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1
Relationships

i.
Romantic Expectations

The central fantasy behind all the noise and anguish of relationships is to find someone we can be happy with. It sounds almost laughable, given what tends to happen.

We dream of someone who will understand us, with whom we can share our longings and our secrets, with whom we can be weak, playful, relaxed and properly ourselves.

Then the horror begins. We come across it second-hand when we hear the couple yelling at one another through the wall of the hotel room as we brush our teeth; when we see the sullen pair at the table across the restaurant; and sometimes, of course, when turmoil descends upon our own unions.

Nowhere do we tend to misbehave more gravely than in our relationships. We become in them people that our friends could hardly recognise. We discover a shocking capacity for distress and anger. We turn cold or get furious and slam doors. We swear and say wounding things. We bring enormously high hopes to our relationships – but in practice, these relationships often feel as if they have been especially designed to maximise distress.

A fundamental feature of the way our minds work is that we continually generate expectations about how things will go. Almost without noticing our tendencies, we draw up scenarios of how the future should unfold.

These expectations are in no way innocent; they become the benchmarks against which we judge what actually happens. We deem something miserable or fantastic, not in and of itself but in relation to the notions of normality we have covertly assembled somewhere in our consciousness. We may thereby end up doing an acute injustice to the real conditions of our lives.

We're drawn into rages by situations that contravene what we expected would happen. We don't shout whenever things go wrong; only when they go wrong and we hadn't expected them to. It would be great if it could be sunny over the Easter break, but we have learned across long years that we live in a cloudy, generally damp, disappointing climate, so we won't stamp our feet when we realise it is drizzling. Once certain depressing situations have been budgeted for, we are at no risk of losing our tempers. We may not be happy, but we are not frothing. Yet when you can't find the car keys (they're always by the door, in the little drawer beneath the gloves), the reaction may be very different. Here, an expectation has been violated. Someone must have taken the damn keys on purpose. We were going to be on time, now we'll be late. This is a catastrophe. You are enraged because, somewhere in your mind, you have a perilous faith in a world in which car keys simply never go astray. Every one of our hopes, so innocently and mysteriously formed, opens us up to a vast terrain of suffering.

Romantic relationships have a habit of creating the highest kinds of expectation. The public realm is full

of fantastical notions about what decades of life together with a partner could hold in store. We are no strangers to the challenges of love. We can observe people struggling all around us. Rates of divorce and incidents of domestic strife are avidly reported. Nevertheless, part of our minds remains remarkably impervious to the melancholy data. Despite a vast amount of evidence, we cling to notions of what love is like that bear little resemblance to any love story we have ever seen unfold anywhere near us.

We trust in our own plucky good fortune. Despite all the obstacles, we have faith that there is someone out there – the legendary 'one' – with whom everything will come right; someone with whom to bare one's soul and end one's days in deep satisfaction.

We aren't dreaming. We're just remembering. The origin of some of our hopes of love cannot be traced back to any adult experience. They can be identified with a slightly more curious source: early childhood. Our concept of what makes a happy couple is heavily influenced by the sort of relationship that an infant has with its parent, full of cosiness, wordless understanding and safety. Psychoanalysts suggest that we all knew the state of love in the womb and in early infancy when, at the best moments, a kindly caregiver interacted with us in a manner akin to that which a grown-up partner might employ with us. They ministered to our needs, even those we had trouble verbalising. They brought us a feeling of security and cuddled us to sleep. We are projecting a

memory onto the future; we are anticipating what may happen from what once occurred according to a now-impossible template.

We have always had dreams of happy love. Only recently in history have we imagined that they might come to fruition within a marriage. An 18th-century French aristocrat would – for instance – take it for granted that marriage was a necessary matter for reproduction, property and social alliances. There was no expectation that it would, on top of it all, also lead to happiness with a spouse. That was reserved for affairs – the real targets of tender and complex emotional hopes. The practical sides of a relationship and the romantic longing for closeness and communion were kept on separate planes. Only very recently has the emotional idealism of the love affair come to be seen as possible, even necessary, within marriage. We expect, of course, that there will be major pragmatic dimensions to our unions, involving variable mortgage rates and children's car seats. But, at the same time, we expect that the relationship will fulfil all our longings for deep understanding and tenderness.

Our expectations make things very difficult.

The expectations might run as follows: a good lover generally understands us quite well, so it is unnecessary to spell out our inner states of mind at any length. At the end of stressful work routines, there is no need to specify that it would be nice to have some time alone: our lover will just know, and magically slip away upstairs. They will have an acute capacity to grasp what is going

on inside us even if we have not used words to inform them. They will be very much on our side; they will see things from our point of view. They won't insist that we do certain things for them. Their needs will be minimal; they will have no annoying friends, and their family will be encouraging but unobtrusive.

Oddly enough, despite all the unsatisfactory relationships we may have had, we refuse to give up on our hopes. Experience seems unable to dent our expectations. Whenever we do fail, we insist on attributing our setbacks to the particular character we got together with. We localise the problem: it was all to do with the ex's strange habits and their refusal to grow up as we told them to. We know how to be punitive about our exes, yet refuse to blame love itself. We hold everything responsible other than our ideas on love. And soon enough, we are ready to gift our troublingly elevated expectations to a new partner.

When we encounter difficulties in relationships, we are disinclined to blame our ideas of love. We localise our troubles instead. We focus on the particular flaws of the partner who has undermined our Romantic expectations. We become experts in listing what is wrong with them – how they have let us down, failed to understand us and been selfish. But we retain a faith that someone, somewhere, might honour the hopes of love that we cling to. It might be the person we met at the train station who looked extremely charming in a camel-coloured coat and with whom we exchanged a few words about the vending

machines. Perhaps they would be the answer. There must be a better way than this.

We are seldom as vile as we are with the people with whom we've agreed to share our lives. At the office and among our friends, we are reliably kind and civil. Yet when we are around the lover to whom we've made more commitments than anyone else on earth – the person named in our will, who has a claim on our every possession – we show a bad temper others could not imagine us capable of. We are not especially evil or strange; it is our expectations that have made us so tricky to be around. We can afford to be so friendly with our acquaintances for a very simple reason: we just don't care enough.

The person we love has unparalleled power to drive us to fury because there is no one of whom we expect more. Our most regrettable moments – swearing at them in the car, shouting late at night in the hotel, mocking their mannerisms at a party – are all the ghastly by-products of something superficially very innocent: hope, the most combustible and dangerous element of any relationship.

One way to calm ourselves down is to adopt a philosophy that, at first, sounds inimical to love: pessimism. We are used to thinking ill of this quality. It is redolent of resignation and cynicism. It seems the enemy of affection. Yet in love, it is precisely hope that endangers everything we might wish for.

The best way to enter a relationship should be to keep in mind the normality of being more or less

constantly misunderstood. This should be no grounds for rancour or even surprise. Given how infinitely subtle and cavernous our minds are, it is no wonder if other people never manage to work out their contents. We would ideally calibrate our hopes accordingly from the start. We would know we are likely to remain largely unread even by those with the most tender intentions towards us. This doesn't mean we would always be miserable. Of course, especially in the early days, things truly would go well. Our lover would say something utterly in line with our most private beliefs. They would show an understanding of our deep selves beyond what even we could muster. But we would know that this would not be a regular occurrence. As time went on, we'd know that low-level misunderstanding would be the norm. We wouldn't get angry, or even surprised. From the first, our hopes would have been correctly calibrated. We wouldn't be bitter or defensive, just grateful for having known what to expect.

We'd ideally have an assumption that in any relationship there would be significant areas of disagreement – which could well turn out to be irresolvable. We wouldn't particularly relish this. It's not that we are eager to get together with someone with whom we are at odds. But we would just assume that we're not going to find someone who is on the same wavelength as us on every serious issue that crops up. The idea would be that a good relationship would involve strong agreement on a few pretty major matters, with the expectation that in a host of other areas there would be

sharply divergent attitudes and ideas. This divergence wouldn't feel like a terrible climbdown or compromise. It would be normal, just as one would cheerfully work in an office alongside a person who had a totally different idea of what a nice holiday might be like or a bedtime unrelated to ours. We would know that a good working relationship would not mean blanket agreement. We'd assume that our partner would quite often be wrapped up in concerns of their own that wouldn't really have much to do with us.

In a wiser world than our own, we would regularly remind ourselves of the various reasons why people simply cannot live up to the expectations that have come to be linked to romantic relationships.

The lover is not us

One of the striking features of babies is that, for a surprisingly long time, they have no secure sense that their mother is another person. She seems to be merely an appendage to their own being, like an extra limb that they almost – but don't entirely – control. Something of the same illusion accompanies us into adult relationships. Here, too, it can take a little while before we fully recognise that our lovers are not umbilically linked to our psyches; that they aren't extensions of us, but independent beings with their own quite separate, and often painfully contrary, perspectives. They might be in a different mood to us, readying for bed just as we're getting excited to

party, or hold contrary opinions on a film, or fail to sympathise with an idea that feels core to us.

The start is no indication of what is to come

The feeling that we are 'in love' tends to begin with the realisation that we and the lover have an extraordinary amount in common. It might be very large things: political orientations; attitudes to education; views on the role of women in society. Or they might be much smaller yet still hugely significant matters: they too like long country walks, or early Baroque music, or the work of a little-known Bosnian poet. These discoveries create small bursts of ecstasy in lovers' hearts. They are redemptive signs of an end to loneliness.

The Romantic phase of love pivots around the recognition of what two people have in common, but the idea that this might be what love truly is, in and of itself, is a harbinger of an ill-tempered end to any union. If two people remain together, they will inevitably be confronted by areas of serious divergence. Far from being evidence that love is failing, the mapping of zones of difference is a sign that love has thrived, and that two people are moving from the realm of unstable fantasy to that of noble and solidly founded reality.

No one had a normal childhood

However well-meaning parents might be, no one ever has a 'normal' childhood in the sense of a set of experiences that leaves them ideally poised, ready to respond proportionately to difficulties, able to take challenges in their stride, disposed to a sanguine perspective on events – and able to love without ingeniously sabotaging the relationship they claim to be committed to. Such a creature is a theoretical possibility, of course, but he or she is unlikely ever to cross our paths.

Instead, we stumble on people who have been warped by dynamics that they neither understand properly nor can warn us about in good time. Perhaps they have a tendency to become furious for no apparent reason; perhaps our family evokes traumas for them that render them incapable of ordinary politeness in their company; maybe a stern father made them suspicious of all authority, or an over-indulgent mother made them unusually resistant to any form of criticism. They might have no ability to spend any time alone, or a hurtful proclivity for running upstairs to read a book at the first signs of tension.

We are liable to respond rather badly to the discovery of these warps, and to interpret them as evidence that we have been astonishingly unlucky. For a time, it seemed as if we had found someone normal, but in fact we have a freak (or worse) on our hands. We start to look around for alternatives. We zero in

on the partner's flaws with manic accuracy. We are not wrong about these necessarily, but we are very wrong to imagine that they might not, in their general form, be universal.

Everyone is differently mad, but madness is general. The emergence of a human animal to maturity is too fraught a process to unfold without serious incident; therefore, distortions of character are a certainty rather than a risk. We should not wonder whether or not a prospective partner will be damaged; we need only consider how they might be so.

In many areas of culture and life, we can trace two major – and highly contrasting – attitudes, which can be summarised under the names 'Romantic' and 'Classical'. The distinction was first used in connection with the arts, but it readily applies to the way we think and feel about relationships. Many of our current expectations about what relationships are meant to be like are deeply influenced by Romantic ideas. There are several points of contention between Classicism and Romanticism, including:

Authenticity vs politeness

From the late 18th century onwards, Romantic artists and thinkers got increasingly excited by the idea of speaking frankly and freely on all topics. They didn't like the idea of social convention constraining what they could or couldn't say. To hold back, they thought, was to be a kind

of fake. To pretend to feel things you didn't really feel, to say something just because it would be nice for another person, was the mark of the hypocrite. Translated into relationships, this view has fed our expectations that we have to tell each other everything; that if we keep something back, we are betraying love.

By contrast, the Classical person reveres politeness. They see the point of smoothing things over even when there can't be total agreement, adding in the occasional artful stroke to the other's ego. It is not that they are afraid of ruffling anyone's feathers per se – but they feel it's not usually a constructive move. They sense that in reality we can only cope with a limited amount of negative or confronting news. And that to survive, a relationship may need to accept that there will be certain no-go areas, that there will be zones of privacy and resignation.

In the Classical view, the polite relationship isn't a painful compromise. It's not a climbdown from the too-difficult task of full openness. Rather it is a separate and distinct ideal of its own. The relationship should be a place where each person is conscious of how fragile their partner inevitably is on certain matters – and takes deliberate care to treat them delicately. This is an admired accomplishment and a real expression of love.

Instinct vs rules

Starting in the arts, Romanticism tended to be very sceptical about training and learning lessons and

was especially hostile to the notion of rules. No one, Romantics felt, could learn to be a poet or an artist; the arts were opposed to rules; success was a matter of having the right instincts and inspiration. By extension, the idea of learning how to be a lover or partner came to be seen as slightly repugnant.

By contrast, Classicism has embraced the notion of education very broadly. In the Classical view, one might need to be taught not just how to write a poem but how to have a conversation, how to be kind or how to deal with a relationship. Classicism builds on the idea that we're not naturally equipped to meet many of the major challenges of existence. We're coming to these difficult tasks with a serious shortfall of techniques. We are not naturally able to defuse a row, to say sorry or know how to share a kitchen. To the Classical mind these are crucial, learnable skills – and being taught them is no more embarrassing, and should be no more strange, than being taught to drive.

Attitudes to relationships are not universal and eternal. They are cultural creations. Though it's not a legacy we are consciously very much aware of, our current thinking is powerfully shaped by Romantic attitudes – which has resulted in some elevated expectations and subsequent panic and fury when they are not met. The Classical set of ideas about relationships operates with lower, less dramatic hopes about what good relationships are like – and carries a high regard for the qualities and skills that help us manage tensions. In search of calmer

relationships, and happier loves, our collective attitudes should be heading in a more Classical, and politely more pessimistic, direction.

ii.
The Lack of Glamour of Domesticity

We are not blind to the idea that relationships might be hard. The issue comes down to where we think the difficulties might lie. Here the surrounding culture does us no service. The history of the Romantic novel, for example, is filled with examples of lovers battling against numerous obstacles. But these are of a particular sort: a pair of star-crossed souls may have to deal with the opposition of the Church or a faction in government. A devastating war may tear apart childhood sweethearts. Narrow-minded and snobbish parents may poison one partner against another. Romantic writers have shown genuine commitment to exploring a range of factors that can impede the development of love.

Nevertheless, one could accuse these Romantics of being unhelpfully selective about what particular problems they have focused on. It isn't that a war or a religious edict aren't serious; it's just that many other equally grave but also far more common challenges have tended to be ignored in their favour. Almost never has there been a Romantic novel that has meticulously studied the difficulties created for a couple by the issue of laundry. Seldom has a novel articulated the distress that can be caused by differences in ideas of a suitable bedtime, or the genuine agonies that emanate from kitchen cleaning rotas. We have, in art, seldom heard of a