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Mors Amoris

When is Love Really Dead?

Increasingly nowadays one encounters discussions of the particularly perplexing question, "When is a human being really dead?" A person may be declared clinically dead and then be revived to full and vibrant life. In contrast, a person may be technically alive but be really a vegetable, so inert and comatose that, many would argue, it would be only humane to put an end to his existence. When, indeed, is a person *really* dead?

The same question can be put concerning love, and since love has often been said to be the most important part of life, it is rather surprising that only a few writers have addressed themselves to the question, "When is LOVE *really* dead?" When does this emotion, which, when at its peak, makes life wonderfully worth living, reach a point of decline at which it is useless to try to revive it and even humane to hasten its complete and final demise? Ovid, the classical poet of love *par excellence*, has, in his *Ars Amatoria*, shown how to win love and how to bring love to its fullest life; and in his *Remedia Amoris* he has discussed how one can cure oneself of love and its painful after-effects. But even Ovid has not addressed himself to the curious question of precisely *when* love is dead. Fortunately, a number of English poets *have* addressed themselves to the question, and their poems make a compendium that serves as a complement to Ovid. As one might expect, the answers they present vary as much as the poets themselves—even, at times, more so.

Michael Drayton, for instance, in his sonnet called "The Parting" (1594),¹ gave a picture of lovers breaking up. The man (presumably) expresses satisfaction at the turn of events:

Since ther's no helpe, Come let us kisse and part,
Nay, I have done: You get no more of Me,
And I am glad, yea glad withall my heart,

That thus so cleanly, I my Selfe can free,
 Shake hands for ever, Cancell all our Vowes, (5)
 And when We meet at any time againe,
 Be it not seene in either of our Browes,
 That We one jot of former Love reteyne. . . .

Their love obviously appears to be dead—"I have done," "I am glad, yea glad withall my heart"—and yet certain clues suggest that actually their love is not yet dead, even though they are on the point of parting. Like the player queen, the man doth protest too much: "Cancell," "cleanly," "for ever," and not "one jot"—these are overdone and betray a desperate effort to convince himself. His desire to touch her, in the handshake and in the kiss, likewise indicates much. Consequently it causes no surprise when he proceeds to draw the kind of parallel we have been previously concerned with. Their love is on his deathbed, but . . .

Now at the last gaspe, of Loves latest Breath,
 When his Pulse fayling, Passion speechlesse lies, (10)
 When Faith is kneeling by his bed of Death,
 And Innocence is closing up his Eyes,
 Now if thou would'st, when all have given him over,
 From Death to Life, thou might'st him yet recover.

An interesting picture, this, and not just because of the parallel with a person dying and the indication that love, too, can be saved right up to the last moment. Look at the bedside attendants: Faith, who is sure that Love is almost dead, and Innocence, who is even closing his eyes, the first step in laying out the corpse. These two attendants are separated from the women addressed, the "thou." That separation is even emphasized: "when all have given him over, . . . thou might'st him yet recover." This separation of the woman from faith and innocence suggests that she has had neither, that her lack of them has caused the break—hence her lover's vehemence in the octave. But evidently, by the end of his speaking in the poem, the man is willing to take her back again, regardless, if only she will be loving.

Not the most idealistic view of love, admittedly. It is much like the view of a person's degree of life: that it is not necessary to remain in the full prime to merit staying alive. Perhaps one is not kicking, but at least one is still alive, and there is consequently no reason to pull the plug. John Donne presented the contrary view in 1635, in his poem called "A Lecture upon the Shadow."² For him, in this poem, love is worth living only when it can be experienced at its fullest, at its highest peak of zest and intensity.

Donne's speaker, presumably a man, addresses the woman he loves and draws an analogy between the progress of their love and the development of the morning in which they have been walking together:

Stand still, and I will read to thee
 A Lecture, Love, in loves philosophy.
 These three houres that we have spent,
 Walking here, Two shadows went
 Along with us, which we our selves produc'd; (5)
 But, now the Sunne is just above our head,

We doe those shadowes tread;
 And to brave clearnesse all things are reduc'd.
 So whilst our infant loves did grow,
 Disguises did, and shadowes, flow. (10)
 From us, and our cares; but, now 'tis not so.

That love hath not attain'd the high'st degree,
 Which is still diligent lest others see.

As the sun rises, the shadows it casts shorten, and when the sun reaches its zenith, all shadows virtually disappear, leaving everything in full clarity. So the two lovers have produced disguises, functioning like shadows, so that other people would not see the true nature of their love. As their love strengthened, the need they felt to produce disguises lessened, until now they exult in full openness and clarity. There is another part, however, to the analogy. As the sun declines in the west, it sends shadows in the other direction—and they lengthen. So, too, if the lovers' love should diminish, they will produce shadows "in the other direction," to hide the changing nature of their love, not from others, but from themselves.

Except our loves at this noone stay,
 We shall new shadowes make the other way. (15)
 As the first were made to blinde
 Others; these which come behinde
 Will worke upon our selves, and blind our eyes.
 If our loves faith, and westwardly decline;
 To me thou, falsly, thine, (20)
 And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.
 The morning shadowes weare away,
 But these grow longer all the day. . . .

But Donne, having carefully built up the analogy and having elaborated it in considerable detail, breaks it, deliberately. Although the natural

cycles (the sun circling and the shadows projecting) extend as far in decline as they do in ascent, with love it is different:

But oh, loves day is short, if love decay.

Love is a growing, or full constant light;
And his first minute, after noone, is night. (25)

There is a curious detail in Donne's poem, about the shadows. If one visualizes the lovers walking under the sun in either the morning or the afternoon, one comes to realize that (apart from the situation at high noon), whenever they turn to look at each other, there will be shadow somewhere on at least part of one of their faces. Physically there is no difference between the morning and the afternoon: the difference is in their attitude. As long as the disguises they project are intended for others only, and while their love is growing, all is well. All is best, of course, when they "tread" disguises beneath their feet (1.7) and when they reveal their love in a clarity that is "brave" (1.8), meaning both courageous and bright. But as soon as they begin to disguise their feelings to each other, their love is dead. The natural day may gradually wear away, like a human being after thirty, but it is not so with love. Love, true love, that total commitment to each other, that supremacy of two-as-one, that love is dead the very moment either lover breaks that supremacy and puts self above the two together. When that happens, it is much better to pull the plug, to remove the support equipment.

2

What happens when a couple refuses to pull the plug at that moment is seen in Thomas Hardy's poem "Neutral Tones" (1867), which traces the events between the time when love dies morally and the time when love is physically, finally, utterly dead.³

Again a man (presumably) is the speaker, this time remembering the last day he met with the woman:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

There is much that is close to death in these lines. The water, being in a pond, is immobile, as are the couple, standing by its side (standing, unmoving, in spite of the cold, the raw cold). The leaves are grey, not even brown, and only a few. Everything is drained of colour, including the sun. But the speaker's emotions are not immobile, or drained of colour. He is instead considerably upset. He calls the sod "starving" (1. 3), even though it is actually only dormant. His word "starving" appears to reflect, not the state of the sod, which is perfectly natural, but the state of his own emotions, which is not. Similarly, his image for the sun—"as though chidden of God"—makes one wonder what manner of monstrous evil the sun could possibly have done to warrant being chidden, and then one realizes that again it is rather his emotional distress that is reflected.

He has reason to be distressed:

Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove (5)
 Over tedious riddles of years ago;
 And some words played between us to and fro
 On which lost the more by our love.

There is movement in *these* lines, but what kind is it? Her eyes cannot rest on him, so weary is she of him. The words do not stop with either auditor: they merely play between, back and forth. And note what it is they talk about: not about which of the two lovers gained the more from their love, but about which lost the more. They have reached the stage of mutual recrimination. Their feeling for each other is not yet completely dead (physically speaking): if it were, they would not care enough to do what they do. Instead their recrimination, bickered back and forth, is the death rattle in the throat of their love. This fact appears even more plainly as the speaker proceeds:

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing
 Alive enough to have strength to die; (10)
 And a grin of bitterness swept thereby
 Like an ominous bird a-wing. . . .

Her smile, reflecting the almost dead love behind it, calls to mind a baby bird mauled by a cat. As one stands by helplessly, one wishes it would die, and die quickly. One cannot quite bring oneself to knock the poor thing on the head and end its misery, but one urgently wishes one could. The grin on the woman's mouth is compared to another kind of bird. to

"an ominous bird a-wing." The phrase "ominous bird" is of course simply another way of saying "bird of omen" and usually a "bird of omen" is a "bird of ill omen," a bird, not of prey (like an eagle), but of carrion (like a raven), a bird that feasts on flesh that is newly dead. This bird of carrion is still "a-wing," circling overhead, waiting for their love to gasp its last physical gasp, so that it may swoop down and gorge itself. It will not have long to wait.

As if this lingering state were not deplorable enough, the speaker indicates that, since that last day with her, he has learned certain things which have hurt even more.

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
 And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
 Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree, (15)
 And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

"Love deceives": did his lover deceive him at that last meeting? Or before? Or did she really love him at any time, as he had thought? "Wrings with wrong": the evil of "chidden" has returned in the "wrong," and the "wirings," in addition to the torturing twist it describes, plays ironically on its sonal pun to reverberate through the poem. For the speaker, the death of love is now complete. The pond is edged with leaves: no longer are they only a few, but presumably all have fallen. The tree has been neutered to the point of being, not even an ash in its greyness, but simply a tree. And that tree has been set beside a sun that is "curst": no longer "as if," but actually, and not just "chidden" but "curst." The couple's pitiful Eden was blasted even before they left it. Better had they agreed with Donne's speaker and, one minute after noon, had parted, never to meet again.

3

Hardy's lovers, it would appear, were not married to each other. What about those who are? For them when is love really dead?

The fact that love does die, or at least can die, in marriage is attested to by George Meredith in a striking image that appears in the opening poem of his cycle *Modern Love* (1862).⁴ He depicts a man and wife lying, side by side, in bed at midnight:

. . . they from head to feet
 Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
 By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.

Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

(11. 11-16)

Not only their years are dead: man and wife have become like a mediaeval knight and his lady, stretched out in stone on their sarcophagus, still, cold, unfeeling, on the tomb of their marriage, with the union-preventing sword made mockingly needless.

Precisely when love died in their marriage is not mentioned in the poem, but George Crabbe does give the time, the exact time, for his couple, in a poem called "The Natural Death of Love" (1819).⁵ From the opening exchange of dialogue, it is evident that something has gone wrong in the marriage. Emma says,

Well, my good sir, I shall contend no more;
 But, O! the vows you made, the oaths you swore—

(11. 109-10)

To which Henry replies, "To love you always—I confess it true;/ And do I not?" So far, the usual kind of exchange. But then he adds, "If not"—which is a rather sudden change of tactic—"what can I do?"—which is, at the least, coolly insulting. It seems that Henry has changed in his conduct. As Emma says:

Do you remember how you used to hang
 Upon my looks? your transports when I sang?
 I play'd—you melted into tears; I moved—
 Voice, words, and motion, how you all approved;
 A time when Emma reign'd, a time when Henry loved.
 You recollect?

(11. 130-35)

Henry replies, with a smile at the end:

Yes, surely; and then why
 The needless truths? do I the facts deny?
 For this remonstrance I can see no need,
 Or this impatience—if you do, proceed.

(11. 135-38)

How superior these men are! Evidently the couple's love has died. Before marriage, however, they just as evidently had been in love. As Henry says,

There was that purple light of love, that bloom,
 That ardent passions in their growth assume. . . .
 . . . by that light
 All loved of thee grew lovely in my sight. . . .

You went the church-way walk, you reach'd the farm,
 And gave the grass and babbling springs a charm;
 Crop, whom you rode—sad rider though you be—
 Thenceforth was more than Pegasus to me.
 Have not I woo'd your snarling cur to bend
 To me the paw and greeting of a friend?
 And all his surly ugliness forgave,
 Because, like me, he was my Emma's slave?
 (11, 169-70, 175-76, 182-89)

What then happened? The answer is simple:

Think you, thus charm'd, I would the spell revoke?
 Alas! my love, we married, and it broke!
 (11. 190-91)

There is the answer: they got married. Keats has expressed the same idea symbolically. In his *Lamia* when Apollonius, representing reason, is admitted to the marriage feast, the bride withers and vanishes into nothing.⁶ Emma agrees with Henry that it was the marriage ceremony that did them in; it was at that moment that their love died. About lovers who rush to church to ease their pain, she says:

A spell is utter'd, and a ring applied,
 And forth they walk a bridegroom and a bride,
 To find this counter-charm, this marriage rite,
 Has put their pleasant fallacies to flight!
 (11. 369-72)

Actually it would appear that marriage removed a particular need. Concerning the preceding courtship, Emma protests:

I practised no deceit;
 Such as I am I saw you at my feet;
 If for a goddess you a girl would take,
 'Tis you yourself the disappointment make.
 (11. 238-41)

But Henry replies:

O! Emma, when I pray'd
 For grace from thee, transported and afraid,
 Now raised to rapture, now to terror doom'd—
 Was not the goddess by the girl assumed?
 Did not my Emma use her skill to hide—
 Let us be frank—her weakness and her pride?
 Did she not all her sex's arts pursue,
 To bring the angel forward to my view?
 Was not the rising anger oft suppress'd?
 Was not the waking passion hush'd to rest?
 And, when so mildly sweet you look'd and spoke,
 Did not the woman deign to wear a cloak? . . .

When we view'd that dell,
 Where lie those ruins—you must know it well—
 When that worn pediment your walk delay'd,
 And the stream gushing through the arch decay'd;
 When at the venerable pile you stood,
 Till the does ventured on our solitude,
 We were so still! before the growing day
 Call'd us reluctant from our seat away—
 Tell me, was all the feeling you express'd
 The genuine feeling of my Emma's breast?
 Or was it borrow'd, that her faithful slave
 The higher notion of her taste might have?
 So may I judge, for of that lovely scene
 The married Emma has no witness been;
 No more beheld that water, falling, flow
 Through the green fern that there delights to grow.

(11. 242-53, 280-95)

Emma admits the charge, obliquely:

O! precious are you all, and prizes too,
 Or could we take such guilty pains for you? . . .

But be it said, good sir, we use such art,
 Is it not done to hold a fickle heart,
 And fix a roving eye?—Is that design
 Shameful or wicked that would keep you mine? . . .

Then, when you flatter—in your language, praise—
 In our own view you must our value raise;
 And must we not, to this mistaken man,
 Appear as like his picture as we can?
 If you will call—nay, treat us as—divine,

Must we not something to your thoughts incline?
 If men of sense will worship whom they love,
 Think you the idol will the error prove?
 What! show him all her glory is pretence,
 And make an idiot of this man of sense?
 (11. 318-19, 332-35, 338-47)

Once the need to appear what they were not was removed, the aura—"that purple light"—was gone, and Henry saw her solely, as he puts it ungallantly, "by heaven's own light" (1. 196). At that moment, evidently, love died. Curiously, however, Henry feels that it was not a sudden death, for he says,

No sudden fate our lingering love supprest;
 It died an easy death, and calmly sank to rest.
 (11. 358-59)

It must have been a rather lengthy marriage ceremony, during which their love was able to sink to rest slowly, calmly, and (one suspects) thankfully.

In the place of love, Henry and Emma seek an accommodation. Henry suggests,

Yet let us calmly view our present fate,
 And make a humbler Eden of our state. . . .

As careful peasants, with incessant toil,
 Bring earth to vines in bare and rocky soil,
 And, as they raise with care each scanty heap,
 Think of the purple clusters they shall reap:
 So those accretions to the mind we'll bring,
 Whence fond regard and just esteem will spring;
 Then, though we backward look with some regret
 On those first joys, we shall be happy yet.
 (11. 381-82, 417-24)

Quite a picture, this, of man and wife bringing their loads to the vines: for those couples who are really in love it will only confirm the fact that, for Henry and Emma, love died the moment they became man and wife.

Not all English poets think that love dies in marriage. In fact Thomas Hardy provides a most eloquent tribute to the health and strength of love in marriage. In his poem "The Walk" (1912) he presents the situation in which the wife has become enfeebled:

You did not walk with me
 Of late to the hill-top tree
 By the gated ways,
 As in earlier days;
 You were weak and lame, (5)
 So you never came,
 And I went alone, and I did not mind,
 Not thinking of you as left behind.⁷

Evidence that it is not simply companionship that is being talked about in this admirably understated poem can be found in line 8: a mere companion, not accompanying the walker but staying behind, would be greeted on his return, but a loved one is so much a part of the thinking and feeling of a person going off physically alone that he does not, in fact, think of her as left behind. Then the speaker's wife died: the bereaved lover went walking again, as usual:

I walked up there to-day
 Just in the former way; (10)
 Surveyed around
 The familiar ground
 By myself again:
 What difference, then?
 Only that underlying sense (15)
 Of the look of a room on returning thence.

There is indeed a difference, a sad difference, for she is no longer there, and the strength of the feeling comes through in the understatement. But this is the *only* difference: love is still there; he still thinks of her, not as left behind, but as with him still.

4

The poems we have looked at so far have been concerned with the love between two people, a love which, when it died (if in fact it died), did so for both. But what of those situations in which, although love in one of the pair dies, it does not die, at the same time at least, in the other? When one lung collapses, what happens to the other? When one half of the brain ceases to function, what about the other?

Geoffrey Chaucer tells about such a pair in his *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1386).⁸ Within the town of Troy, long besieged by the Greeks, the noble prince Troilus and the gentle Criseyde meet, fall in love, and become, indeed, a most tender, loving pair. But then the circumstance

of war requires that Criseyde leave Troy and go to the Greek camp. The night before she leaves, she and Troilus agree that, after a certain number of days, Criseyde will find a way of leaving the Greek camp and will return to Troy and Troilus. She promises him

I wol ben here, withouten any wene.
 I mene, as helpe me Juno, hevenes quene,
 The tenthe day, but if that deth m'assaile,
 I wol you sen, withouten any faille.
 (4.1593-96)

She even swears an oath, that not for any reason—dread of anyone, delight from anyone, or whatever—will she be false to him: she will instead be true (4.1534-40). Yet, once in the Greek camp, and courted by the pressing Diomede, she betrays Troilus, breaks her promise, and decides to stay in the camp with Diomede (5.1023-29). Reasons are given: she always has been the most fearful of persons (2.450); she is, in the camp, unstable in courage (5.825); and she is in a dreadful predicament—a Trojan woman in the Greek camp needing protection, or so she thinks (5.1025). But still, although she swore that in spite of dread of anyone, in spite of delight from anyone, she would be true to Troilus, now in dread of the Greeks and in anticipation of delight from Diomede, she proves untrue. Or partly untrue, for she decides that she will now be true to Diomede (5.1071).

Troilus, meanwhile, not dreaming that love could have died in Criseyde, awaits the return of his beloved. Each day he goes to the gates of Troy in anticipation of her return (5.603-06); on the promised day itself he keeps eager watch from the walls until well into the night (5.1107-82); when she fails to come, he persuades himself that he has miscounted the days (5.1185). The day after, he returns to the wall to wait, and does so the next day, and the next, and the next, for six days before he begins to admit to himself that perhaps she is not coming (5.1198-1211). At length he sees a coat taken from Diomede in combat, and on its collar a brooch which Troilus had given Criseyde wet with his tears of parting and which she had promised to keep for ever (5.1649-66). He must now recognize her betrayal.

Her uncle, Pandarus, who brought Troilus and Criseyde together and who loved Criseyde less than Troilus did, now hates her and will for evermore (5.1732-33). But Troilus writes to her that, although she obviously cast him right out of her mind, he cannot

withinne myn herte fynde
 To unloven yow a quarter of a day!
 In corsed tyme I born was, weilaway,
 That yow, that doon me all this wo endure,
 Yet love I best of any creature!

(5.1695-1701)

Though love died in her, it continued to live, painfully, in him, even to the day of his death. As C.S. Lewis comments,

The end of *Troilus* is the great example in our literature of pathos pure and unrelieved. All is to be endured and nothing is to be done. The species of suffering is one familiar to us all, as the sufferings of Lear and Oedipus are not. All men have waited with ever-decreasing hope, day after day, for some one or for something that does not come, and all would willingly forget the experience. Chaucer spares us no detail of the prolonged and sickening process to despair; every fluctuation of gnawing hope, every pitiful subterfuge of the flattering imagination, is held up to our eyes without mercy.⁹

Hope dies, slowly, in *Troilus*, but love does not. Perhaps it should have.

George Crabbe gives a bourgeois equivalent to the story of *Troilus* and *Criseyde* in a verse tale of his called "Procrastination" (1812).¹⁰ A young couple, Dinah and Rupert, would have liked to marry, but he was impoverished and she was dependent on an aunt who withheld her permission.

Servant, and nurse, and comforter, and friend,
 Dinah had still some duty to attend;
 But yet their walk, when Rupert's evening call
 Obtain'd an hour, made sweet amends for all. . . .

(11. 42-45)

That their relation really was love, even though they did not boldly marry in defiance of the aunt and fortune, is made clear as the narrator continues:

So long they now each other's thoughts had known,
 That nothing seem'd exclusively their own;
 But with the common wish, the mutual fear,
 They now had travell'd to their thirtieth year.

(11. 46-49)

An opportunity arose for Rupert to make enough money for them to marry, but it meant that he would have to go overseas for an undefined length of time.

. . . the aunt declared
 'Twas fortune's call, and they must be prepared:
 "You now are young, and for this brief delay,
 And Dinah's care, what I bequeath will pay. . . ."
 (11. 54-57)

The lovers parted, as did Troilus and Criseyde, with assurance of mutual love and fidelity (11. 62-63).

As Dinah tended her aunt,

To vary pleasures, from the lady's chest
 Were drawn the pearly string and tabby vest;
 Beads, jewels, laces, all their value shown,
 With the kind notice—"They will be your own."

This hope, these comforts cherish'd day by day,
 To Dinah's bosom made a gradual way;
 Till love of treasure had as large a part
 As love of Rupert in the virgin's heart.
 (11. 76-83)

There, of course, is where love really died in Dinah, but it took her some time to recognize the fact.

. . . the pleasure grew
 In Dinah's soul—she loved the hoards to view;
 With lively joy those comforts she survey'd,
 And love grew languid in the careful maid.
 (11. 88-91)

As she "felt her passion for a shilling grow" (1. 95), her letters to Rupert underwent a change:

And for the verses she was wont to send,
 Short was her prose, and she was Rupert's friend.
 (11. 104-05)

When her aunt died, Dinah inherited her possessions and her love for them:

Stocks, bonds, and buildings;—it disturb'd her rest,
 To think what load of troubles she possess'd.
 Yet, if a trouble, she resolved to take
 Th' important duty, for the donor's sake. . . .
 (11. 120-23)

Her attitude to Rupert, who in spite of the change in her letters remained unsuspecting, likewise underwent a change. At first, when she thought of him, her conscience hurt, for a while (11. 126-27), but then she found reasons why it was right for her to have deserted him:

His worth she knew, but doubted his success;
Of old she saw him heedless; what the boy
Forbore to save, the man would not enjoy;
Oft had he lost the chance that care would seize,
Willing to live, but more to live at ease. . . .
(11. 129-33)

She likewise found a salve for her conscience:

Yet could she not a broken vow defend,
And Heav'n, perhaps, might yet enrich her friend.
(11. 134-35)

The diseased and dying love within her spread, like gangrene, to include her attitude towards others to whom she owed some form of love:

She knew that mothers grieved, and widows wept,
And she was sorry, said her prayers, and slept.
(11. 140-41)

Her inner state, now calcified, was reflected fittingly in the workings of her handsome clock, which, "while on brilliants moved the hands of steel," "click'd from pray'r to pray'r, from meal to meal" (11. 178-79).

Unexpectedly Rupert returned, still unsuspecting and confident that, although he was penniless, Dinah would gladly share her inherited possessions with him as well as their love. But, "No," she said,

" . . . all my care is now to fit my mind
For other spousal, and to die resign'd."
(11. 243-44)

Rupert caught on surprisingly fast:

"I find thee pious—let me find thee true.— . . .
Heav'n's spouse thou art not; nor can I believe
That God accepts her who will man deceive."
(11. 260, 267-68)

She reiterated:

"His soul she loved, and hoped he had the grace
To fix his thoughts upon a better place."
(11. 289-90)

His immediate response followed:

. . . his regard,
His best respect were gone, but love had still
Hold in his heart, and govern'd yet the will—
Or he would curse her. . . .
(11. 294-97)

So, undoubtedly, he thought at the time, but,

Proud and indignant, suffering, sick, and poor,
He grieved unseen, and spoke of love no more—
Till all he felt in indignation died,
As hers had sunk in avarice and pride.
(11. 300-03)

Crabbe depicts the afterdeath of their love as actually something more poignant than what befell Hardy's lovers in "Neutral Tones." Rupert became an almsman, maintained by the parish. One day, in the street, they would have met: she knew that she really should speak to him,

But pride forbad, and to return would prove
She felt the shame of his neglected love;
Nor wrapp'd in silence could she pass, afraid
Each eye should see her, and each heart upbraid.
One way remain'd—the way the Levite took,
Who without mercy could on misery look,
(A way perceived by craft, approved by pride):
She cross'd, and pass'd him on the other side.
(11. 342-49)

More troubling still, however, is the question that arises when one compares Rupert and Troilus, for which is to be lamented more, the one whose love dies in indignation because he has been betrayed, or the one who continues to love (and to feel) even though betrayed?

5

There is one poem in particular, "The Lost Mistress" (1845) by Robert Browning, which, because of its perplexities and ambiguities, provides a compendium in itself of varying answers to the question, "When is love really dead?"¹¹

On a casual reading, the poem might look like a gentlemanly acceptance of the end of a love affair and the death of the love within it:

All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
As one at first believes?
Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
About your cottage eaves!

And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly, (5)
I noticed that, to-day;
One day more bursts them open fully
—You know the red turns grey.

To-morrow we meet the same then, dearest, (10)
May I take your hand in mine?
Mere friends are we, —well, friends the merest
Keep much that I resign:

For each glance of the eye so bright and black, (15)
Though I keep with heart's endeavour, —
Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops back,
Though it stay in my soul for ever!—

Yet I will but say what mere friends say, (20)
Or only a thought stronger;
I will hold your hand but as long as all may,
Or so very little longer!

It would appear that the speaker (again, presumably, a man) is willing to fall back, as apparently requested, to the role of a friend, though he also intimates, gallantly, that, as far as he is concerned, he will be a friend plus, as he holds her hand so very little longer. But there are difficulties with this reading. In lines 3-8, for instance, what is going on? Perhaps the speaker's mind has reeled in shock, and is seizing on those aspects of his surroundings until it can recover. But why are the particular details chosen and presented? In the first two lines, as well, why is there the time difference, between the implicit now and the previous time pointed to by the phrase "at first"? In lines 11-12 the lover says that "friends the merest / Keep much that (he)'ll resign": why, if he is to be a friend, will he have *less* than friends? And why, as indicated by the

word "endeavour" in line 14, will he have to work at keeping her glance in his heart?

Perhaps the speaker is more like the one in Drayton's poem, only more subtle. Perhaps he appears to accept the break and the death of love (in her) but actually tries to win her back. His saying that friends will have more than he will (11. 11-12) is an oblique way of saying that she will not have him as a friend, even, though actually she wants him as something much more. He will make the effort required (1. 14): so why not she? And he really does love her, as shown in the last stanza. Perhaps this particular reading will solve these later problems in the poem, but, it must be admitted, it does nothing for the puzzle in lines 3-8, or for the one in lines 1-2. All it shows is that, although love may have died in her, it has not in him, and he will try to revive it in her.

An objection may well have been building over the last while: in all the poems we have looked at, it is the woman who has broken off the love, who has betrayed it. Such a repetition is, of course, not surprising, since all the poems have been written by men—as my Presbyterian mother used to say about the Bible whenever I referred to those parts of it that say unkind things about women. So it may be a pleasant surprise to find a third reading of the poem which sees the man breaking off the love affair, because his paramour has told him that she is pregnant—possibly by another man, indeed, in which case the "mistress" of the title would really be "lost." The reason why one would look for such an otherwise startling reading is quite simple: it would appear from our difficulties so far—the unresolved problems of wording—that what is literally missing from this dramatic lyric and what is therefore needed is the unspoken part of the kind of situation in which this speech could be spoken. This third reading, of the jolted (not jilted) lover, offers such a key. It can explain the particular details in lines 5-8: his mind seizes on the swelling leaf-buds, about to burst open, because they parallel her pregnancy. The sparrows of lines 3-4 are explained because they have always been available as symbols of lust.¹² The time difference in the first two lines is accounted for by the fact that she has known for some time what would happen when she told him. In response to her plea (reflected in lines 11-12) that they remain public friends for appearance sake, he says yes, but also that emotionally he will be less than a friend. He says that he will "endeavour" and work at being kind, a statement which evidently begins a warming process, for he proceeds to relent: her voice will stay, without his effort; and in fact he will be, not a little less, but a little more than a friend. Love has recovered from a near-fatal blow.

If one feels that this jolted reading has a lot of gee-ing and hawing for only twenty lines, or that it would not fit the kind of calculating relationship premissed, then there is a much more sentimental interpretation available. The speaker's "mistress" (i.e., the lady who commands his love) has revealed that she will soon die: it is accordingly best for him as well as her not to continue an intense emotional involvement; they should become friends instead of lovers, so that when her death comes, it will be less painful for them both. Such a reading certainly accounts for the first two lines: she has been through the truth of knowing about her approaching death and can tell him whether, for him, the truth will still be bitter after the shock has worn off. Under the effect of that shock, he reaches (in lines 3-4) for something else to talk about, something else to think about, and, as often happens, he goes to the opposite of what has caused the shock, from the momentous to the trivial twitter of the sparrows. But, again as often happens, this opposite, sought for as relief, still reflects the oppressing concerns: hence the "good-night." Similarly, in lines 5-8, the speaker's mind turns to the irony of the abundant life outside, specifically to the birth about to be, in sickening contrast to the death about to be within. By the third stanza he has recovered: he will resign much *when she dies*. His heart (l. 14) will work naturally at retaining her voice after her death. And as for the immediate present, yes, he will oblige her, of course, but still with a little stronger thought, a little longer touch, to show her how he feels. His love will outlive her physical death.

But there is still another reading of the poem which goes beyond even this, which goes, in its answer to when love dies, beyond even that provided by Hardy's surviving lover. It sees the "mistress" as the speaker's wife, the beloved commander of his love, and it sees her "lost" in death. She has died and "all is over." The speaker has returned from the funeral, and now, having had a few days of living with the truth of her death, he asks himself whether it sounds bitter, as it was when he first received it. It is still a shock, however, and his mind attempts to cope with it in the manner we have seen in the preceding interpretation. He then addresses his lost mistress *in absentia*, thinking of "to-morrow" when they will meet again in heaven. Chaucer's Troilus, when he reached heaven, changed his mind about earthly love and viewed it as something worthless compared to heavenly felicity (5.1816-19). But Browning's speaker appears to have in mind what Jesus told the Sadducees: that in heaven there is no marriage or giving in marriage: the resurrected dead are instead like the angels (Mark 12:25). What, then,

about him and his beloved wife? By the rules of the establishment they must be "mere friends"; but, worse, "friends the merest" here below (11. 11-12) have some form of physical, bodily contact which he will there have to relinquish. He is, however, determined to find ways of circumventing the celestial regulations. His heart will work at remembering their wedded bliss here below. His soul will cherish her wishing they could see the earthly snowdrops again. He will exceed the limits in thought and, most defiantly, will even hold her heavenly hand "so very little longer." He is determined that he will show her, on their reunion, that his love has survived, not only the physical death of both of them, but also their elevation to heaven.

NOTES

1. Michael Drayton, "The Parting," in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. William Hebel (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1961), II, 341 (there identified as Sonnet 61 of the series called "Idea").
2. John Donne, "A Lecture upon the Shadow," in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J.C. Grierson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), I, 71-72.
3. Thomas Hardy, "Neutral Tones," in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 9.
4. George Meredith, Sonnet no. 1 of "Modern Love," in *The Poetical Works of George Meredith*, ed. G.M. Trevelyan (London: Constable, 1912), p. 133.
5. George Crabbe, "The Natural Death of Love," being Tale XIV in "Tales of the Hall" in George Crabbe, *Poems*, ed. A.W. Ward, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1907), pp. 48-60.
6. John Keats, "Lamia," in *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 159-78, esp. pp. 175-78 (2.157-306).
7. Thomas Hardy, "The Walk," in *Collected Poems*, p. 320.
8. Geoffrey Chaucer, "Troilus and Criseyde," in *The Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), pp. 449-564.
9. C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 195.
10. George Crabbe, "Procrastination," being Tale IV in "Tales" in George Crabbe, *Poems*, ed. A.W. Ward, vol. II (1906), pp. 56-66.
11. Robert Browning, "The Lost Mistress," in *The Works of Robert Browning*, ed. F.G. Kenyon (London: Benn, 1912), III, 137.
12. Cf. James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 288.