

ON LOVE AND SPACE

by Lowry Pei

“The ‘private life’ is nothing but that zone of space, of time, where I am not an image, an object. It is my *political* right to be a subject which I must protect.”

-- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

“Love is a property of the space between two people”: I find this sentence in a copy of a letter I wrote to a friend. I don’t know whether I thought it up myself, but now it seems like a good starting point for seeing more than my private world.

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I have been in love quite a few times and have (to make a distinction) loved two women, ten years apart, in a way that feels as absolute as the sun or plants; each of them left me, one of them has died.

The second time I lost the irreplaceable – and no love ever is replaced – I came to the thought that starts this essay, first as a sensation: I discovered, after some months, that my inability to accept what had happened expressed itself perceptually in the loss of the third dimension. I saw as you would if you had only one eye. Analytically I could tell that there must be space between things, because of parallax, shadows, and so forth, but I no longer actually felt space opening before me as something I could walk into. Rather I was always inside a confinement that moved with me. When I looked out of this place where I always was, I felt as though I saw most people from the outside only, as images, though from time to time I would think that I glimpsed someone actually living, actually experiencing space, freedom, time, and felt that I would not experience that condition again.

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Time, like space, underwent a compression or foreshortening. There was no such thing as leisure.

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That was how it felt. But what did I mean when I wrote that love is a property of the space between two people? Above all, I think I meant that it is not a phenomenon inside one person or the other (“being in love” is that) but rather something outside – that situation in which space itself is defined and charged with energy by being between two particular people. The energy can be described this way: when I love someone, the world common to all people becomes available to me because the beloved is here too. And at last I am not only *on* the world but *in* it; from this situation delight arises.

I meant, too, something like what Rollo May meant in *Love and Will* when he said that Eros is the power that attracts us, draws us toward the other, while sex is the force that pushes from behind. The property of space that I wanted to refer to is an attractive one that pulls us not only toward the beloved but also into space itself, into room to act.

And I meant that neither person reels the other in, neither is played like a fish on a line, but rather that the attraction is situated in between them, in the space, like a third thing, autonomous. So the attracting or the attractedness has nothing to do with contest, with “war of the sexes.” If one feels some kind of giving in, it is not to the other but to Eros itself.

Perhaps the relationship between love and space, as I want to mean it, can be compared to a curious aspect of the notion of the Big Bang. The universe, according to that theory, began in an outpouring of energy (almost instantaneously turning into matter) from what was, at its inception, an infinitesimal point. Here is the curious aspect: the “point” out of which the Big Bang poured *was the universe* from the start. What erupted out of that “point” was not only energy (also called matter) but also space itself. All space was inside that inconceivable tininess-containing-infinity. When it burst forth it began expanding (into what?) and still does so today.

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Intuitively, when I imagine a point, I imagine it in a surrounding space. In the case of the Big Bang, that must be wrong. If space was inside the point, what was surrounding it? What is outside the universe?

Consciousness deprived of love, consciousness that cannot feel space.

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Now that I'm aware of all this, I've seen some goings-on, out there on the street, which never came home to me so powerfully before. Mostly I've seen a lot of what Eudora Welty called "deliberate imperviousness...the most successful, most fatal signal of all." I think I see people making a tremendous and constant effort not to be visibly affected by all those other people around them – an effort which they regard as obligatory, yet in which they are unhappy. It is an effort because they are, in fact, affected. Everyone knows that by looking at someone else – someone not paying attention to you – for more than a second you can cause that person to turn and look back. We can all do this; we can do it at a distance of twenty or thirty feet, when one of the two parties to the transaction is on the sidewalk and the other is driving by in a car. Meanwhile we say people should just "mind their own business."

But it isn't that simple. We know too much. We are predators, chasers, with eyes on the front of our heads for pursuit of the prey, but like the prey, we also know when someone's looking at us from behind. If you make someone turn to look back at you and you pay full attention during that momentary encounter, you will often see in the other's look either fear or warning: Get Away. In many places, those who initiate eye contact on the street are seen as intending to interfere, to obstruct, to con, even to rape, or to entice the person receiving the look toward no good end. This assumption, which I think I see people make about each other and me, makes the effort to seem unaffected obligatory.

A world of con artists, busybodies, hookers, rapists and thieves might almost be entertaining in a Gothic novel or a Jacobean tragedy, as long as we can put it distinctly Over There, but I doubt that anyone wants to live in such a world, and I'm beginning to think that in our extremest imaginings we do. And to the extent that we feel we must keep ourselves pulled in, unaffected, unavailable, we are not free. Oh, I know, we go home (at least ideally or in theory) to our friends, our lovers and families, and there we are ourselves; we are open and uninhibited. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me, however, to say that we live in a free society if we are only free as long as we stay inside the house. That the predators outdoors should be converted to friends, lovers, and family is everybody's hope, but how it happens, when it does happen, is anybody's guess. Between the desire to attract and outrage at undesired

attraction there sometimes seems to be no middle ground. If you want someone to be drawn to you, and that person is, it's instant pleasure; if you don't, it's a form of harassment.

So we may, without exactly intending, pass through the world in a space which we do our best to keep unshared, inwardly lamenting our aloneness.

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But even when I felt myself to be outside the universe, the openness of shared space seemed only a step away – a step made possible, I think, by a kind of loving dialogue and, as far as I can see, by nothing else. I feel certain that for human beings there must be, in the awkward phrase of our day, “a significant other” – if not a person, then the natural world, or a task, or God (are there other possibilities?). The soul goes crazy when it's cut off and can't connect.

I've probably already said too insistently that I don't think we are very good at getting this dialogue started. And in its absence we try, when the need grows strong enough, to enter into dialogue with things that cannot answer us. Possessions. Teams. The media. The newscaster always says, “We'll see you at eleven.” But the fact is, they will never see you; it is not their presence that the screen brings to you. What TV, more than any other medium, sells us is a view of ourselves *as images* – humanity from the outside – and the illusion of being in dialogue when in fact we are not. That way lies nothing but further disconnectedness.

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Even when we are seen, if we can do nothing *besides* look and be seen – which is the situation on the street, or in the world of fashion, celebrity, image – there is little hope for community, which now seems to be the most precarious achievement of the human species. By “community” I mean this: that state of affairs in which the public world around the individual connects to and confirms the private part of oneself, so that there is no need to get home and close the door in order to be free.

It is difficult for me to imagine how we will ever get home at all if we see ourselves as images. There is no way that the image you project toward me can be in loving dialogue with the image I project toward you. Even if we take in *images of loving dialogue* and try to recreate them with living people, we miss the point: what we need is not something very much like a dialogue but rather dialogue itself.

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My son is four. He and I love each other about as much as two people could, it seems to me, and I think he lives in a world of community and freedom, a world that has space and time as I have been speaking of them, brought about somehow by his parents and the other adults in his life, the other children he lives with at day care, and by his own ability to bring these qualities into the world. I do not want him to lose this inside himself or around him as he grows up, and it hurts me to think that to some extent he certainly will. He's my child, and so I think first of him. But we are all somebody's child.

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