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A Latin Lover in Ancient Rome

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CHAPTER 6

CODA

Mercy, madame! Alas, I die, I die!

—Wyatt

Man's love is of his life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence.

—Byron



THE MAD LOVER IS perennial and ubiquitous. He and she manifest themselves now alone or in clusters, now in mobs and movements, in all times and all places (they comprise, in fact, one of those ‘universals’ we have been admonished to disbelieve in). How and why this phenomenon occurs in the Near East, in India, in China, in Japan (and elsewhere) I leave to historians and sociologists who concentrate on the rise and fall of erotic fashions, scholars who are equipped to handle the complexities of a comparative erotics. What I have offered in this book are speculations about the appearance of passionate, obsessive love in Rome in the last century of its republic and observations on how this style of loving and being loved functions in the poetry of the writer whom I take to be its most successful (extant) exponent. What especially interests me about the Mad Lover in his Propertian avatar is the manner in which his unalterably fixed idea is mingled with and nourished by a powerful distrust of the uses of society and a no less powerful drive to individualism and a fierce need for personal freedom and for artistic autonomy.

Most patriarchal versions of the ideal erotic code have some correspondence with the verses of Byron quoted above (that they occur in a

letter written by a woman provides a nice ironic twist to them: *Don Juan* 1.194.1551–52). From this perspective the male animal is an excellent multiple-tasker: he falls in (and out of) love when he chooses (or needs) to, while pursuing other ambitions and other triumphs, and it is women, the objects of his mutable, moveable attentions, who remain constant in their love—because that is their nature, their reason-to-be. But when Sir Thomas Wyatt cries “Mercy, madame! Alas, I die, I die!” or Shakespeare describes the lover he impersonates as “Mad in pursuit and in possession so, / Had, having, or in quest to have extreme,” the patriarchal code they inhabit has somehow faltered and the myth of male erotic self-control and of the female erotic compulsion on which it depends has begun to crumble. What contributed to reshaping of the social contexts in which Wyatt and Shakespeare could write these verses—whatever the contributing factors to this reshaping were, they were not restricted to shifts in literary conventions or mere intertextualities—I cannot say. But when I think of these poets and their poems (or later, of Goethe and Heine, of the Brownings and Tennyson and Hardy, of Baudelaire and Yeats and Rilke), what comes to mind is the transformation of a traditional (patriarchal) sign system which permits some males to imagine themselves as being permanently consumed by their loves for a woman (or a man) and which allows some women to contemplate the possibility of finding the core of their lives outside the bedroom. Whatever caused these transvaluations of erotic values in Europe’s sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the last years of ancient Rome’s republic the erotic components of the traditional codes of masculinity began to undergo a severe alteration when the citizen-soldiers and the untrammelled orators were replaced by a professional—and increasingly mercenary—army and by imperial bureaucrats and courtiers; when the world of Cato widened to give way to the worlds of Petronius’ Trimalchio and of Statius, Juvenal, and Martial; when the city-state of Rome became the Greco-Roman cosmopolis, capital of “the known world.” In that new spacetime, just at its onset, mad (Latin) lovers flourished in ancient Rome.

Propertius provided that strange, brief era with its most vivid representative, and Ovid straddled that era and the one that closed it. After his own ambivalent elegies (honoring the genre, mocking it), Ovid went on, in the *Ars Amatoria*, to perform a satiric autopsy on the Mad Lover, and then, in the *Metamorphoses*, his tragicomic counter-epic that would vie with the greatest long poems of antiquity and would influence Europe’s poetry and art century after century, he examined erotic obsession in

the wide spectrum of its splendors and miseries. He wrote exquisite short stories about love that exalts its devotees and often destroys them. He wrote stories about mad lovers that were sometimes critical of them but were more often empathetic with them. He wrote stories in which lovers collide with reality and are, mostly, overwhelmed by it.

The Mad Lover speaks best for himself in first-person poetry, in love elegy, in lyrics, in sonnets, where the energies of his passion are distilled to their essence by a process of extreme concentration. But, as Ovid saw, the intricate dynamics that fuel the Mad Lover are most intelligible when they undergo the rigors of complex narrative, when they are subjected to the scrutiny of multiple perspectives and are viewed in the contexts of the societies that contain them and seek to limit and constrain them. Propertius would find his most fluent heirs among the writers of sonnets and love lyrics; Ovid would find his subtlest heirs among the great writers of the novel: Austen, Goethe, Stendhal, Flaubert, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Tolstoy, Hardy, Schnitzler, Proust, Wharton, Colette, Lawrence.

Sometimes the Mad Lover becomes a Stalker or a Black Widow, sometimes he or she becomes a splendid longtime companion or a splendid spouse. He or she can be dangerous, but societies cannot get rid of him or her, nor can societies get along without the erotic ideals that “younge, fresshe folkes, he or she” (Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 5.1835–36) confer on them. Among the surest repositories of those ideals and their erotic imperative are poems and novels wherein the Mad Lover survives and thrives and the accents of Propertius and Ovid continue to re-echo.