the lesson the hard way. He “spared” Lenka (and himself) not only of their potential struggles but also of the possibility of finding their “fit” and thereby developing their symmetry and harmony.

LIFE WITHOUT COMPLETION, LOVE WITHOUT CLOSURE

Aristophanes, a writer of comedies and parodies, offered in Plato's dialogue *Symposium* a myth-like eulogy to Eros that turned out to be enormously influential. In the beginning, said Aristophanes, we were quite different. We were one big whole, a ball that included both male and female elements, or, in some cases, the elements of the same sex. Those “sphere-like human beings” had four legs, four arms, one head with two faces, and two sets of reproductive organs. Gods were jealous of such complete beings who, in their roundness looked more perfect than gods themselves and split them into two halves. Love is really a search, of the now mutilated and imperfect beings, for our missing half. When we find our unique counterpart, we become round and perfect again, fulfilled and happy until the end of time.

Much of our romantic conception of love is based on a similar idea: somewhere out there in the world there is my perfect match, my Prince Charming or my Sleeping Princess, and, when we reunite, we will be complete (again), and we will live happily ever after.

It would be impossible to sustain this naïve conception of love without it containing a grain of truth and corresponding to some

of our secret longings. In our practical life and social relations, we assume that we already are complete beings: we know who we are, what our choices are, and we are responsible for them. The romantic conception of love is closer to truth than this widely accepted belief because the way we normally are, we are not complete. This is not to say that once, in some primordial paradise, we were so. There are very few individuals who should be considered as fully developed personalities. (Among them is the person of whom Aristophanes made fun: Socrates.) Our growth and the development of personality is a task, one of the highest aspirations that should guide our choices and behavior. The original meaning of health is wholeness, and the romantic conception of love correctly implies that health is not a usual factual state of affairs, but a goal toward which we must strive. Just as it is inadequate to understand peace as the absence of fighting, it is equally insufficient to treat health as the absence of disease. Our so-called peace is often nothing but a preparation for the next war, and our so-called health is frequently a period of incubation of some infection or illness that may soon overwhelm the organism. The wholeness of health must be a dynamic process, like that of the relationship of love and strife in Empedocles, in which there is a continuous effort toward the integration of the various aspects of a human being.

We know enough of medicine to understand that it cannot focus on the body and the physical side alone, but must also involve its psychological and spiritual aspects. As Plato postulated in his tri-partite conception of the soul, health must consist of a process of an integrative balancing of the body (the belly with the genitals), the heart, and the mind. This tri-partite soul should not be visually represented as tree layers of a cake, hierarchically ordered from the top toward the bottom. Nor should we think of the soul as one big and closed circle, that can be divided into three roughly equal parts. Rather, the soul is better represented as the three circles that overlap to a significant degree (which is not determined once and for all but varies through time), yet which retain some aspects unique for themselves, as in the following figure:

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

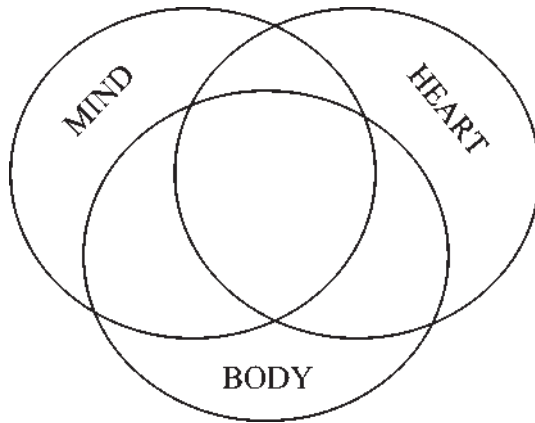


Figure 9: *The Tri-Partite Soul*

The romantic conception is right to insist on a vital role of love in this dynamic process. By its nature, love connects. In addition, there are always elements of frenzy and seizure that characterize love. The first year of Laza and Lenka's relationship was based on that seizure, on that eagerness to inquire and share, to learn and teach.

The romantic conception is furthermore right about the significance of intimacy that is achievable only in personal love. In our practical world, we claim that love is blind, meaning that it makes those who are in love blind. Indeed, they show an uncommon degree of indifference toward practical concerns. This does not imply, however, that their love does not open their eyes to some insights for which the rest of the pragmatically-obsessed world is oblivious. Intimate love may be the only opening toward some of the most important insights as to who we are and what our inner-calling may be. The reason for this is that personal love requires the utmost level of trust on our side, as well as the highest degree of faith in the best of the person we love. In a business exchange, we deal with each other "surface to surface." In business transactions it does not matter who we are as unique persons; all that is expected is a general level of maturity and responsibility. Yet, in each one of us, personality is different and ought to be so. It is different be-

cause it is unique, and—no less importantly—also because it is developed to a different degree. To penetrate through the social shell that is more or less the same for everyone, we need to open ourselves up and become sensitive to the uniqueness of another person to a much higher degree than we do in order to realize a business transaction. It is then no wonder that we can know and understand those we love much better than mere acquaintances and strangers.

Even in our dealings with those marginally known, there are two levels of comprehension. One concerns who someone is as a member of certain society and how this individual behaves in concrete situations in accordance with social expectations. The second level deals with what everyone ought to be and aspire toward as human beings. There are, correspondingly, two levels of knowledge of someone as a unique person. For example, I need to know this specific person, his or her actual behavior and concrete way of life. Yet, there is also a higher level, an ideal specific to this person. It is this aspiration that forms the core of one's inner-calling, and it is this ideal that is most difficult to discern. It often happens that we can recognize what it is in the person we love, but we fail to do it with regard to our own.

When fear dominates our lives, we focus on the actual behavior and anticipate the future in accordance with the present and past patterns. When love guides us, we shift attention to what the person could become, to what the genuine aspirations of this person are. When fear rules, we are unforgiving of the mistakes that someone has made; unless this person is punished or restrained, we are afraid that such mistakes may be repeated and even multiplied in the future. When we love, we are willing to forgive, especially if we see a genuine effort to improve and live in accordance with one's potentialities and aspirations. To fear is to expect the worst from those we are dealing with. To love is to have faith in what is the best in every person.

When we love, we let the beloved know what we see as his or her personal potentials and aspirations. More often than not, it is

not done verbally, yet the message is conveyed in an unmistakable manner. Love has its own language, and that level of communication can be far more penetrating than our ordinary words and signals. When such a message is conveyed by those who love us, we do what is in our power to justify the faith they have in us. This means that love is a powerful motivator and a genuine transformative force that leads us to attempt to close the gap between the empirical and the ideal self, between who we are and what we aspire to become. That is how love makes us feel fully alive—it inspires us to strive to become the best we can be.

The conception of romantic love is usually crude, but it may be developed to incorporate these insights. The problem with this conception lies elsewhere: like the tale of Aristophanes, it creates an erroneous expectation that for each of us there is one and only one ideal partner, “our original missing half.” Our experiences show us that it is possible to have intimate and genuinely loving relations with more than one person. Despite the possibility of having such relations with numerous persons, however, I am convinced that one such relationship—just one—leaves a more profound mark on our lives than the rest. Whether it is the first really intimate relationship in our lives (as it was for Lenka), or one that happens later in life, when we do not expect that it will come about any more (as with Laza), one loving relationship may reach such level of intimacy and depth that no others—fulfilling as they may have been—come even close. There is no guarantee that such a relationship will unfold, and there may be many who never experience it. If such a miraculous gift is, however, granted to us, not making it the center of our lives amounts to betrayal not only of the person we love but also ourselves.

Laza and Lenka experienced that kind of love which can happen only once in a lifetime. Lenka was ready to commit herself fully to it and she desired nothing more than that. She was too inexperienced to understand that making this love the center of one’s life does not have to involve getting married, or even living togeth-

er. Sometimes the circumstances of life make such a marriage, or joint living, virtually impossible. Nevertheless, despite the years of physical separation and even lack of any contact, a person can be committed to his or her loved one with a heart full of unwavering devotion. Love like that never dies.

Recall Aristophanes' vision telling us that, when we find our true love, we will form a full circle again. Marriage is also represented as a circle—symbolized by the wedding ring—in which the partners abandon their own individuality, their individual circles, to merge into one bigger circle. Interestingly enough, Jung also popularized the idea of a circle as the symbol of a fully developed and integrated personality (= "the Self"). Relying on numerous ancient traditions, he called it "*mandala*." (It is most often represented as a circle, but what mattered to Jung the most was that mandala is a closed geometrical figure, whether it be a circle, or a square, or a triangle.) The problem with all these closed figures is that they are at least misleading, if not incorrect: the personal circle is never closed. Completeness is what we strive toward but hardly ever achieve.

I prefer a different symbolic representation of our selves and of our relationship to others that develops some of Laza's ideas concerning intercrossing. Imagine two circles standing next to each other and partially overlapping. The area of the overlap will look like an eye, or like an almond nut. "*Mandorla*" is an Italian word for it. The same word, mandorla, is also used for the entire figure of the intersecting circles. As the figure of overlapping circles, mandorla is a more accurate symbol for human beings than a single and closed circle. We are never isolated atoms, nor are we ever complete beings: we have a tri-partite soul with the parts difficult to integrate, despite the importance of this integration. Their integration and balance is the foundation of our health, of our unity in plurality and plurality in unity.

It becomes even more complicated when we take into account our relationships with other people. With those we do not know, there would normally be no intersecting area. With those we bare-

ly know, the circumferences of the circles may touch but need not overlap. With those we do know, there is always an overlap. The less intimate the relationship, the less overlap would there be. Conversely, the better we know someone and the closer we are, the more extensive the overlap. With regard to any one of us, there are numerous, virtually countless numbers of overlaps with other beings—humans, animals, plants, the environment, cultural and historical entities, and so on. These relationships and the areas of overlap are dynamic: there can be periods when some people mean little to us, and then other times when they are very important.

The mandorla symbolism is also fruitful because of its ability to multiply and make complex figures. There is virtually an endless number of combinations that can be made with the overlapping mandorlas, but I am especially interested in the one that is called the “flower of life.” I have in mind a hexagonal pattern, where the center of each circle is in the circumference of six surrounding circles of the same diameter, which is made of nineteen complete circles and thirty-six partial circular arcs. Although life and love are never so regular, and there is no one single circle encompassing it all, this dynamic pattern is visually represented as follows:

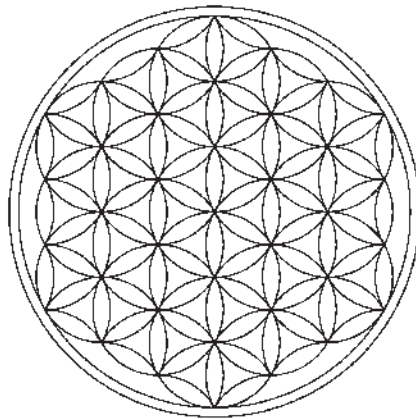


Figure 10: *The Mandorla of Life*

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

This symbol is archaic, and it can be found on different continents. The oldest known representation of the flower of life is from Egypt, and it is at least six thousand years-old. In the Temple of Osiris at Abydos, the flower of life is burned into marble, rather than chiseled into it. In India, we can find the flower of life mandorla in the Golden Temple, in Amritsar. In China, we encounter it in the Forbidden City.

In the Western world, the mandorla symbolism was first used by the Pythagoreans. They called it the “measure of the fish” and for them it represented a mystical symbol of the intersection of the divine sphere with the earthly realm of matter; this intersection is the beginning of all creation. In the Roman times, the mandorla symbol was used to represent the Goddess Venus (thus Venice as well?), and also the female genitalia. It is interesting that Christianity took over this symbol to represent the womb of Mary, the Mother of God, and there are many depictions of Mary alone, or of Mary with the baby Jesus, or of Jesus alone, presented as if coming out of a mandorla-shaped frame. Here is one of them, in which Jesus is surrounded by his four apostles (symbolically represented):



Figure 11: *The Jesus Mandorla*

It is not accidental that the mandorla symbolism is usually found in a religious context. The original meaning of the word religion

refers to joining, bridging, and healing. Joining, bridging, and healing require a different kind of rationality from the one that separates, differentiates, and classifies the world in terms of our schizophrenically dividing “either-or” categories. This different kind of rationality must be lifted up from the dust of arbitrary classifications and lifeless abstractions to the level of the heart and the concreteness of life. The logos that wants to be in dialogue with life and an instrument for the understanding of that life must be capable of embracing its endless changes and paradoxes. Nicolas of Cusa (and Jung after him) called this approach the “*coincidentia oppositorum*,” Boehme (and other alchemists) thought of the similar idea in terms of the androgyne, and Laza discussed it under the principle of intercrossing.¹

The mandorla symbolism reconfirms the idea of Empedocles and Heraclitus about a unity in plurality and a plurality in unity. Empedocles and Heraclitus were thinking about the cosmos as a whole, but each one of us is a micro-cosmos, in relationship with countless other micro-cosmoses. If mandorla is an adequate symbol to represent our lives, it teaches us that each of us is virtually a maze in which it is easy to get lost, a labyrinth in which an important part of life can be wasted. How, then, can we sort out what to do and how to live?

Love and strife can guide us. Love is the principle of attraction; strife is the principle of repulsion. Love leads us toward what we esteem and desire. Strife turns us away from what we fear and despise. When examining our lives and choosing a course of action, we must always keep in mind the questions: Are we following the

¹ A similar idea is sometimes represented by two interpenetrating triangles, one pointed upward, and the other pointed downward. In the Indian tradition this symbol is called “*yantra*,” and it is taken to symbolize the union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female divinities. In the Jewish tradition, this symbol is called the “Star of David” (and the “Seal of Solomon,” when inscribed in a circle). In the Christianity of the second eon, this figure is associated with the finding of the Grail, which is a universal archetype of the ultimate form of health (called “*moksha*” or “*nirvana*” in the Orient, and “atonement” in the Occident).

II. THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

path with a heart, or is fear guiding us in our choices? Do we invest our energy into what we love and what inspires us to realize our potentials and aspirations, or do we choose the path that leads us away from those goals? Calculating what is in our practical interest may turn us away from our inner-calling. Love will lead us to it.

If we combine these insights about the role of mandorlas together with Jesus' cross of love that we discussed earlier, we get the following diagram:

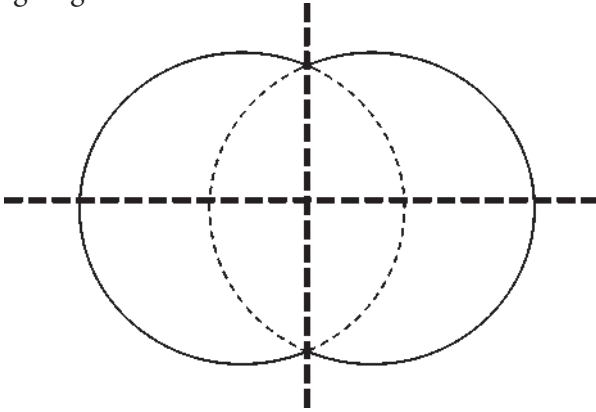


Figure 12: *The Paradox of Love and the Cross of Love Combined into the “Mandorla of Love”*

Unlike single circles, closed figures, or mandalas of any kind, this figure captures much more reliably the complexity of life and the dynamic role of love in our lives. We do not always choose correctly. It is in our nature to err. It is also in our nature to learn from those mistakes and not repeat them again. Depending on what is at stake, we get a second chance, and sometimes even a third and a fourth. Life experiences teach us, however, that the more important the crossroads, the less chances we will have to return to it. A second chance is by no means guaranteed. Heraclitus believed that we could not step in the same river twice. In terms of many of the small things in life, he was wrong. When dealing with anything related to our inner-calling, our highest aspirations, or our deepest

love, however, Heraclitus was right. Although Laza changed his heart after Lenka's death and nourished that love with even greater care, it was not the same. "Santa Maria della Salute" may be a brilliant work of art, it may have been a rarely inspired expression of love and devotion, but it was not the same as being with Lenka and loving her while she was alive. This poem can be our inspiration, but it should not be our aspiration.

IN SEARCH OF HAPPINESS

Should we assume that, had Laza married Lenka, they would have a happy life together?

We should not make such an assumption lightly. Like the myth of Aristophanes, the romantic conception of love is mistaken in taking for granted that there is a simple correlation between love and happiness. Yet, some correlation does exist. It will take some probing before we bring light to this important topic. Let us then turn to the master-teacher, Socrates, in hope that he may enlighten us.

When Socrates finally got a chance to make his eulogy to Eros in Plato's *Symposium*, he made some astonishing remarks. The man who was famous for claiming ignorance with regard to the most important issues in life surprised everyone present by asserting that the art of love is the only subject in which he was well versed. He was not only instructed about the mystery of love by the wise priestess Diotima—notice that his teacher was a woman—but he also claimed that he could not remember a time in his life when he was not in love.

Socrates' complex speech—supposedly a summary of what he learned from the "divine madness" of Diotima—could itself be summed up as follows: the development of personality consists in the continuous and arduous cultivation of the erotic desire. Socrates spoke of the "ladder of beauty," along which we need to climb in the process of educating our erotic desire. This ladder ascends from the sensual attraction to beautiful bodies toward the realm of the

sacred in which we learn to appreciate Beauty in Itself. This ladder is comparable to the south-north axis of Jesus' cross of love, in which we move from fascination with the profane toward reverence of the sacred.

The speech of Socrates ended up in a cloud of sublime abstractions about Beauty in Itself. Plato brought us back to earth by introducing the erotically charged Alcibiades, who appeared uninvited and drunk. Upon hearing how the company of his friends was spending the evening, Alcibiades insisted on making a eulogy to Eros on his own. It was really a eulogy to Socrates, for Alcibiades was madly and jealously in love with him. While Socrates spoke the truth of the matter because of who he was as a person and how far he had climbed on the ladder of beauty, the immature Alcibiades had no choice but to speak the truth on this particular occasion because he was drunk, and drunk people say what is on their minds. Alcibiades revealed his exasperation with Socrates who did not love him in the sense of pleasing every desire of his beloved, but rather frustrated him by refraining from physical intimacy even when there was an ideal opportunity for it. By "exposing" Socrates in such an unseemly manner, Plato not only helped us to understand this erotic man better, but also to admire him more.

There are many lessons to learn from this dialogue, but I will focus on a few that are most pertinent for our discussion. First, as much as we elevate ourselves and have noble goals, our aspirations and ideals have to be pursued in this world, with real people. As much as we ennoble our erotic desires, they will have to be applied to the people we love, and not to our memories or images of them. In Plato's language, someone who receives the proper erotic education by leaving the cave, has to return to it and act as a mediator between the two worlds. Second, two people who are in love, as Socrates and Alcibiades supposedly were at the time of the dialogue, may have similar feelings for each other, but may be quite apart in their personal development in general, and in their ascent along the ladder of beauty in particular. Such discrepancy would

cause a significant friction, but also create an opportunity for them to grow closer by bridging the differences and helping the other along the way. Third, loving someone does not mean pleasing this person and letting him or her get away with things that are not right. Socrates was a passionate but unrelenting lover. Despite Alcibiades' gifts and potentials, and they were extraordinary, his behavior and the values that guided his way of life were often catastrophic. Precisely because he loved him, Socrates felt obliged to put obstacles in his way in hopes of an inner conversion. Fourth, while Socrates had been Diotima's good student, he failed as Alcibiades' teacher of love. At the time when Plato's *Symposium* was written, it was known to everyone that Alcibiades' life was a colossal failure. Nevertheless, the question remains to what extent we can teach those we love, unless they themselves are willing to change and make sacrifice for what matters to them the most. Fifth, the sincerity and nobility of love is not compromised by it not being reciprocated, or by it not leading to mutual happiness. By loving with our entire being we participate in something more important than hedonistically understood happiness.

In the middle of the dialogue, when Socrates narrated what he had learnt from Diotima, we may be (mis)led to conclude that this something is Beauty in Itself. At the end of the dialogue, however, it is hard to suppress the feeling of awe: not for Beauty in Itself (whatever it is), but for something that has just been elevated and sublimated in front of our eyes—the personality of Socrates. What we come to admire with such unadulterated reverence is how Socrates lived and loved, how he transformed himself in the presence of the challenges he was facing in the Athenian society of his time and the individuals to whom he was attracted. It is not a question of whether Socrates was happy or not. The question deals with how, through his loving attitude, he managed to internalize that “divinely superfluous beauty” and to spread it around himself.



In his youth Laza was not called Alcibiades for nothing. His gifts were unquestionable, but his life was unruly, his handling of money irresponsible, and his gambling habits disturbing. From the testimonies of those who knew Laza when he was roughly twenty-three-years-old, we can conclude that he wanted to be the first and the best in everything that engaged his imagination and his ego; Laza was as charismatic as Alcibiades, and just as equally narcissistic.

Fortunately, Laza did not follow his famous namesake toward a disastrous ending. He wrote his first poems when he was about sixteen-years-old. In his twenties he also started writing short stories, reviews, and essays. It is worth noting that in all of his non-fiction writings, as well as his numerous public lectures, he always used the form of a dialogue. Instead of a narcissistic self-preoccupation, Laza switched to a form of speaking, thinking, and writing that is based on the interplay of assertion and doubt, reconsideration and reevaluation. In this way, his speaking and his writing followed Empedocles' dialectic of love and strife and developed his own basic principle of the intercrossing. The young self-centered man became a far more balanced thinker willing to consider the plurality of views and capable of weighing the merits of each of them. His art had changed as well. The dialectical oppositions between light and darkness, presence and absence, strangeness and familiarity became dominant in his poems and his literary analysis. The lyric and the dramatic, the comic and the tragic, became integrally interwoven into his poetry and his view of life.¹

By the time Laza met Lenka, in his behavior and his thoughts he resembled Socrates rather than Alcibiades. Laza was not only familiar with Plato's *Symposium*, but he became no less eccentric

¹ In his first philosophical essay, "The Basis of Beauty in the World," inspired by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Laza mused about the fatality of beauty and of beauty as the source of the tragic feeling of life. Thinking mostly of Helen of Troy, he speculated that beauty is tragic for the person who carries it. This never finished essay was written eleven years before he met Lenka and twenty-nine years before he wrote his poem, "Santa Maria della Salute." In the poem, he ascribes that extraordinary, and perhaps fatal, beauty to Lenka: "Oh, such a sight had my eyes ne'er seen!"

than Socrates. He normally slept until noon and stayed up late. He usually ate one meal a day, in the late evening, and that meal had to be elaborate, consisting of four to six courses, with Laza often consuming two servings of each. To counterbalance such lavish meals, he walked about ten miles every afternoon, rain or shine. Although Serbian winters are much harsher than those in Greece, Laza did not walk barefoot, but he did refuse to wear a winter coat, and equally hated to put a hat over his long and always unruly hair. When he felt that his creative juices were flowing, he would dress in his best three-piece white suit. Laza preferred to read and write while standing, and he had a custom-made desk from Vienna that enabled him to work in this way. On hot summer nights, he liked to work completely naked, which annoyed his mother-in-law and her sister (who lived in the same house) to no end. What enraged them even more was that, during his work, Laza would occasionally plunge into deep thoughts and walk out to the balcony completely naked but oblivious to his surroundings, and spend some time there breathing fresh air or gazing at the starry sky above. Since the balcony was facing the main street in Sombor, and there would always be some late-night passers-by, the mother-in-law and her sister would hear about Laza's night visits to the balcony the next day, as indeed would the rest of the town.

Like Socrates, Laza was mostly indifferent to the town-gossip and social customs. Both were eccentric, but their eccentricity flowed from their personalities, not from their intention to be different. Their ways of life revealed that both Socrates and Laza realized that there are two different ways in which we can search for happiness. The more common one is to conceive of it in terms of our feelings—ranging from crude pleasures to sophisticated joys—as they are caused by something happening in the outside world. In this case, we are the recipients of some outward fortune or a lucky turn of events (or their opposites). The Latin word for this conception of happiness is "*Fortuna*." When Dr Simonović spoke about Laza's unhappiness, or when we talk about Socrates' tragic end, this is the conception of happiness that we have in mind.

There is another conception of happiness, relatively independent of the first one and focused on the inner aspects of life. What is relevant for this is not so much what we feel, but our inner disposition and our special capacity for feeling. This capacity may be rough and underdeveloped, or nuanced and subtle. The key to happiness is not to be found in what is happening in the outside world, but in the attitude we take toward such happenings; not in whether we are showered by good fortune, but whether we are capable of lovingly approaching anything that happens to us—be it fortune or misfortune.

The Greek word “*eudaimonia*” (εὐδαιμονία) is almost automatically translated as happiness. Because the literal meaning of this word was: “being blessed with a good *daimon*” (δαίμων), both Socrates and Laza pointed out that happiness should not be understood as fortune but as living in harmony with our *daimon*. The Greeks considered Eros to be a *daimon* (neither a divinity, nor a mortal being); it seizes the person caught by Eros and makes him or her behave out of the ordinary, as in ecstasy. When Socrates claimed that he could not remember the time in his life when he was not in love, what he meant was that he could not recall the time when he was not seized by his *daimon*. Plato wanted us to believe that Socrates was a remarkable man, not because he was eccentric, but because he was living in harmony with his *daimon*, even when he was in love with someone as problematic as Alcibiades. This was the test that Socrates passed while Laza, when struggling with his love for Lenka, did not.

Although Laza’s failure was ultimately personal and should not be excused by any external factor, it did not help him that he was part of a civilization that did not teach him to embrace the demonic and live in harmony with it. Quite the contrary, and in this same society in which we live as well, we are encouraged to fear the demonic in all of its forms and restrain it by all possible means. Besides thereby making the forbidden even more appealing, we do not learn to confront our own dark side, to integrate into one whole

those aspects of our personality that are socially deemed disrespected, shameful, or dangerous. We do not learn how to live with thorns and yet continue to appreciate the beauty of the rose that is pricking us. If we go to a flower shop to buy roses, we expect the thorns to be cut off for us. But those thorns, and the demonic aspects of our nature in general, arise from the ground of being; they are part and parcel of the natural cycles of life. By denying the demonic, by not recognizing that life involves both love and strife, happiness and suffering, we delude and prevent ourselves from achieving their intercrossing and a balance needed for health.

Like fire, happiness is not a gift without its dangers. This is why the Greek myth speaks not only about Prometheus' heroic theft of fire and his gift to humanity, but also of Pandora and her box of questions that came as a gift as well. Unlike the Greeks, we are eager to take over the fire of Prometheus but are weary of Pandora's box and try to prevent it from ever being unveiled. Yet, this is not how life unfolds.

While it is obviously better to have a comfortable and luxurious life, rather than to suffer in poverty and deprivation, we have all seen how that kind of fortune can lead its recipients to become shallow. Life experience teaches us that pleasantness and comfort all too often drive higher values out of sight and out of mind. It teaches us that we can bear only a limited measure of hedonistically understood happiness without descending into superficiality and complacency. Paradoxically, it is precisely the difficulties we experience and the suffering that we have to endure that are so often our best teachers of what really matters in life. They sharpen our perception of what is valuable and increase our appreciation for (too) many things we take for granted.

This is not to say that all happiness is superficial. There is a profound level of happiness, connected with maintaining the balance of the overall organism and its growth as a whole. That is why *eudaimonia* is more adequately translated as flourishing (or blossoming). Properly understood, *eudaimonia* concerns growing and

unfolding, struggling and striving toward the best that is humanely possible. There are many ingredients needed for such blossoming, depending on the specific context. In all these variables, however, there is one “ingredient,” one demonic aspect that is needed for blossoming and health, whether we are dealing with roses or human beings. This ingredient is love. When understood in that sense, we still cannot say that love guarantees happiness. What we can say is that it is impossible to have happiness without love.

We are now in the position to see the greatest mistake not only of Aristophanes’ myth and the romantic conception of love, but also of our ordinary approaches to life, health, and happiness. Aristophanes postulates that what is missing is somewhere outside us and someone other than ourselves. Find him or her, glue the missing element again to our selves, and all will be as it should be. The romantic conception of love makes us similarly search (or wait) for someone out there—there is a person who would complete us, heal us, make us happy forever and ever. In our commonsense approach, we expect the solution to health and other problems in life to be somewhere outside of us; it is always something or someone else that can make us happy and bring our life’s adventure toward a desired end.

In contrast to such expectations, what Socrates proposes is that the key ingredients for a healthy and happy life are already within us, that we should not look for them outside ourselves. What is outside ourselves definitely affects us, in positive and negative ways, and we should not shy away from contacts with the outside world and relationships with other persons, just because we may be hurt or rejected. When we go through such sufferings and betrayals, when we accept our *daimon* instead of blaming others for our problems, when we summon the courage and act with faith and integrity, we can free ourselves from the false expectations of the paradise waiting for us in the Promised Land and stop searching for it. Only then can we come to realize that there is a source of healing and happiness in our depths. Only then can we make ourselves ready to

give or to receive the pot of gold that we imagined is on the other side of the rainbow. This pot of gold is love.

This contrasting approach to healing and health, life and love, enables us to question Dr Simonović's contention that Laza was one of the unhappiest men he had known. Had Dr Simonović thought of that internally-oriented conception of happiness, had he paid more attention to health as a continuous process of integration of the demonic with the non-demonic aspects of personality on the one hand, and on the ability to balance our existence with the lives of those who we love the most on the other, he would have been more reluctant to pronounce such a negative judgment. But, in his defense, someone may argue that it is very hard to determine who is happy and who is not. Can we ever recognize with certainty those who are happy? Can we recognize those in love?

I am convinced that we all intuitively know the answers to these questions. Happy people and people in love shine. They look blissful. They radiate.

THE LUMINOSITY OF LOVE

While visiting the church Santa Maria della Salute for the first time, I was particularly surprised by the Madonna on the icon above the altar. I was young and this was my first trip to Italy. I visited dozens of churches in Venice, Florence, and Rome; every one of them had images of Madonnas, but only the one in Santa Maria della Salute was black. Learning about why the church was built, my first reaction was that the blackness of the Madonna had to do with the Black Death and the faith that we can overcome it. I quickly realized that this explanation could not be true, because the painting of this icon preceded the building of the church by several centuries. Then I thought that perhaps the painter wanted to make a statement that the Mother of Jesus, and indeed Jesus himself, were of the African origin. That made more sense. Overwhelmed by so many different impressions from my trip, I soon forgot about the black Madonna.

Years later, while visiting La Salute for the second time, I was again fascinated by the icon and spent a lot of time observing it. What caught my attention this time was the contrast between the darkness of the Madonna's skin and the radiance emanating from her face. There is a halo around her head, but it has as little to do with her radiance as Mona Lisa's lips have to do with her smile. The aura around her head was more like an additional tier of her scarf, which is painted as consisting of several layers and in the color intermediate between the darkness of her skin and the light-brown shade of the halo. Even baby Jesus, sitting on her lap, does not have that radiance. He possesses a different kind of energy, an energy of strength and determination, while the gentle radiant energy of the Madonna is that of inner-centeredness and serenity. Her holiness emanates from within, not from without. It is so much more beautiful for coming from within, rather than to be imposed on her from the outside.

Laza must have noticed much of what I am describing here. We have a preserved draft of his poem on loose scraps of paper. The poem acquired its final form quickly, with few changes and little editing. The first line of the poem, however, was modified in a way that deserves our attention. In the draft version of it, still preserved in Laza's handwriting, the line was: "*Oprosti, sveta Majko, oprosti,*" which literally translates as: "Forgive, Holy Mother, forgive." Laza crossed the words "*sveta Majko*" and rewrote the first line as: "*Oprosti, Majko sveta, oprosti.*" This seems like a mere change of the order of two words, but it is more than that. In the literal translation, this line now says: "Forgive, Mother of the world, forgive." In the Serbian language—as in Greek and other Slavic languages—the words for "holy" and "world" (or "worldly") have the exact same root, "*svet.*" Depending on the case (of which the Serbian language has seven!), they can assume the same written form, so that from the mere written sign and without understanding the context, we cannot say which of the two words was meant. What made Laza make that change, from *Mater Sancta* to *Mater Mundi*?

Fascinated with the contrast of the opposing elements and forces, Laza thought extensively about the need for their intercrossing and mutual influence. Above all, he thought about the heart where the intercrossing takes place. While lecturing on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, he made a contrast between "black blood and red blood," which was for him symbolic of the contrast between mud and spirit. (In the Serbian rendering of the Bible, we come out of mud and to mud we return—mud is certainly far richer soil for the creation of the world than dust.) The spirit must come down to mud to work on it and transmute it. In their intercrossing, both mud and spirit are transformed and each must receive the elements of the other into itself. As Laza put it, "Without suffering, there is no salvation. Without crucifixion, there is no resurrection. Without the muddening of the spirit, there is no spiritualization of mud." This is how "holy" and "worldly" can have the same roots and how, like two circles of a mandorla, they intersect.

Well versed in the Greek and Roman mythology, Laza knew that Venus is the Roman rendering of Aphrodite. Both are the goddesses of love, beauty, sex, fertility, and desire. (Their male counterparts are the fiery and aggressive Ares and Mars.) Aphrodite and Venus were both born of sea-foam, and both represent the feminine, watery principle; they come out of the natural world and they are essential for the generation of life.

Laza was also aware of the close etymological and symbolic connections of Venus and Venice. Like Venus, the most beautiful church of Venice, La Salute, arises out of the muddy bottom and the waves of the Adriatic, only to be crowned by the dome—the "mud" ennobled and elevated to the highest sphere of the spirit; the base material turned into spiritual gold. This may be the reason for Laza's change of the first verse of his poem: since "high stands on low," he began from below, from where we approach the church as embracing us into the darkness of its womb, only to separate us from the forces of nature and chaperon us into a different, and yet always the same, world.

Laza noticed a few more interesting things. The same root, “*svet*” is also present in the word “*svetlost*,” which means primarily light, but also radiance and bliss. There is no world without light—“Let there be light, and be light.” There is also no holiness without light, without radiance, and what they represent—the divine world is light, while the demonic world is dark. Furthermore, Laza noticed the connection of the root “*svet*” with beauty and what is beautiful. In the ancient Greek, “beauty” (Laza had in mind “*hōraios*” [ὥραιος] more than “*kallos*” [κάλλος]) is an expression of a well-balanced structure; it is something that naturally flows out of a harmonious order of things. What is perhaps the most surprising is the conceptual connection between beauty on the one side, and health and ripeness on the other. Only what is healthy (that is, balanced) and ripe (that is, fully grown) is beautiful. Such beauty, showing itself as radiant cheerfulness or bliss, is the result of a flow of spirit through inert matter (that is, mud). The spirit ennobles matter and moves it, so that they coexist in a harmonious balance with each other. The spirit is not thereby arrested by matter, or swallowed by it. Quite the contrary, the spirit can achieve its freedom not by floating in the clouds of abstractions, but by finding its proper role and place in guiding the matter and in thereby being in harmony with the rest of the world.

Laza noticed that these conceptual connections that exist in Greek and Serbian (and other Slavic languages) are not present in Latin and the languages derived from it. In Latin, “beauty” (*pulchritudo*) has nothing to do with health and ripeness but is conceptually tied to what is useful and good. Following Max Müller’s insight that, “every language contains a petrified philosophy,” Laza realized that this linguistic difference had a great impact on our views regarding art, life, and our humanity. Later Western art and philosophy, as the foundation of its general worldview, has lost much of the Greek playfulness and spontaneity, surrender and serenity. Their close conceptual ties to usefulness and goodness make them too serious and “heavy,” while Greek art and philosophy retained more humor and lightness in their approach.

Our modern Western language, our “petrified philosophy of life,” is poor when it comes to describing love, and this certainly reveals a lot about our attitude to love. Perhaps it should not be too surprising, for little practical usefulness and material goodness come out of love (and beauty), while love is sure to lead to some troubles. Be that as it may, the aspect of love that suffers the most from this impoverished and pragmatically-oriented language is that of the radiance of love: the least understood, yet the culminating aspect of love.

Whether we deal with “black blood” or “red blood,” let us recognize that energy (*pneuma*) is the life-blood of the universe. We are used to honoring the attitude that is based on intensity, that is goal-setting and oriented toward problem-solving. We admire the energy involved in acting directed toward improving the world by making visible, sweeping changes in it. This is the energy of doing, which, symbolically speaking, is the male way of acting in the theater of life and love. This is the Eros in its natural form as an instinctive drive.

The other kind of energy, that of *luminosity*, is the energy of being. This is the kind of energy that arises from entering a moment of experience so completely that a higher form of gravity takes over. The energy of luminosity is the energy that does not change anything directly, but simply illuminates what is and lets it be. Indirectly, however, precisely because it makes everything so illuminated, it also enables the inner tendencies to emerge and follow their natural course of flowing and growing. We are here in the center of the theater of life and love, in the realm of being of the feminine. This is a different Eros, the one refined and sublimated through the spirit.

One of the rare intellectuals who tried to clarify this energy of luminosity was Nietzsche. In his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he spoke about the value of gold in terms of its radiance. He used the expression “*Schenkende Tugend*,” which is somewhat misleadingly translated into English as “radiant virtue.” The literal meaning of Ni-

etzsche's expression is a "gift bestowing virtue." It is translated as "radiant" because the gifts it bestows are given through illumination, through the luminous energy of love, rather than through any concrete gift.

A person of radiant virtue bestows gifts out of his or her spiritual fullness; they simply overflow from the person endowed with "gold." This kind of love, which should be considered right next to personal love as the highest value that bestows meaning to life, is found in exceptional individuals, such as Socrates. They are those who dared to fly and follow the rainbow to its highest arching point, and who then descended toward the pot of gold, awaiting those most believing and bravest at the bottom. The gold is spiritual, not material. It fills the person's soul, it radiates out of the inner being, and illuminates all around.

Nietzsche wanted to underline how different such radiant love is from the Christian *agape*, which is our spiritual response to those suffering, to those in need. Radiant love is indiscriminately imparted, but persons whom this kind of illumination affects the most are the unspoiled spirits not yet fully contaminated with the "wisdom" of the practically-oriented world.

Nietzsche, who both hated and loved Socrates, called him "the genius of the heart." Socrates' "teaching" was, for the most part, directed toward helping young minds free themselves of the prejudices that their societies were imparting on them in the process of growth and education. He was driving them to realize their misconceptions and ignorance; he was hoping to open the path for real learning, education, and growth. Unlike the intentions of the rulers of our societies, those of Socrates were not to quench their thirst but to intensify it.

Socrates illustrated what the root of the word "education" (*educere*) means: to draw, to bring forth, to lead. Socrates' radiance was so powerful, it exposed so much foolish pride and the false values of his interlocutors, the challenge he issued against the social filters and prejudices was so strong, that he was accused of se-

ducing (*seducere*) the youth away from the accepted ways of life and corrupting them.

Many of us who continue to be fascinated by Socrates, or were at least in our youths seduced by him, tend to forget our other teachers whose radiance has not been so strong and impressive. There have always existed those teachers whose luminosity is more like that of the moon than of the sun. Yet, whether their luminosity is sun-like or moon-like, all good educators are seducers. They seduce in order to educate us, not in a particular subject matter, nor in a particular doctrine, but in the art of living.

This last the point is worth emphasizing, for Laza missed a great opportunity to become Lenka's teacher in the art of living. Lenka's journal reveals that in the first months of their relationship he did, indeed, attempt to teach her numerous things: from the English language to how to read literature and poetry. Being so much older and more experienced, he could have been Lenka's mentor and trusted friend for years to come. Due to the social customs and the cultural climate of their country, as well as their personal expectations and limitations, it is a disappointment that Laza and Lenka did not seem to explore that possibility at all. The responsibility for that was far more on Laza's shoulder's than on the young Lenka. As a former "Alcibiades," Laza had the experience of an older mentor, no less loving and critical than Socrates was toward his Alcibiades. We do not have enough historical documentation to judge exactly how erotic Laza's relationship with his mentor was. Because of the gender difference, the mentoring relationship of Laza and Lenka would have been a bit more complicated, if for no other reason than because in their surroundings it would have been observed with more suspicion and scrutiny. But Laza and Lenka already reached such a level of trust and spiritual intimacy that it would have been possible to continue and build on it, even if one (or both) of them had been married to someone else. Just as the art of living does not aim toward any closure, nor does the art of loving.

Nor does the art of loving require any institutional certification and social endorsement. In fact, it is easier to sustain it when

it develops freely and spontaneously. Let us deepen our understanding of this point, and of the nature of love in general, by illustrating it in terms of the following known but neglected linguistic differentiations. Our word “love” is a noun, and we often think of love in terms of a person we need to find, the person we would love and who would love us and make us happy forever. As we grow, we realize that it may not be a particular or unique person—*the* person—that we should be looking for or expecting to come our way. Then we start focusing more on loving than on love—on love as a verb, rather than on love as a noun. Given that I have loving feelings for a certain person, how should I show her and build this relationship? By getting a tattoo, with the initials of this person inscribed within a tattooed heart? By buying a golden necklace and impressing my beloved in that way? By making a marriage proposal? Or perhaps by writing a poem inspired by love?

There is also yet another aspect of love that is captured neither by nouns nor verbs, but by adverbs. This least understood yet most important dimension of love deals not with the “who” or the “what” but with the “how.” Something can be done to any person in good spirit, or in bad spirit. The key lies not in what is done, or to whom, or with what aim and consequences, but in which way and in which spirit: anything we do can be done lovingly, or not. The essential point of the art of loving is that our general aspiration must always be to become as loving human beings as possible. When such a loving attitude becomes our way of life, the luminous energy permeates our entire being, and we radiate like gold. Then everyone can easily recognize that we are in love and that we are happy. Then everyone can also recognize that love can be the only solution for the widespread fear of love and the devastation of humanity it causes. Those who fail to impress and seduce try to possess and control. Love is an altogether different affair. The ability to impress and seduce, educate and heal, are the greatest wonders produced by the miracle of love.

Epilogue

Laza Kostić wrote four short stories in his twenties, one of which was entitled “Minnehaha.” Laza’s story was named after a fictional character from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Song of Hiawatha” (1855). Longfellow’s Minnehaha was a young Native American woman in love with the main character, Hiawatha, and she dies a tragic death. It is curious that a Serbian writer would pick up a story based on the tradition of a Native American tribe. It is even more intriguing to come across the following line in Laza’s story: “He is the one who taught them how to love, and the world killed him for that.”

What an interesting symbolism in this sentence! “He” can refer to many persons, from a Native American shaman, to Socrates and Jesus. “Love” in Laza’s quoted sentence should be taken in a broad sense: caring and compassion may be the first two associations, but their list would have to include faith and courage. For these four words we can also substitute the word “humanity.” Indeed, humanity and love are the most intimately connected: like two circles intertwined in a mandorla, they go together, or they are both missing.

We are not very generous to those who teach us how to love and challenge us to develop our humanity. We long to love and be loved, we yearn to ennoble our natural impulses, we strive to become the best we can be. Yet, we also dread the effort, the risk, and the uncertainty that are the necessary components of this process. What is worse, we not only find ready substitutes for love and lose ourselves in the disoriented swirl we call the contemporary world, but we even kill those who dare to remind us how far away have we drifted from our human potentials and aspirations.

All of us remember our late teens when we had the exact realization that Laza expressed in his story. At that age we still had plenty of innocence and enough wisdom to see what “the world” has been doing from the time immemorial to those who teach it how to love. That murderous world, we start to notice, involves our neighbors, teachers, and even our parents—all those so quick to moralize and offer us their endlessly repeated, hypocritical lessons as to what it means to live as responsible adults. The problem is that by our early thirties, if not before, we cannot say any more: “the world” —meaning “they” —killed the teacher, because we had become participants in the same process. Then, in our forties, it suddenly dawns on us that things are far healthier than we previously assumed. It was an illusion that the victims are those who taught us how to love. We are the real victims. We kill ourselves by trading our humanity, our emotions and our vulnerability, for the efficiency of machines and the indifference of rocks.

Although love is one of the most commonly used words in our daily conversations, genuinely loving persons are not easy to find. That is why we so often recall fictional characters in our conversations about love. Because our longing for love is so primordial, our consumerist society can feed us with numerous romantic stories with happy endings, and thus make us blind to the most important issues regarding love. Being in love is not a fairytale but a demanding relationship in which our humanity is tested, sometimes in the most severe ways. After the usual “beginner’s luck,” we almost inevitably come upon the point in every relationship at which hard decisions have to be made. At these crossings we get a much better insight as to who the persons we love are and of what material we ourselves are made. Looking first at ourselves, at our attitudes and decisions, there are four central points to keep in mind:

1. how not to betray ourselves and be true to our inner-calling;
2. how not to betray the persons we love and be true to them;
3. after we betray ourselves, how to continue to live and love;

4. after we betray the persons we love, how to continue to live and love.

If we now redirect our attention to the impact that the decisions of the loved ones can have on us, we recognize the fifth important point:

5. after we are betrayed by the persons we love, how to continue to live and love.

These are the five critical intercrossings at which the transmutations of love are the most potent. Notice that their ratio is four to one, which reinforces the realization that we need to focus far more on what we do and how we relate to ourselves and those we love (love as an adverb), rather than on what those who love us may do to us. If there is something to fear in love, it is primarily us ourselves, not actions or decisions of those we love.

These five intercrossings are the focus of the alchemy of love. If fear guides our choices and behavior at these critical intercrossings, we retreat toward our lower selves, toward the darkness of an overprotective ego-shell. If awe is stronger than anxiety, we follow our inner-calling, step forward toward the sacred, and create an opening for the miracles of love to take place. At these points of the intercrossing of fear and awe, we are nailed to the middle of the cross of love. Fear will pull us down toward mud and other base material, make us kill those who teach us how to love, and ultimately impair our humanity. Awe will lift us up to follow the footsteps of those who teach us how to love, so that we too can discover the treasure on the other side of the rainbow.

The story of Laza and Lenka is so fascinating because the periods of crises were clearly delineated and their reactions to them had monumental consequences. Lenka loved Laza with all her youthful devotion and innocence. When she was betrayed, Lenka could neither accept any compromise, nor could she cope with her pain, find a way to forgive and the faith to continue to live and love. Lenka was broken and she let herself crumble into pieces.

Laza initially loved Lenka probably as much as Lenka loved him but, because of his life experiences, his love could not be so pure and his devotion so unwavering. Fear weakened his faith and softened his fortitude. Feeling the burden on his shoulders to make a decision for both of them, he made a choice that did not lead either of them to health or happiness. Yet, when Lenka died, Laza did not abandon her. He internalized her into himself, until she became his Muse.

Had Lenka not died, and had Laza's sense of guilt not been so strong, his most beautiful creation would likely never have been born. His poem-apotheosis for Lenka has been an inspiration to many and for longer than a century; it may live forever and make Laza's name known for all eternity. I am convinced, however, that Laza would be the first to say that this magnificent poem was not worth Lenka's agony. Nor was it worth the missed opportunity for Laza and Lenka to love and struggle and grow together. The poem was a potent, strong medicine to confirm his never-ending devotion to the one he loved and betrayed, the medicine he needed to prepare for a death as peaceful as possible.

Laza himself would probably also warn us that the poem was only an idealized version of his love, which did not mention some of its not-so-sublime aspects that were as important to him as what he so magnificently expressed in the poem. In one of the entries (from 1904) of his Dream Diary, Laza reported his dream of the previous night:

Radiating with youth and beauty, more blond than you were, golden blond, almost translucent, you stared at me with that look full of longing, promise, and devotion, the look that encourages, calls, almost provokes, the look with which you looked at me in this world only once, in the moment that is remembered for all eternity, when you peered at me convinced that I did not see you. Oh, that immortal look! That insatiable well of desire, which the destiny decided to keep unfulfilled in this world! —And then, leaning toward me, you whispered: "*I want to, but*

not all the way.” —Just as I was to come after you, your brother G. appeared and separated us.

Whether we are dreaming or awake, love is paradoxical and challenging. Is it more exasperating that the *daimon* of carnal desire can never fully be transmuted, or that, just when we think that everything is going our way, some “brother” or another shows up and gets in the way?

And yet, despite such love-knots, what can be worthier of our effort than to embrace this paradox and to continue to struggle along the path with a heart? What better way to spend life than by bringing into this world as much radiance and as many miracles of love as possible?



Laza wrote in his story: “He is the one who taught them how to love, and the world killed him for that.” Yet, why could it not be a “she” as well? And what if we do not kill a person who teaches us how to love?

Since both our humanity and our health depend on these things being possible, I will conclude by offering a story which involves a feminine protagonist and a different attitude toward the person who teaches us how to love. We began our search for an answer to the question why fear, suffering, and betrayal are not the last word when it comes to love by telling one story, and perhaps it is only proper to conclude in the same manner—by narrating another story. This is proper not only because of rhetorical reasons, but because of some of our most important findings with regard to the nature and significance of love for our lives. Like love, and like life, stories seem to aim at closure: each has its beginning, its middle part, and its conclusion. And yet, such a closure is but another example of the veil of Maya: it is only imaginary. In the case of stories, as in life and love, reality reveals itself in the form of a mandorla: every story is not only open to numerous interpretations but, even more importantly, one story always leads to another. Every story inter-crosses with many other stories and, for better or for worse,

we are caught in an endless labyrinth of stories. It is just that, as with lives and loves, some of those stories are worth knowing, re-telling, and reflecting upon. Here is one of them.



When I was a boy, I was fascinated by my mother in ways I could not articulate. My parents were elementary school teachers and we lived in the village school building where they worked. The school was for the children of grades one through four, after which they had to commute to a larger school in the nearby city of Sombor. There were only about thirty-five to forty children of that age in the village, and my parents were the only teachers in the school. Each was in charge of taking a class at the first grade and leading it to the end of the fourth grade. Since there were only two of them, they each had to teach two grades simultaneously. If my mother was teaching the first and the third grades, for example, my father would then be teaching the second and the fourth grades. This was not uncommon in the rural Yugoslavia of the 1950s and 1960s, nor was it unusual to have a little apartment for the teachers within the school building itself.

Since there was nobody to take care of my sister (two years younger) and myself while my parents were teaching (one shift, usually between eight and twelve in the morning, after which the children would go home), the two of us virtually grew up in the classroom. My mother had a playpen for us in her classroom when we were babies, and she managed to handle both of us and teach her classes at the same time. From the age of four on, my sister and I were seated at a desk, like other children, doing the same schoolwork.

What fascinated me about my mother was how she managed to be a teacher and a mother and a wife, with seemingly infinite patience and devotion. Village children were not always encouraged to do their schoolwork. In the afternoons, instead of doing their homework, they were asked to help on the farm, and there was not always time to do the assignments the teacher gave them. I do not remember my mother ever raising her voice or reproach-

ing the children who did not do their homework, much less punishing any child in any way. She had a way of turning negative into positive, mistakes into motivation to do better the next time. She had the rare gift of bringing the best out of every child. She was born to be an educator.

My mother did not stop being a teacher after the classes were over. Especially in the colder weather, in the evenings, she would read books to my sister and me. The school had a small library of about one hundred books, and she read them all to us. Some of her favorites, like *Heidi* by Johanna Spyri, I heard a number of times—from cover to cover!

In addition to being a teacher, she had to be a spouse and a mother. All the domestic work (cooking, cleaning, laundry) was on her shoulders. In addition, she had a vegetable garden (that my father helped with), and a rose garden. My mother loved flowers and they were planted all around the school building. A special place in her heart was reserved for a small rose garden, and the softest place of all for red roses. Like most women and housewives, my mother was always “on call.” Yet we learned (and accepted gradually) that when she was in her rose garden, it was better to leave her alone and wait with our demands until she returned, which never lasted too long anyway. Her rose garden was her sanctuary.

What puzzled me greatly was how to reconcile my mother’s loving approach to everything she encountered with her past, especially her childhood. Her family was of the Serbian origin, but they lived in the part of Croatia called Lika. Born just before the outbreak of the World War II (in 1937), she was the oldest of three girls. Her father was in the resistance movement from the beginning of the war in Yugoslavia (in 1941), and died a year later. A powerful bomb exploded and maimed beyond individual recognition a unit of twenty-two men. Exactly a year later, on the first anniversary of her father’s death, her mother died. As with Lenka, typhus was listed as the official cause of her death. Years later, my mother learned that, besides struggling with typhus, her mother

cut her veins. Two aunts dragged the three orphans with them through the war zone for about a year and a half. Without any medical help, my mother survived typhus, in addition to hunger, cold, and being exposed to atrocities that would shake even the strongest adult. Along with the middle sister, she was put in an orphanage at the end of 1944. They were able to locate their youngest sister more than a decade later. In the chaos of the war, that sister, too young to remember, grew up in another orphanage, believing that she lost all of her family members and relatives in war. For the rest of her life, her heart was so hardened that she never developed any loving feelings for her sisters. Despite the years of effort by the older sisters, the youngest one remained uninterested in any cordial relations. Something that died in her at that tender age could not be brought back to life any more.

As I learned that family history, it did not puzzle me so much that my aunt was so cold. It perplexed me, and delighted me, that my mother (and her middle sister) did not turn out the same way. How could someone toward whom life was so harsh become a loving and caring human being? How could anyone, even with a far less challenging childhood, end up loving the world, with all of its imperfections and injustices?

When I asked my mother about her early life, she always emphasized how fortunate she was. She singled out three things. First, she had her middle sister with her. From early childhood, they shared a bed together, and later, for the rest of their lives, they were the best friends and confidants. They shared everything they had, from toys and clothes to books and secrets about the looks that some boys had given them. Second, my mother felt blessed that the two aunts that saved their lives continued to act as her guardian angels for years to come. Every school break she was able to spend with one or the other and their families. According to her narrative, the aunts, their husbands and children always treated her as one of them. She had a family. In fact, she emphasized with pride, she had two loving families, while most other people are lucky to

have one. Third, my mother developed love for classical literature. Reading books, she said, enabled her to forget that food was never enough, that water in the shower was always cold, that rats ran through their bedroom at night, and that every New Year Santa Claus forgot to make a stop at their orphanage. (In the communist Yugoslavia Santa came not at Christmas, a Christian holiday, but at the New Year, which is religiously neutral.) Reading books, from the Greek classics to Dickens and Balzac, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, enabled her to realize that some individuals face far greater problems than hers, and that there are many good, kind and loving people in the world. Reading about such people spurred her desire to become one of them.

Like most human beings, I first encountered the radiance of love as a baby, in my mother's embrace. Later, as a child, I witnessed it in her classroom. I did not understand it, because I was told that this was her job, her profession. It was, but it was also her inner-calling. Teaching was her labor of love, and that is what enabled her students—and children—to grow and blossom.

I sensed more clearly what this phenomenon is about when I observed my mother in her rose garden. Even that took years, because we normally first notice the trivial aspects of every phenomenon. As a wife, mother, and teacher, there was always plenty of work for her. What I could not understand was why she was adding to that work by tending to her rose garden. On many a warm afternoon, when she could rest, she would be out there, pruning and watering, shoveling and fertilizing, and even occasionally being pricked. Why did she need that extra work? Every spring, she would have to redo her garden; every summer the roses would blossom for a while, and then they would fade away.

Every once in a while, I would need my mother while she was in her rose garden, whether to pose a question or to ask for assistance. Only then, when I would find her in her garden and kneel down next to her, I would see her face radiate with joy and hear her words calling my attention to the beauty of a particular flower.

Only then did I begin to understand what she was doing, as well as what the most important ingredient is for any growth and blossoming. It was not the seeds, soil, or quantity of water and sunshine. It was, and is, the care and attention to the details. It is pure and selfless devotion. It is love.

Unlike hearth (and home, which hearth symbolically represents), a rose garden is the place where love is not contained within the walls and protected by the roof. The energy of love can freely flow through it, carried by the winds of *pneuma*. The rain can be absorbed by the soil that feeds the plants. The sun's rays can be freely absorbed by the eager buds and blossoms.

As a true mandorla, a rose garden represents the intercrossing of the different spheres of being. The soil and the roots are there, together with water and animals that live there and feed off the thorny plants. A garden is a place of cultivation, of domesticating the gifts of nature with a caring hand that prunes and fertilizes and shovels and protects the fragile plants from intruders. It is also a place where the spirit descends to the earth and brings with it its vision, faith, and love.

When I grew into a teenager, I started visiting my mother in her garden more often. I began staying with her there even after she answered my questions or provided the needed assistance. There were times when she was not there, and I would wander through the rose garden by myself, looking at the buds about to open up fully, and at those red bundles of beauty in full bloom. I could sense that these flowers were gifts, something of value which could not be measured in any material way. I could sense that these flowers simply had to be appreciated, that their beauty had to be admired while it lasted.

Then came the time, toward the end of my high school years, when I fell in love for the first time. To my mother, it probably looked like a childish love, but she knew that for me it was the most important thing in the world. I started spending far less time in her garden, or even at home. When she knew that I was going

to see the girl with whom I was so much in love that the rest of the world barely mattered to me, she managed to slow my departure just enough to run to her garden, pick the most beautiful red rose she could find there, cut it and give it to me, to present it to the girl for whom I cared so much.

At that time, I did not pay much attention to that gift of love. I took it for granted. Only much later did I realize that in all our life experiences there is perhaps just one thing as important as loving others. It is appreciating the love of another human being. That is how one becomes an integrated, loving, and radiant personality.

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HERE
ENDS THE BOOK,
"THE LUMINOSITY OF LOVE,"
BY PREDRAĐ CICOVAČKI;
THIS EDITION IS LIMITED
TO 1000 COPIES AND WAS PUBLISHED
IN ALHAMBRA, CALIFORNIA,
IN FICTION BOOK SERIES,
NUMBER 3, PRINTED AT THE
INTERKLIMA-GRAFIKA
PRESS IN VRHJCI, SERBIA,
OWNED BY KYR
LJUBISLAJ CUPERKOVIC,
REALIZED BY SEBASTIAN PRESS
IN LOS ANGELES, CA,
AND FINISHED
ON THE 25TH DAY
OF FEBRUARY,
IN THE YEAR
OF THE LORD
2018.