

Romantic Realism

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INTRODUCTION: We expect love to be the source of our greatest joys. But it is – of course – in practice, one of the most reliable routes to misery. Few forms of suffering are ever as intense as those we experience in relationships. Viewed from outside, love could be mistaken for a practice focused almost entirely on the generation of despair. We should, at least, try to understand our sorrows. Understanding does not magically remove problems, but it sets them in context, reduces our sense of isolation and persecution and helps us to accept that certain griefs are highly normal. The purpose of this essay is to help us develop an emotional skill we term ***Romantic Realism***, defined as a correct awareness of what can legitimately be expected of love and the reasons why we will for large stretches of our lives be very disappointed by it, for no especially sinister or personal reasons. The problems begin because, despite all the statistics, we are inveterate optimists about how love should go. No amount of information seems able to shake us from our faith in love. A thousand divorces pass our doors; none seem relevant to us. We see relationship difficulties unfold around us all the time. But we retain a remarkable capacity to discount negative information. Despite the evidence of failures and loneliness, we cling to some highly ambitious background ideas of what relationships should be like – even if we have in reality never seen such unions in train anywhere near us. The ideal relationship is the equivalent of the snow leopard; our loyalty to it as a realistic possibility cannot be based on the evidence of our own experience. Instead it derives from a range of reckless ideas circulating in our societies about what sharing a life with another person might be like. The problem starts with the wedding. In a wiser world than our own, our marriage

vows would set the tone from the outset.

A wedding day signals a commitment by two deeply imperfect people to endure a range of extraordinarily arduous difficulties until the end. It is a vow to be, a lot of the time, pretty unhappy together without blaming one another unfairly. Family and friends will be aware of their own relationship sufferings, will admire the couple's courage and wish them luck – while worrying (and knowing) all the while that a deeply rocky and in many ways devastating experience lies ahead of the couple.

How happy we are is to a large extent dependent on whether we judge certain problems to be normal or not. And because our societies have failed to normalize – and speak honestly about – a great many issues in love, it is absurdly easy to believe ourselves uniquely cursed. We not only feel unhappy; we feel unhappy that we're unhappy. When difficulties strike, we start to feel we are going out with a particularly cretinous human. The sadness must be someone's fault: and naturally, enough, we conclude that the blame has to lie with the partner. We avoid the far truer and gentler conclusion: that we are trying to do something very difficult at which almost no one succeeds completely. At an extreme, we exit the relationship far too early. Rather than adjust our ideas of what relationships in general are like, we shift our hopes to new people whom – we ardently trust – won't suffer any of the irritating problems we experienced with the last partner. We blame our lover in order not to blame love itself, the truer but more elusive target. We would be wiser to follow Romantic Realism in trusting that love will prove challenging for us not for accidental or unique reasons, but for structural and intractable ones. Paradoxically, Romantic Realism is not the enemy of love; it is one of the attitudes that best contributes to the flourishing and survival of relationships in the long term. Once we understand the true nature of love, sorrows will move from being symptoms of a personal curse to simply being

facts of life. That will already be huge and consoling progress – which this book hopes to hasten.

THE MANY SORROWS

I: ‘I’ve become a monster.’ The Romantic ideal states that we will be nicer to our partner than to anyone else in the world. We selected them because we liked them so much and will therefore bring our kindest and most gentle sides forward in the relationship. We’ll be a lot nicer with them than – for example – with any of our friends. We like the latter; we love the former. But the reality is intriguingly and soberingly different. We tend to become, if things go to plan, something akin to monsters in love. As Romantic Realism attests, we’re likely to be significantly less kind to our partner than towards almost any other human on the planet. What explains our bad behavior? Firstly, that there is so much at stake. Our whole life is on the line. Friends are with us just for the evening; our mutual challenges may go no further than the need to locate a half-decent restaurant. But the person we love becomes, if things go well, involved in some of the grandest and most complex matters we ever undertake: we ask them to be our lover, our best friend, our confidant, our nurse, our financial advisor, our chauffeur, our co-educator, our social partner and our sex mate. Together with them, we set up a house, raise a child, run the family finances, nurse our elderly parents, manage our careers, go on holiday and explore our sexuality. The job description is so long and so demanding, no one in the standard employment market could conceivably deliver perfectly on even a fraction of the demands. The good lover needs to be a blend of therapist, PA, teacher, host, chef, nurse and escort. Asking someone to marry us turns out to be an impossibly demanding and therefore pretty mean thing to suggest to anyone we would really want the best for. Furthermore, it’s the precondition of any long-term relationship that we cannot

easily fire the partner and flee when issues arise. Many frustrating situations are rendered a great deal more bearable with the thought that we can escape them without too many penalties. But within long-term love, an irritant that exists now may possibly have to be endured for many decades. A problem that would not have to be maddening in and of itself (a towel on the floor, a delay in answering, a chewing sound) can unleash catastrophic anxiety when we feel that this may be a more or less permanent feature of the one life we have been granted on this earth. At the backs of our minds, driving our agitation on during domestic struggles is a simple, explosive thought: that the other person hasn't just done this or that thing we find problematic, they have ruined our lives. We aren't monsters with our friends because they have no capacity to do us much damage. It's a few hours a month at most. We don't care about them enough to be anything other than sweet with them. We need to care a lot about someone before we will be motivated to scream at them, slam doors on them and call them a fucking c**t. What further makes us monsters is that we don't, in our agitated state, say clearly and calmly what may be wrong. Instead, we lose our composure and scream, sulk and get bitter. We should, ideally, teach our partners how we feel and convey precisely why we have certain ideas in mind. But teaching requires a degree of calm indifference which is in short supply amidst the panic unleashed by the idea that the partner has ruined our lives. We end up far too anxious about our problems to begin to know how to fix them. We're monsters too because we labor under the illusion that we are, on the whole, really quite easy to live with – and, under such illusions, don't prepare our partners for the struggles they will have with us, or apologize readily enough for the damage we've caused. We fall prey to a belief in our own normality because it can, in a single state, be so hard to see where our crazy sides are located. When alone, at moments of fury, we don't shout, as there's no one

there to listen – and therefore we overlook the true, worrying strength of our capacity for anger. Or we work all the time without grasping, because there's no one calling us to come for dinner, how manically we use work to gain a sense of control over life – and how we might cause hell if anyone tried to stop us. It's only in long-term close relationships that problematic sides of us come into contact, and then clash, with the needs and expectations of another person – at which point it feels utterly natural to blame the partner for being uncommonly tricky. We labor under the self-righteous belief that we are relatively plausible and sound people to be with – if only we found the right person. Another alarming reason why we are mean to our partners is that we ultimately feel safe enough to be horrible to them. If we were so intemperate with our friends, they'd very soon make excuses to stop seeing us. But with a partner, we are – below the surface – confident that they won't run away despite our tetchiness. Their loyalty makes them a safe target for our more distressed and desperate emotions. Love lends us the safety to show a partner who we really are – a privilege we would in truth be wiser and kinder never fully to share with anyone. To edge us away from self-righteousness and fury, we should accept that we haven't come together with someone unusually incompetent; we're trying to do something unusually hard. We should blame the task, not our colleague. We should cease, too, to be so priggish about our own characters. We are – naturally – appallingly difficult to live with. It's just that no one ever cared enough about us to tell us; our friends couldn't be bothered, our exes wanted to be rid of us without hassle, our parents were blind to our faults. But that doesn't mean we are paragons of virtue; we are necessarily offensive to anyone who has to experience us closely. Fortunately, perfection is no requirement for love. We just need to be able to explain our imperfections in good time, without pomposity, before we have hurt the other too much with our madness. It's not an option for any of

us to be more than mediocre. Acting foolishly and not-so-nicely is what we do much of the time. By behaving badly, we're not deviating from the course; we're confirming our membership of the human race.

II: 'They're not who they at first seemed to be...' For many of us, love starts very quickly, often at first sight: with a sudden overwhelming impression of the other's loveliness. This phenomenon – the crush – goes to the heart of the modern understanding of love. It could seem like a small incident, a minor planet in the constellation of love, but it is in fact the underlying secret central sun around which our notions of the Romantic revolve. A crush represents in pure and perfect form the essential dynamics of Romanticism: the explosive interaction of limited knowledge, outward obstacles to further discovery and boundless hope. We wouldn't be able to develop crushes if we weren't so good at allowing a few details about someone to suggest the whole of them. From a few cues only, perhaps the depth of their eyes, their handsome brow or a few funny comments, we rapidly start to anticipate an intense connection and years of happiness, buoyed by profound mutual sympathy and understanding. We have a proclivity for developing life-long certainties in an instant. We pay dearly for our haste as any relationship progresses. We are all, of course, a perplexing and boundless mixture of the good and the bad. The primary error behind our passionate early feelings is that we overlook a central fact about people: that everyone has something very substantially wrong with them once their characters are fully known. The facts of life have deformed all of our natures. No one has come through unscathed. We all lack courage, preparation, confidence, intelligence. We don't have the right role models, we were (necessarily) imperfectly parented, we fight rather than explain, we nag rather than teach, we fret instead of analyzing our worries, we have a precarious sense of security, we can't

understand either ourselves or others well enough, we don't have an appetite for the truth and suffer a fatal weakness for flattering denials. The chances of a perfectly good human emerging from the perilous facts of life are non-existent. Our fears and our frailties play themselves out in a thousand ways, they can make us defensive or aggressive, grandiose or hesitant, clingy or avoidant – but we can be assured that unfortunate tendencies exist in us all, and will make everyone much less than perfect and at moments, extremely hard to live with. Every human can be guaranteed to frustrate, anger, annoy, madden and disappoint us – and we will (without any malice) do the same to them. There can be no end to our sense of emptiness and incompleteness. This is a truth chiseled indelibly into the script of life. Choosing who to marry or commit ourselves to is therefore merely a case of identifying a kind of misery we can bear rather than an occasion miraculously to escape from grief altogether. We should enjoy our crushes. The person on the train probably really does have an extremely beguiling air of self-deprecation in their eyes. The person glimpsed by the fresh fruit counter really does promise to be a gentle and excellent parent, friend and lover. But these characters will, just as importantly and inevitably, also be sure to frustrate our lives in key ways if ever we begin to know and love them. Romantic Realism simply takes it for granted that one person should not be asked to be everything to another. With this truth accepted, we can look for ways to accommodate ourselves as gently and as kindly as we can to the awkward realities of life beside another fallen creature: never feeling betrayed by, or furious about, their imperfections and apologizing heartily, early and constantly for ours. If we do get in a relationship, we should never blame our one-time angel for not really being who they seemed at the start. It is just that we decided who they were without checking. They haven't become awful. They were just always – as we all are – tricky. In a wiser culture than our

own, those who fell in love would be immediately judged as suffering from a passing mental disease and their opinions handled with extreme caution, this rather than being anointed courageous visionaries able to perceive something important about another person. The only people we can think of as amazing are those we don't yet know very well. And yet, accepting that everyone is maddening is no reason to give up on relationships, it is simply a sign that we're finally getting to know human nature.

III: 'I didn't make the right choice...' At times of trouble, we can be haunted by a searing, devastating thought: that we made the wrong choice. We shouldn't tell ourselves that we haven't, we should learn to see and sympathize with the many solid reasons why we did so. We should graciously accept that we didn't stumble into error by chance. We made a mistake because, and this can be exceptionally hard to admit to, we were very lonely. We weren't calmly choosing from dozens of candidates, as we might be when identifying a fridge or a computer. We were struggling to fill an urgent need with whomever we could find. We would have needed to be utterly at peace with the prospect of many years of solitude in order to have any chance of choosing with requisite pickiness and wisdom. But most of us hate being single even more than we love the partner who eventually spares us being so. We shouldn't kick ourselves. After a certain age, society makes singlehood unbearably unpleasant. Communal life starts to wither, couples are too threatened by the independence of the single to invite them around very often. Celibate life becomes a nightmare. When sex was only available within marriage, people recognized that this led many types to settle down for the wrong reasons: to obtain something that was artificially restricted in society as a whole. They grasped that lovers would be free to make much better choices about whom they united with when they were not simply responding to a desperate desire for sex. We may have solved that particular

issue, but we still haven't found any way of making companionship freely available, and so of avoiding unfortunate unions formed under the unfair pressure of our vexing solitude. There is a psychological reason too for our poor choices: we feel actively drawn to the wrong people. We believe we seek happiness in love, but what it seems we often actually seek is familiarity – which may well complicate any plans we might have for happiness. We long to recreate in adult relationships some of the feelings we knew in childhood. It was as children that we first came to know and understand what love meant. But unfortunately, the lessons we picked up may not have been straightforward. The love we knew then may have come entwined with other, less pleasant dynamics: being controlled, feeling humiliated, being abandoned, never communicating, in short: suffering. As adults, we may then reject certain healthy candidates, not because they are wrong, but precisely because they are too well balanced (too mature, too understanding, too reliable), and their rightness feels unfamiliar and oppressive. We call these kind people 'boring' or 'unsexy' and head instead towards candidates whom our unconscious senses will frustrate us in familiar ways. We make mistakes because we don't ultimately associate being loved with feeling entirely satisfied. Knowing that we don't choose our partners freely – from a psychological or practical point of view – helps to dampen our anger with those we've ended up with. We weren't merely stupid, we were constrained, as much by the difficulty of finding anyone as by the warps in our own nature. We can be reassured that being with the wrong person was for us profoundly necessary. It was the price we needed to pay for being in a relationship at all.

IV: "I wish I was still single." One of the haunting thoughts that can make us especially snappy and bitter is the idea that if only we were single, we would be a lot happier. We can be so conscious of the troubles of our present lives, we are naturally drawn to look

back and remember the nicer aspects of solitude. We remember being able to get up whenever we wanted; we recall not having to fret about where we threw things. We remember how inoffensive our own bad habits were, when we were the only ones to witness them. We recall not having to justify our meal choices, however eccentric; we could go out somewhere and never tell anyone; we could (when we felt like it) work through till 2 a.m. without being accused of being obsessive or cold. Though we were sometimes sad, we could at least always hope for a better future. It was so fulfilling in comparison with the life we lead now. But memory is a hugely unreliable and therefore reckless instrument – which isn't a small point, for our powers of recall have a huge impact on how we assess our lives in the present. We are editors of genius who know just enough about how to romanticize our single days in order to poison our conjugal ones. Some of our ingratitude might be eroded if, long before we met anyone, a talented filmmaker were charged with making a close observational documentary about our lives as single people. They'd capture our face at 5.30pm on a winter Sunday afternoon, as the sun was setting and we knew we'd be alone till we reached the office on Monday morning. They'd observe us looking across the room at someone at a party, longing for their kindly face, but lacking any courage to go up and address them. They'd capture us spending a lot of time at our parents' house, growing increasingly tetchy in their company. They'd show us struggling to know what to do when the fridge stopped working or we felt a terrible pain in the middle of the night. We'd be required to view this documentary at regular intervals just after bruising fights with our partners. It would provide crucial evidence – which our own memories are so good at strategically omitting – of how less than ideal the single state can be. We would realize that though we are sad now, we were also very sad then. We would accept, with good grace and a touch of dark humor, that life simply gives us few

opportunities to be content.

V: 'There's so much laundry.' In the history of Western literature, in hundreds of poems and novels, no Romantic hero or heroine has ever ironed their underpants. It may seem like merely a trivial point. But it is a crucial and personally urgent fact, because it signals that we've taken our cues about what belongs to love from a societal narrative that is radically incomplete and misleading in nature. Romantic culture takes no interest in the myriad of challenges that fall within the realm of the 'domestic', a term that captures all the practicalities of living together, extending across a range of small but crucial issues, including who one should visit on the weekend, when to empty the bins, who should clean the oven and how often to have friends over for dinner. From the Romantic point of view, these things cannot be serious or worth the attention of intelligent people. Relationships are made or broken over grand, dramatic matters: fidelity and betrayal, the courage to face society on one's own terms or the tragedy of being ground down by the demands of convention. The day-to-day minutiae of the domestic sphere seem entirely unimpressive and humiliatingly insignificant by comparison. Partly as a result of this neglect, we don't go into relationships ready to perceive domestic issues as important potential flashpoints to look out for and devote sustained attention to. We don't acknowledge how much it may end up mattering whether we can maturely resolve issues around how to clean the kitchen floor or the conundrum of whether it is stylish, or a touch pretentious, to give a cocktail party. When a problem has high prestige, we are ready to expend energy and time trying to resolve it. This has often happened around large scientific questions. It was entirely understood that mapping the human genome would be enormously difficult – as well as hugely beneficial. It is taken for granted that developing a commercially viable driverless car is a monstrously difficult puzzle, but one worth devoting great resources

to. This respect leads to an unexpected but crucial consequence. We don't panic around the challenges, because we understand the difficulty of what we are attempting to do. We are a lot calmer around prestigious problems. It's problems that feel trivial or silly and yet that nevertheless take up large sections of our lives that drive us to heightened states of agitation. Such agitation is precisely what the Romantic neglect of domestic life has unwittingly encouraged: its legacy is over-hasty conversations about the temperature of the bedroom and curt remarks about the right channel to watch on TV, matters which can – over many years – contribute to a critical erosion of our power to love. When there are tensions we refuse to budget for, we readily fall into the roles of the nagger and the shirker. The nagger is trying to influence the other's behavior, but they have given up trying to explain their desire rationally. They simply deploy a tactic of prodding, cajoling and insisting instead. The nagger has abandoned explanation and justification; it's what we do when we don't think a topic is worth much attention. The shirker for their part simply avoids doing what's being suggested, but they don't gift the nagger a serious and compelling explanation for their disagreement. They just go upstairs and close the door. From each side it just feels plainly obvious that the struggle isn't worth having, which nevertheless doesn't prevent it from occurring. But if we admit that sharing a space and a life is very difficult – and yet very important and worthwhile – we come to conflicts with a very different attitude. We will argue about who puts out the bins, who gets more duvet and what we watch on TV... but the nature of the struggle will change. We won't necessarily get so impatient and so rude at once, we won't necessarily nag and so we won't shirk. We'll have the courage of our dissatisfactions – and patiently sit with our partners elucidating the issues between us. We might argue that some of the reason our relationships end up being fractious is that prestige has been distributed in the wrong places.

Those obliged to do practical tasks are highly likely to resent them and feel that something has gone wrong with their lives for having to involve themselves so closely with them. And yet these tasks are what is truly 'romantic' in the sense of 'conducive and sustaining of love' and should be interpreted as the bedrock of a successful relationship, and accorded all the prestige currently given to other activities in society, like mountain climbing or motor sport. As people, we're not against trivia per se, just against having to do small things that lack a sense of dignity.

At certain points in history artists have attempted to correct the distribution of prestige. In the 17th century, the Dutch painter Pieter de Hooch specialized in portraying high-status, interesting looking people engaged in domestic chores. He wanted to show the relevance of such activities to having a good life and to convey that these were not in any way degrading or unworthy tasks. Organizing a linen cupboard was, de Hooch was proposing, no less a task than checking the accounts of a major corporation or making sure that a load bearing wall was sufficiently strong to support the weight of an attic story. Domestic preoccupation isn't really a sign of the death of love. It's what we start to get involved with when love has succeeded brilliantly. We will be reconciled to the reality of love when we can accept without rancor the genuine dignity of the ironing board.

VI: 'It was supposed to be nicer...' Often, our partner isn't necessarily being terrible in any overt way, but we feel a growing sadness about the character of our relationship: they're not as focused on us as we'd hoped; there are often times when they don't understand us properly; they're often busy and preoccupied; they can be a bit offhand or abrupt; they're not hugely interested in the details of our day; they call their friends rather than talk with us. We feel disenchanting and let down. Love was supposed to be lovely. But, without any one huge thing having gone wrong, it doesn't much

feel that way day to day. This sorrow has a paradoxical source: we're upset now because at some point in the past we were really rather fortunate. We're sad because we've been lucky. To explain the seeming paradox we need to have a look at the intimate origins of love. Our idea of what a good, loving relationship should be like (and what it feels like to be loved) doesn't ever come from what we've seen in adulthood, it arises from a stranger, more powerful source. The idea of happy coupledness taps into a fundamental picture of comfort, deep security, wordless communication and of our needs being effortlessly understood that comes from early childhood.

Some of the most popular pictures in the world show a mother very tenderly holding a small child, with an expression of complete devotion and love on her face. Officially, these are pictures of one specific and very unusual child and one very holy and good mother. But the religious background to the Mother-and-Child images isn't the key to their appeal. We're moved because we recognize a paradisiacal moment in our own personal story; because we're being brought into semi-conscious contact with a delightful memory of how we were once cared for. At the best moments of childhood (if things went reasonably well) a loving parent offered us extraordinary satisfaction. They knew when we were hungry or tired, even though we couldn't explain. We did not need to strive. They made us feel completely safe. We were held peacefully. We were entertained and indulged. And even if we don't recall the explicit details, the experience of being cherished has made a profound impression on us; it has planted itself in our deep minds as the ideal template of what love should be. As adults, without really noticing, we continue to be in thrall to this notion of being loved, projecting the best experience of our early years into our present relationships – and finding them sorely wanting as a result – a comparison that is profoundly corrosive and unfair. The love we

received from a parent can't ever be a workable model for our later, adult, experience of love. The reason is fundamental: we were a baby then, we are an adult now – a dichotomy with several key ramifications. For a start, our needs were so much simpler. We needed to be washed, amused, put to bed. But we didn't need someone to trawl intelligently through the troubled corners of our minds. We didn't need a caregiver to understand why we prefer the first series of a television show to the second, why it is necessary to see our aunt on Sunday, or why it matters to us that the curtains harmonize with the sofa covers or bread must be cut with a proper bread knife. The parent knew absolutely what was required in relation to basic physical and emotional requirements. Our partner is stumbling in the dark around needs that are immensely subtle, far from obvious and very complicated to deliver on. Secondly, none of it was reciprocal. The parent was intensely focused on caring for us, but they knew and totally accepted that we wouldn't engage with their needs. They didn't for a second imagine that they could take their troubles to us or expect us to nurture them. They didn't need us to ask them about their day. Our responsibility was blissfully simple: all we had to please them was to exist. Our most ordinary actions – rolling over on our tummy, grasping a biscuit in our tiny hand – enchanted them with ease. We were loved, we didn't have to love: a distinction between kinds of love which language normally artfully blurs, shielding us from the difference between being the privileged customer of love, or its more exhausted and long-suffering provider. Furthermore, our parents were probably kind enough to shield us from the burden that looking after us imposed on them. They maintained a reasonably sunny facade until they retired to their own bedroom, at which point the true toll of their efforts could be witnessed (but by then we were asleep). They did us the honor of not quite showing us what looking after us cost them, which was immensely kind, but did us one

lasting disservice: it may unwittingly have created an expectation of what it would could mean for someone to love us which was never true in the first place. We might in later life end up with lovers who are tetchy with us, who are too tired to talk at the end of the day, who don't marvel at our every antic, who can't even be bothered to listen to what we're saying – and we might feel (with some bitterness) that this is not how our parents were. The irony, which has its redeeming side, is that in truth, this is exactly how our parents were, just up in their bedroom, when we were asleep and realized nothing. The source our present sorrow is not, therefore, a special failing on the part of our adult lovers. They are not tragically inept nor uniquely selfish. It's rather that we're judging our adult experiences in the light of a very different kind of childhood love. We are sorrowful not because we have landed with the wrong person but because we have (sadly) been forced to grow up.

VII: 'I can't tell my partner everything...' Many relationships begin with a deeply misleading but charming sense that we can tell a partner everything. At last, there is no more need for the usual hypocrisies. We can come clean about so much that we had previously needed to keep to ourselves: our reservations about our friends, our irritation over small but wounding remarks by colleagues, our interest in less often-mentioned sexual practices. Love seems founded on the idea of an absence of secrecy. Then, gradually, we become aware of so much we cannot say. It might be around sex: on a work trip we kissed a colleague and nearly went to bed with them, we discovered a porn site that beautifully targeted a special quirk of our erotic imagination; we find their brother (or sister) very alluring. Or the secret thoughts can be more broad ranging: the blog they wrote for work, about their experience in client care, was very boring to read; the dark green scarf they so love wearing is hideous; their best friend from school, to whom they are still very loyal, is (in our view) excessively silly and dull; in the

wedding photo of their parents (lovingly displayed in a silver frame in the living room) their mother looks unbearably smug. Love begins with a hope of – at last – being able to tell someone else everything about who we are and what we feel. The relief of honesty is at the heart of the feeling of being in love. But this sharing of secrets sets up in our minds – and in our collective culture – a powerful and potentially problematic ideal: that if two people love one another, then they must always tell each other the truth about everything. The idea of honesty is sublime. It presents a deeply moving vision of how two people can be together and it is a constant presence in the early months. But in order to be kind, and in order to sustain love, it ultimately becomes necessary to keep a great many thoughts out of sight.

Keeping secrets can seem like a betrayal of the relationship. At the same time, the complete truth eventually appears to place the union in mortal danger. Much of what we'd ideally like to have recognized and confirmed is going to be genuinely disturbing even to someone who is fond of us. We face a choice between honesty and acceptability and – for reasons that deserve a great deal of sympathy – mostly we choose the latter. We are perhaps too conscious of the bad reasons for hiding something; we haven't paid enough attention to the noble reasons why, from time to time, true loyalty may lead us to say very much less than the whole truth. We are so impressed by honesty, we have forgotten the virtues of politeness, this word defined not as a cynical withholding of important information for the sake of harm, but as a dedication to not rubbing someone else up against the true, hurtful aspects of our nature. It is ultimately no great sign of kindness to insist on showing someone our entire selves at all times. Repression, a certain degree of restraint and a dedication to editing our pronouncements belong to love as much as a capacity for explicit confession. The person who cannot tolerate secrets, who in the name of 'being

honest', divulges information so wounding it cannot be forgotten, is no friend of love. Just as no parent should ever tell a child the whole truth, so we should accept the ongoing need to edit our full reality.

VIII: "I'm so lonely in my relationship." It's hard to admit to feeling lonely within a relationship, The basic assumption is that no respectable person could ever feel isolated unless they were outside of a couple. Yet in truth, a high degree of loneliness is an inexorable part of being a sensitive, intelligent human. It's a built-in feature of a complex existence, whatever our relationship status. It's impossible that another person could ever have had all the key background experiences that would be necessary to understand and sympathize with our situation. Even a partner who is quite well aligned with us in principle is unlikely to be in exactly the same mood at the same time. They won't necessarily be thinking just the same thoughts as us on coming out of the cinema. And looking out at the night sky, just when we want them to say something highbrow and beautiful, they will perhaps be remembering a painfully banal and untimely detail from an area of domestic life (or vice versa). It is – almost – comic. It's profoundly gratifying to be deeply understood. But a lot of other factors take us into relationships. Our partner may be great around money or we may find them sexually deeply alluring, they may be great at arranging interesting weekends or have a lovely way of being cozy and relaxed. We may have been drawn to them for some very sensible and good reasons other than their ability to have conversations in which they delicately tease out the troubles of our souls. We must all die alone, which really means, that many of our pains are for us alone to endure. Others can throw us words of encouragement, but in every life, we will at points be out on the ocean drowning in the swell while others, even the nicest ones, are standing on the shore, waving encouragingly. The problem is sure to get worse, the more

thoughtful and perceptive we are. There will simply be less people like us around. It isn't a Romantic myth: loneliness truly is the tax we have to pay to atone for a certain complexity of mind. In other worlds there are areas of what might be (grandly but accurately) called metaphysical loneliness which no other person – however well-intentioned – can properly assuage. At an exasperated moment, near the end of his life, the German writer Goethe, who had a lot of interesting friends and a very active social life, exploded bitterly: 'No one has ever properly understood me, I have never fully understood anyone; and no one understands anyone else.' There are – he was saying – irremovable barriers between the souls of individual people. It is impossible and wholly normal not to feel a bit lonely.

IX: 'Sex is a let down,' At the center of modern attitudes to relationships lies an ambitious three-fold hope: to have a great sex life, to have it with someone we love and to maintain it for as long as we live. A great sex life + the person we love + long term Previous generations were wiser in assuming that only two of the three options could ever coexist. We could, for example, have great sex with someone we loved – but only in the short term, perhaps over a few weeks in the summer of our eighteenth year. Or we would find a partner with whom to have regular great sex over the long-term, but this wasn't expected to be a person we were in love with; the European and East Asian aristocracies had a subtle understanding of the legitimate role of the lover, the concubine, the mistress and the gigolo. Or, we could find someone we loved and could marry, but it was clear that sex would, after the children were born, stop almost entirely. In other words, the pre-Romantic view starkly – but in the end kindly – asked us to choose which of three varieties of suffering we might prefer. These hopes are not, in themselves, new. Throughout the ages, people have wanted to have great sex, they have wanted to love a special person and they

have been interested in the long-term. What's distinctive and deeply problematic is the contemporary idea that we should and could secure all three ingredients at the same time; this is the distinctive ambition – and pain-inducing folly – of Romantic love. Varieties of Suffering in Relationships

1. Intense, loving but brief sexual relationships
2. Long-term sex, but without real love
3. Cosy long-term love but without great sex.

In daily life within relationships, we have to stand our ground; we soon realize we can't let the other person walk over us. We must stand firm during bargaining over how money is spent or how the holidays should unfold, who should pick up the children or what color the sofa should be. Satisfactory sex on the other hand requires a mindset of surrender and vulnerability: we may need to tell the partner a fantasy that exposes us acutely or ask them to do things to us or with us that could open us to ridicule. There might be small resentments and aggressions within the relationship which render us unwilling to grant the partner the pleasure they seek. Or we might feel that the decadence and debauchery of good sex runs counter to the demands of childcare; sex can seem impossibly selfish when others need us so much. In our own age, the sense of an incompatibility between sex and long-term love is a discovery that for most couples is accompanied by acute shame, loneliness and a sense of blame and responsibility. Yet, in truth, there are a host of entirely forgivable and ineluctable reasons why love and sex simply aren't going to be an ongoing option. Despite the Romantic narrative, spousal values (the things that make a relationship loving) are in multiple ways fatally at odds with erotic values (the things that make sex fantastic). Furthermore, and more peculiarly, we all first learnt about love in childhood – from people we were resolutely not meant to have sex with. Deep in our minds, being loved and being sexual may have grown fundamentally opposed. As little children, without us quite understanding, we felt it was exciting to see our parents in the

bathroom, it was lovely to clasp their legs, cuddle into their bed or stroke their hair. But it was equally important that any sexual implication be rigorously suppressed by these parents. They had to signal that these intimate things were emphatically asexual, that love could not imply an erotic component. At this crucial stage of development, we therefore learned a necessary lesson that can go on to have painful consequences in adult life: that sex and love are enemies, that those whom we love and those we can have uninhibited sex with need to be different. The more we grow tender towards our adult lovers, the more we re-engage some of the feelings of loyalty and coziness we knew in childhood, the more implausible sex with them can seem. No wonder if, after a while, most couples find it easier to imagine and have vivid sex with someone other than the person they have to face every day over the breakfast table. At this point, some will argue the case for open relationships. Polyamory certainly sounds a mature solution to many of the tensions at stake: perhaps sex and love really can be thought of as radically distinct entities with an almost accidental, and unimportant connection. A fling (or a series of them) might go alongside a central loving long-term relationship. Yet, this comfortingly wise philosophy forgets how nice it is when something is fully ours and how worrying it is when we cannot make any claim on the person we have learnt to trust. As children, we probably never actually liked letting others use our toys, although borrowing those of others was always nice. A disavowed possessive streak runs deep in most of us. It remains extremely challenging when, at an orgy, our partner gives us a wink as they disappear into a softly lit bedroom with two strangers. Hearing the one we love orgasm at the hands of another is a complex experience. Given the drawbacks, we may seek to reassure ourselves that life-long loyalty must be a decent enough answer. When things get stale, we can buy scented candles for the bedroom and book weekend breaks in

hotels in the country. But this rosy picture presents an equally – though differently – sentimental and sanitized story. It is deluded to suppose that, by sleeping with only one person, we won't be missing out on some of life's greatest and most important pleasures. We may, as loyal partners, be spared jealousy and fears of abandonment, but we will also, quite a lot of the time, feel rightfully wistful and suffocated. There is, ultimately, no answer, if by 'answer' we mean a pain-free solution. We cannot have love, great sex and a long-term arrangement. There is only one answer of sorts, and it can be called the Melancholy Position, because it confronts the tear-stained truth that in certain key areas of human existence, there are simply no good solutions. Our sex lives never allow us to escape sadness altogether, they merely force us to make our peace with one of its more bearable kinds.

X: 'This is such hard work.' We often complain, at tricky points in our relationships, that love has turned out to be 'too hard'. Perhaps we are repeatedly arguing over small domestic details, maybe it's been a long while since there was some uninhibited fun and delight. The difficulties not only distress us in and of themselves, they can also feel illegitimate, contrary to the rules of love – and a sign that the relationship itself must be an error. This, too, is a legacy of Romanticism, an ideology that lulls us into the unhelpful belief that love is not something to be worked at, because it is a feeling, and not a skill. We need only surrender to our emotions, and our relationships will thrive. But we might be wiser to embrace a notion that love is inherently hard, and that if it feels too hard, this is only because we don't possess the right set of skills to cope with its arduousness. Romantic Realism proposes that relationships are not fundamentally different from any other area of human activity we must develop an expertise in. It argues that it is no less peculiar to imagine that we might be able to love without an education than that we would be able to land a plane or perform

brain surgery without one. It seeks successful love as a skill that can be dissected and systematically learnt, and that we should find nothing cold or eerily rational about such calculated preparation. Romantic Realism insists that it is intuition, and not reason, that is the enemy of successful love. In order to love, we must learn to grasp the role of our past in our selection of partners, to forgive failure rather than merely admire strength, to determine the other's distinctive manner of needing love, to cope with laborious, pedantic domestic issues, to acknowledge the difficulties of admitting to our needs and to accept the nature and drawbacks of one's sexuality. We will be ready for relationships when we accept that our chances of contentment depend on our willingness to go back to a school we were never, sadly, taught we ever really needed. III.

CONCLUSION: Stay or Leave? Mastering the sorrows of love should not be taken to imply that no relationship, however miserable, could ever be worth leaving – or indeed that being in relationship must be the only state worth valuing. To the contrary, success at relationships is critically dependent on an awareness of when it might be wise to quit one and an honest assessment of whether relationships are even an arrangement to which we are psychologically suited. Our age does us a huge disservice in this area by so rigidly equating normality and happiness with membership of a couple. We are made to feel as if there could really be no sane alternative to a life-long partner; as if every other possible arrangement would have to indicate a pernicious flaw in our character. Other eras have not been as prescriptive. For most of the history of humanity, it was uncomplicatedly accepted that conjugal life couldn't possibly suit everyone and that certain individuals would therefore need to remain single in order to make the most of their lives. Perhaps one was too taken up with work or had no interest in children, needed a lot of time on one's own or got

tetchy around large groups, was unusually devoted to God or liked to express oneself sexually outside of a loving union – in short, the best sides of oneself could not emerge from being with someone else all the time. The name given to this choice was celibacy. The word is now often confused with chastity (the deliberate renunciation of sex) though it is quite different, indicating merely a decision not to entangle oneself emotionally with another, while otherwise remaining very open to sexual existence. It's not so much that celibacy is forbidden in our society as that it is frowned upon. Some people live alone of course. But the default assumption is that they would ideally like to be with someone else – or should want to do be, were they were not somehow mad or mentally ill. Two hugely unfair and negative images accompany the term celibate in the cultural imagination; that of the spinster, the woman who no one wanted to marry. And the 'confirmed bachelor', the closet weirdo (perhaps gay) who is imagined as very much wanting to be with someone but prevented from finding fulfillment in a couple by social prejudice. The idea that someone might be perfectly capable of establishing a relationship and yet be deliberately and specifically choosing to live by themselves appears deeply frightening to our age – perhaps because we unconsciously sense in celibacy a freedom of which we're profoundly jealous. A truly evolved society would not be so aggressive in forcing its cohorts into couples. Only when being single truly has equal status with being in a couple can we be sure that people are pairing up for the right reasons, that is, on the ground of mutual attraction and psychological affinity, rather than in order to escape from social opprobrium. For all the vaunted liberations of our time, we need to liberate one last category, the celibate, from the weight of unfair prejudice and stigma. We need to offer closet celibates the chance to acknowledge and feel pride in their distinctive characters from the earliest age, so that they and their unlucky partners can avoid

the unnecessary sufferings and recriminations of that deeply outmoded trap: the sham marriage. Furthermore, though we need to be more determined and skillful about staying in relationships, at the same time, we need to grow a good deal more strategic and intelligent about knowing when to leave them. Wondering whether to stay or leave a relationship is a regular daydream of almost all committed people. It could not be otherwise, give the multiple sorrows to which love exposes us. In deciding how to answer the matter, the issue is not whether we are suffering or not. As we have seen, sorrows belong to the lives of all couples, even the best suited ones. The fact that we have many regrets – we have been considering at least ten here – should never in itself be a reason to end a relationship. Feeling furious and betrayed, shouting, resenting the laundry, fantasizing sexually about other people, resenting that we're not loved enough, rarely having sex... all these are elements that belong to highly workable and legitimate unions. The moment to leave isn't when we're sad, it's when we identify that our lover is contributing sorrows above and beyond those that belong to love in general, when aspects of their character are embittering life far more than the normal rules of relationships mandate and when we can see that the hurts we are facing don't belong anywhere even on the dark and long list of woes provided by the Romantic Realist. It is then should accept that we aren't simply being mature, we are unnecessarily ruining our lives. Yet if, after an honest audit of our troubles, we come to suspect that our many griefs simply cannot be laid at the door our partner but are the work of that less blameful entity, life itself, then we should make our peace and stay put. We will know that we are encountering the misery of existence in the company of one particular person, but not – as it is so easy to presume – because of another person. We will know we are sad not because love has gone wrong, but because it has gone just exactly as it was always meant to go.