

Closed Wings: The Love Story in Grisaille

1

A thousand years or so ago
when love was still a game of bait
and switch and ring around the posey

played within measured lines laid down
a thousand years or so before that
by a Roman-nosed elegist

well-versed in history's answers
to the Socratic dilemma
of how to make two one

who said in nameless books and letters
preserved by nameless Irish monks
that love is a scheme of nouns and verbs

put together like any fiction
with all-too-familiar situations
personal arguments pro and con

lessons on how and how not to
and how to get cured if you do
(*Do we always have to argue?*)

replete with obscure references
to versifiers said to have lived
a thousand years earlier yet

from Lesbian sapphics to Alexandrine
caesuras, lovelorn passions
unchecked by Greco-Roman reason

a tongue-in-cheek of ardent convention
for practical lovers who want to get laid
just for the fun of it not service

to Dame Nature's natural means
Dame Reason's most reasonable ends
or Rome's imperial *obiter dicta*

who in his final years exiled
so far from the center of the world no one

there spoke Latin advised his daughter

to take care in preserving for the ages
his verses and that in her own writing
no man or woman learn to love

2

a thousand years or so ago
when as we were saying love
was still a game of catch me if you can

when gadflies in the new urban schools
began to think of affects of the soul
less as issues of vice, virtue,

salvation and moral acts of will
than simply as facts of human nature,
effects cognitive and bodily

as well as spiritual and moral,
topics for reason's *scientia*
more than faith's *sapientia*,

and when it was still said that a love
may be according to passion or reason
alone, true love arises

only when a special affect or feeling,
a spontaneous pleasant inclination
toward or attachment to someone,

occurs after the spirit, joining itself
to reason, gives its consent so all
one's faculties are in harmony,

and when young scholars hit the road
to sing bawdy ditties and maidens
were saved from dragons for a knight's delight,

then courteous French and curious Cathars
decided to complicate the matter
by crossing Fair Lady with Virgin Mother

songs with an Andalusian ring
sung in langue d'oc accents

to vibrant strings of lute and oud

the original knights in shining armor
saving virtuous damsels in distress,
while their husbands were away at war

putting the lover's simple complaint
through labyrinths of narrative
analysis and elastic debate

exquisite tortures of harem virtue
arabesques of purity
drawn and quartered by holy orders

of men given to ascetic extensions
of lyric moments on the rack of romance
to dance and smile act after act

in concordance with script and scripture
transforming the reader through strange device
of lips tongues ears and eyes

having little to do with knowing
in the biblical sense or turning stones
into gold, death into transmigration

or figuring out the West's obsession
with Freedom and Necessity
the Orient's puzzle of One and Many

a complicated umbilical knot
Aquinas cut through by summing up love
as willing the good of the other person,

an intent to bear good will
toward another for the other's sake
not for oneself or oneself alone

3

until an avant garde Parisian
grown very tired of virtue cloaked
in monkish habit and courtly manner,

the Saracen tunes of the troubadours
spiritualized into plainsong

by Roman teachings of cross and stake,

adolescent hopes for salvation
reduced to delusions of self-transformation
of hypocrite lovers in love with themselves,

silent lovers one never can have;
reverting (despite all those years of platonic
ideals from Augustine to Bonaventura)

in rhymed octosyllabic couplets
to pagan carnality (*Can we
never have what we most want?*)

armed his knight-errant with all he knew
of nature, genius, language and love
to breach the rose-garden wall, cut through

the maze surrounding his heart's desire,
kneel to kiss the relics at its root
then, gently, mindful of thorns

(which though allegorical
might yet for all his mail prove fatal,
leave his tale hanging in the air

impaled as a predatory bug
might be by a shrike keeping watch
from a branch high overhead),

push aside the slender limbs,
tenderly cup in his hands the bud
he had longed so long and hard to embrace,

urge apart the blushing petals
each revealing its own perfume
each anxious to know the sun

until the bloom comes entirely open
bidding him enter the hidden passage
where no other had ever been,

disappear into her *jouissance*
leaving the merest trace of himself
a mustard seed in the name of love

4

A hundred years ago or so
an Irish antiquarian dandy
only recently emerged

from the host of fairies and banshees
cavorting in the Celtic twilight
transposed to his London drawing rooms

still harping on the antic theme,
painting masks for the play of desire,
protesting with ascendant swans

the immanent spell of beastly weather
but cursed by the prior century
of sentimental poetasters

who confused art with life —
finding himself in self-imposed exile
no matter where he found himself

rejected by the battle-axe beauty
his shadow most amused itself with
through page and stage and senate bill —

paid to have goat and monkey balls
stitched into his own sagging scrotum
while working out a Byzantine vision

of lords and ladies dancing for all
eternity with noble grace
to melodies sung by a gold-leaf bird,

art transcending soul and self
because of the love put into it
by craftsmen wordsmiths players and singers

those most to his mind like goddess and god
here *in the place of excrement*
this *foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart*

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And after that and all the pounding
through wars and bouts of depression,

the boom and bust and mizzenmast

learning to swim in a sea of blood,
half a century or so
of educated men and women

able by turn of phrase or calf
to imitate the best of them
with a twist of lime all their own

a learned dagger in the gut
a verbal *anschluss* of allusion
over the heads of *hoi polloi*

in a rising tide of market values
a greater volume of white noise
played back in high fidelity

from waxy surfaces as they turned
to something highly technical
and thoroughly ironical

*(How not to come off as either
a dumb or an intellectual fuck?)*
first to vinyl then to mylar

then to examples of themselves
before the members of their class
regretting, O so regretting

the play of words become a dirge
intoned in institutional settings
the play of intelligence on the page

excited by several degrees
applied to swelling organ music
by men in gowns with flat heads

6

In this day and age when we know all about
seductive fathers and amorous mothers
uncles and aunts who can't keep hands off

(as bad as the priests when it comes to that),
when one's sense of self of being,

of identity no longer

equates with one's sex at birth
or as half of a dyad but is seen
as a property of someone or something else,

when mutilation of body parts
passes for ornament and watching
some jerk nail his dick to a board

or woman piss in some loser's mouth
or get beaten or murdered while having sex
counts as adult entertainment

when what's most important to most people
in middle earth America
is their personal appearance

when most of what gets called art
is about getting in someone's genes
and most of the rest about murder and theft

when medieval stereotypes
like German nun and British princess
still saddle the public's conception of women

when we think we know as we think
we never thought we knew before
that fundamental reality

is riddled with rhetoric and chatter
as any corpse in the heat with maggots,
peace harder to come by than ever,

when moral ambiguities
gender diversity and credit
plans are classical responses

to global control by money and power
(the very food we eat denatured
by corporate ghosts into tempting forms

of intellectual property,
the very truths we have always lived by
prepackaged and predigested

into tasteless clichés shoved down our throats)
all the world but a small percent
of a small percent serfs and vassals

to transnational hedgefund moguls,
when justice is sold, freedom hogtied
and hope a symptom of brain damage

7

children of the lonely crowd, Romans
ourselves at this stage of empire,
so many still learning how uptight we are

how narrow-minded our understanding
how stuck we are where we've been forever
how difficult empathy is for us

sympathy a kind of self-pity
intimacy an embarrassment of riches,
we wonder too how a simple letter

might engage the world that matters,
turn stories on the page into something
more oral than verbal more touching than teaching

bring all lovers *sister brother*
parent child significant others
face to face in a two-way mirror

that never lies, where one finds oneself
perfectly expressed, knows oneself
complete only in multitude —

physical world material word
dreams desires ideas feelings
this finely textured medium —

to quicken once more the ovoid bodies
give opinion a point of view
bring the dead to life again

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But then a quisitive generation
thinking less of each other

than of the relationship

how it might or might not be
the liberating catalyst
by which each achieves themselves

a geometry of love
where size shape and obliquity
signal levels of involvement

degrees of mismatch for instance —
real and unreal or how we think
the other feels about us

and how the other does feel
or how we would like the other to feel
or what each thinks the other thinks

reality is or is to be
or what you think you want and what
you think you are and are in fact

and what you think you are and what
in fact you might after all be
getting out of the relationship