



Eros and Modernity: Georg Simmel on Love

Guy Oakes

Volume 25, numéro 2, 2021

Simmel and Love

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088063ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088063ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (imprimé)

2512-1022 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Oakes, G. (2021). Eros and Modernity: Georg Simmel on Love. *Simmel Studies*, 25(2), 27–54. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088063ar>

Résumé de l'article

The text below was originally published under the name "Eros and Modernity: Simmel on Love" in: The Sociology of Emotions: Original Essays and Research Paper. Franks, D.D. and E. Doyle McCarthy (ed.). Greenwich, CT: JAI press, 1989, pp. 229-247. In the words of its author, the text was written at a time when he was intensely engaged with Simmel, working on his philosophy of history and his hermeneutics. Today, Guy Oakes revisits this text and allows Simmel Studies Journal to republish it for this special issue on love. The text explores in its first part the defining characteristics of erotic love according to Simmel: individuality, reciprocity, immediacy and radicalism. In the second part he concentrates on modernity and how it has had an impact on love relationships.

GUY OAKES

Eros and Modernity: Georg Simmel on Love

Abstract. *The text below was originally published under the name "Eros and Modernity: Simmel on Love" in: The Sociology of Emotions: Original Essays and Research Paper. Franks, D.D. and E. Doyle McCarthy (ed.). Greenwich, CT: JAI press, 1989, pp. 229-247. In the words of its author, the text was written at a time when he was intensely engaged with Simmel, working on his philosophy of history and his hermeneutics. Today, Guy Oakes revisits this text and allows Simmel Studies Journal to republish it for this special issue on love. The text explores in its first part the defining characteristics of erotic love according to Simmel: individuality, reciprocity, immediacy and radicalism. In the second part he concentrates on modernity and how it has had an impact on love relationships.*

The Concept of Love

*It is the nature of love to recognize no rights but its own; and
all other rights vanish
before it.*

Goethe (1809)

In 1809, Goethe published a novel titled *Elective Affinities* (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften*). Simmel regarded this as Goethe's most perfect love story. It is perhaps the best introduction to his own conception of love.

Eduard, a wealthy landowner, lives in ease and tranquility with his wife Charlotte on their country estate. In order to devote himself

exclusively to the delights and responsibilities of marriage and domestic life, he has abandoned his travels and his place at court and taken an early retirement from the army. Charlotte has sent both her daughter and her niece Otilie away to boarding school, arranging her affairs so that she can live for Eduard alone. They both recognize that the harmony of their marriage depends upon the exclusion of alien factors that might destroy their intimacy. Yet in spite of Charlotte's apprehensions about the dangers the intrusion of a third person might pose for their relationship, Eduard proposes to invite his friend the Captain to live with them, a man of education and talent who has not been able to secure a position commensurate with his abilities. With the arrival of the Captain, the two men pursue the conventional male pastimes of the landed gentry: the hunt and the barter and training of horses. The Captain, a surveyor and landscape architect, also enters a domain previously reserved for Charlotte: the planning of the estate grounds. After a brief and systematic survey of the property, he develops ambitious proposals for the redesign of the estate that do not accord with her more modest plans. As a result, Eduard and Charlotte spend less time together, they no longer have as much to talk about, and their relations become somewhat strained. Charlotte now finds herself uncomfortably idle, frequently alone, and no longer confident of her abilities.

As a companion for Charlotte, Otilie is withdrawn from boarding school and brought to the country, where Charlotte supervises her education. With the arrival of Otilie and the beginning of more intensive work on the estate, relations become even more strained. Eduard's place at the Captain's side is taken by Charlotte, who is more thorough and businesslike than her husband. Now it is Eduard who is restless and unoccupied. Self-indulgent, impressionable, and somewhat foolhardy, he is attracted to Otilie and turns to her for companionship. Normally pensive and reserved, she becomes more voluble and animated in his

presence. Eduard finds himself agitated and dissatisfied when he is deprived of her company. Although he sleeps with his wife, in his fantasies Otilie is his partner. Finally, Eduard and Otilie embrace and confess their feelings for one another.

This experience alters Eduard's world irrevocably. His perceptions are transformed, and he responds to the circumstances of life in dramatically different ways. He becomes an early riser, impatient for the day to begin but without any clear idea of what it might hold and what his own daily tasks ought to be. On the one hand, he loses interest in the work on the estate. His surroundings take on an uncomfortably alien air, and he begins to feel a stranger in his own home. On the other hand, he insists that the work be completed immediately, on the largest possible scale, and regardless of cost, simply to please Otilie. Incapable of counting costs or assessing the ramifications of his conduct, he no longer exhibits moderation in thought or conduct. The certainty of his feelings for Otilie and hers for him destroy all deliberation, restraint, and prudence. Passion dulls his moral sensibilities, and considerations of conscience no longer have any bearing on his conduct. This loss of moral proportion and self-control is exhibited in Eduard's indifference to the feelings of others and the collapse of any sense of propriety, or even common decency. His attitude toward Charlotte and the Captain is radically altered. Because they represent obstacles that separate him from Otilie, their mere presence becomes an irritation. Mindless of the fact that his own grandiose plans for the estate threaten to exhaust his financial resources, he is infuriated by their cautious management of the work on the grounds and their inability to match the frenetic pace he has set in order to complete everything by Otilie's birthday. Both marriage and friendship are sacrificed to his feelings for Otilie, and he experiences life before her as the dead weight of prehistory, an emotionally apathetic and torpid existence, and a meaningless waste of time. In his relationship with Otilie, he is reborn. In the world of instrumental rationalities, Eduard is a spoiled and inconstant

dilettant. However, when Otilie inspires in him a passion for which she is the only possible object, he becomes a virtuoso of the emotions. Otilie – unsophisticated, innocent, supremely happy, and with no comprehension of the consequences of her relationship with Eduard – inhabits a dreamlike world in which she lives only for him. This new bond estranges her from Charlotte. The relationship between the two women, formerly frank and unconstrained, is now governed by caution and mutual suspicion. Although Charlotte could accept a return to the status quo, to Otilie this represents an emotional impossibility since it would destroy the basic premise of her existence, her bond with Eduard.

Eduard and Otilie are, of course, in love. Indeed, Simmel considers their union as the ultimate exemplar of what he calls “absolute love,” or “love in its specifically erotic sense.”¹ Erotic love is defined by the following characteristics: individuality, reciprocity, immediacy, and radicalism.

Individuality

Simmel regards love as a basic existential attitude that unites the lover and the beloved as unique and irreplaceable individuals. In his

¹ In the ensuing simply called love (Simmel, 1984: 165, 175). Simmel’s writings present an informal typology of love in which Christian love, “cosmic eros,” philanthropy or humanitarian love, and Platonic love are differentiated from erotic love. The limits of this paper do not allow a discussion of this typology and the differences between these types of love (see Simmel, 1967; 1971a; 1984). Two recent essays germane to the problems of this paper can be recommended: Birgitta Nedelmann’s survey of Simmel’s interests in the sociology of the emotions (Nedelmann, 1983) and the introduction by Heinz-Jürgen Dahme and Klaus Christian Köhnke to their edition of Simmel’s writings on the philosophy and sociology of the sexes (Dahme and Köhnke, 1985).

writings on the concept of individualism, Simmel distinguishes two types of individuality (Simmel, 1913, 1950, 1971b,c). The first he calls formal or quantitative, the second qualitative.

Formal individuality is defined by two conditions: autonomy and homogeneity. Entities are autonomous when an independent and self-sufficient existence can be ascribed to them. They are homogeneous when they have the same basic properties or nature: They are equivalent in the sense that they are constituted or governed by the same laws. Thus individuality is determined by purely formal considerations. Because all individuals are structured in the same way or formed on the basis of the same principles, this means that any given individual is qualitatively indistinguishable from any other. Individuals differ only quantitatively, by virtue of their location in physical, historical, sociological, or psychological space and time. Simmel claims that if the world consisted of qualitatively indistinguishable atoms, each of them would be an individual in this formal sense as long as each satisfied the criteria of independent existence and homogeneity. As a philosophical anthropology, this conception of individuality represents the person as a sociological atom, self-contained, free of all social and historical constraints, and responsible for its own existence. All persons have the same nature, because they are all governed by the same laws of nature. Simmel links the anthropology of formal individuality with the philosophy of the Enlightenment. On this view, what is distinctively human lies in common characteristics that can be ascribed to all persons, properties that can be abstracted from each individual to form human nature as an abstraction determined by universal laws. As Simmel reads intellectual history, the law of nature of classical liberalism, the principles of the free market in classical political economy, the laws of associationist psychology, the principles of utility and the pain/pleasure calculus of utilitarianism, and the Kantian categorical imperative are all expressions of this Enlightenment conception of individuality,

which receives its most perfect synthesis in the philosophy of Kant (Simmel, 1921).

The other form of individuality appears at the end of the eighteenth century and finds its most consummate expression in romanticism, especially in the novels of Goethe and the philosophy of Schleiermacher. Romantic individuality is also defined by two conditions: heterogeneity and heteronomy. The significance of individuality does not depend upon the autonomy of the individual and the extent to which all individuals fall under the same laws, but rather on the singular quality of each person. The essential energies and interests that ultimately constitute the person vary from one individual to another. What is important to this conception is not the independent existence of beings that are the same in principle, but rather the uniqueness of the mode of life of beings that differ from one another in principle. This is the quality of heterogeneity. According to the Enlightenment conception, individuals are autonomous entities, isolated from one another but homogeneous in the laws that determine their nature. According to the romantic conception, individuals are not governed by general laws at all, but rather by distinctive productive forces that develop within each individual. The concomitance of these forces and the way they combine to form the character of the individual vary from one person to another. The vector defined by these forces is the immanent dynamic or “individual law” that constitutes individuality (Simmel, 1968). The romantic conception, therefore, represents the individual as the creative center of its own unique development, not as a point at which laws of human nature impinge upon the person and intersect. These considerations identify the quality in virtue of which the romantic individual “lives from the inside out” (Simmel, 1913: 144). This is the quality of heteronomy.

When Simmel refers to the “individuality of the orientation with which love always apprehends its object,” it is romantic individuality – hereinafter simply called individuality – that is at stake (1984: 168).

Love is a passion for the individuality of the beloved. This is why the feelings that link Faust and Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust* – generally regarded as one of the supreme literary representations of the erotic – do not qualify as love at all. Because Gretchen has no conception of the uniqueness of Faust's character, his individuality cannot be the object of her passion. On the contrary, Gretchen sees Faust as a certain type of man, characterized by a spiritual nature and a powerful and dominating personality. It is not Faust himself who attracts her, but rather these qualities. Her surrender to Faust is not tied to the singularity of the man himself, but only to the type of man he represents, which might be realized by any other man who also possesses these qualities. Faust also perceives Gretchen not as an irreplaceable individual, but rather as an instrument serviceable to his own personal development. For him, a woman is an adventure, an emotional station along the path that marks out the journey of his life. Gretchen is merely one of these women, to whom Faust is attracted because she conforms to a certain stage of his development. Further, what excites him is not Gretchen herself, but “the passion for her sweet body” (Simmel, 1984: 174). As a result, “each lover neglects precisely the most individual qualities of the beloved” (Simmel, 1984: 174). In this respect, Eduard and Otilie form the antithesis to Faust and Gretchen. For Eduard, Otilie is not just another woman who happens to be endowed with qualities he happens to find exciting at the time. The object of his passion is her “absolute individuality.” In addition, Eduard's feelings for Otilie cannot be represented as a type of passion that could be realized in some other object. In other words, it is not as if his feelings could be transferred from Otilie to some other woman, so that someone else could occupy her place in his life. Eduard's love is defined by the singularity of its object. This is the sense in which love is a “thoroughly individual feeling” (Simmel,

1984: 176). There is no love in-general or love-as-such, but only love- for, a passion that is tied to the individuality of the beloved.²

Reciprocity

The passion for the individuality of the beloved is consummated in reciprocity. This is the eros or will to possess that governs erotic love. Possession is the consciousness of being loved in return. The lover *L* wants to be loved by the beloved *B* in the same way *B* is loved: as an individual. This is what it means for *L* to possess *B*. *B* belongs to *L* in the sense that *B* also loves *L* as an individual. Like *L*'s passion for *B*, *B*'s love can have no other object. This means that the lover must be an individual too, for otherwise the condition of reciprocity would not be satisfied. It also means that love cannot be reduced to any state for which reciprocity is not an essential condition. Reciprocity entails that the roles of lover and beloved are interchangeable. Both enter the erotic relationship as subject or

² Consider also the relationship between Rochester and Jane Eyre. Although Rochester is obviously charmed by the combination of shyness, simplicity, frankness, and gravity displayed by the young governess, ultimately it is not these qualities that intrigue him. Nor is it so much what she says or does. It is rather what all this suggests to him: that she is, as he expresses it, cast in a distinctive mold. When Rochester praises Jane, it is not her virtues he celebrates, but rather her self: “the soul made of fire.” This uniqueness of the beloved, the singularity of her character as determined not by the contingencies of fate and the circumstances of life but rather by her own inner nature, is precisely what Rochester does not see in the glittering and majestic Blanche Ingram. Blanche seems to have everything: beauty, wit, grace, education, wealth, rank – and yet she lacks Jane’s distinctiveness and originality. As Jane perceives, this is responsible for Rochester’s evident lack of passion for Blanche. It is why he regards her as common and conventional and nothing more than a proxy for any number of other women of the same type.

actor and also as object.³ Eduard, for example, experiences Otilie as indispensable in two ways: as the object for whom he is the subject, and as the subject for whom he is the object. As regards the first point, because Otilie's individuality is what Eduard desires, she is irreplaceable as the object of his love. He loves Otilie for her own sake or as an end in herself, not in the interest of something else. Further, Eduard's love is defined in terms of this unique object. It is not a passion that can be consummated with any other woman, nor can it be stilled by travel or adventure or sublimated in work. Thus Eduard's feelings cannot be understood as love in general or love as such, but only as love for Otilie. As regards the second point, because Eduard wants to be loved in the same way he loves Otilie, she is indispensable to him. Therefore, it is not sufficient for him to love someone who sees him as replaceable and treats him as an instrument, someone who is wanted only to the extent that he is good for something or useful for some purpose. He must be loved as he is loved: by someone who desires his individuality for its own sake. Finally, the reciprocal love on which this consummation of Eduard's passion depends is not an abstract desire that could be the act of any agent. On the contrary, it is defined by reference to a unique subject: Otilie.

³ Simmel argues that this is one of the decisive differences between erotic and Platonic love. Erotic love links two persons. Platonic love links one person, the lover, and the idea of perfect beauty more or less completely realized by another person, the beloved. Because "the idea to which this love is directed does not love in return," Platonic love is independent of any response (Simmel, 1971a: 245). Because Platonic love is a relationship between a person and an idea, it is also consistent with the replaceability of the beloved. Consider the idea of beauty that the beloved represents. If this idea is also realized by other persons, they can become objects of the same love as the beloved. From the perspective of Platonic love, this is why it is "slavish and foolish to bind one's feelings exclusively to a single beautiful person" (Simmel, 1971a: 241).

Immediacy

The immediacy of love is exhibited in the way it diminishes the distance between the lover and the beloved (Simmel, 1984: 155, 164- 165). This happens in two ways. First, actions that are motivated by love are not instrumental. They are not performed to achieve some purpose that is independent of the lover's feelings for the beloved. Eduard, for example, does not give Otilie presents because he wants something from her, nor does she anticipate his every whim in order to get something from him. Max Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality may be useful here. Love is not instrumentally rational. It is not governed by teleological considerations, criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, or success that require the linkage of means to ends. The imposition of such criteria violates the anti- teleological character of love, which is an end in itself. An act of love is performed for its own sake as the expression of an erotic value, the passion of the lover for the individuality of the beloved.

Love also narrows the distance between lover and beloved in another way: It is not mediated by the personal qualities of the lovers, or by other relationships or forms of life in which they engage. Otilie does not love Eduard because he is a wealthy estate owner, impetuous and prodigal his generosity. Nor are Eduard and Otilie in love because they are friends, because they have common interests, or because they are well- matched sexual partners. All these factors mediate the relationship between persons, creating proximity only by establishing distance. Precisely because love "resists any localization in specifiable qualities," such factors have no bearing on an erotic relationship (Simmel, 1984: 181). Thus love

transcends the media by means of which persons are usually linked.⁴ However, it does not completely eliminate the distance between them. In that case, the lovers' desire for absolute union would destroy their individuality and thus nullify not only what separates them, but also the conditions that make love possible. Erotic love would become narcissism. The point at issue here can be made by using one of Simmel's favorite metaphors: the bridge (Simmel, 1957). It cannot be said that love forms a bridge between the lovers. That is because a bridge separates just as it connects; or it connects only by separating. Love is an experience that unites the lovers independent of any medium that creates distance between them. As a result, the relationship between love and distance is ambivalent in an interesting way. On the one hand, love depends upon the "pathos of distance" that is essential to individuality (Lichtblau, 1984). On the other hand, because love is the ultimate passion – unconditional in the sense that lovers act with their whole being, holding nothing in reserve – it tends to collapse the distance between lover and beloved.

Why Do You Love Me?

Why is love independent of the qualities or personal attributes of the beloved? The answer lies in the consideration that any quality is general. In principle, it can be ascribed to any person. Because beauty, wit, or courage can be attributed to anyone who satisfies the conditions for the ascription of these predicates, they cannot be tied to individuality, which lies beyond all such qualities. "It is situated in

⁴ Consider also Rochester and Jane Eyre, who are separated not only by wealth and social rank, but also by radical differences in temperament, morals, and form of life. Their passion destroys these barriers so that they experience one another as united beyond personal and conventional differences. This collapse of distance is what is at stake when Jane insists that, unlike the fashionable and wealthy guests Rochester invites to his house, she understands the language of his countenance.

the nexus of these qualities,” Simmel explains, somewhat unhelpfully, a nexus that “does not lie in the qualities themselves” (Simmel, 1984: 181). Because the individual is the only possible object of love, it follows that the erotic “never pertains to this or that single quality of the beloved” (Simmel, 1984: 181).

This means that the question “Why do you love me?” has no answer. There are two reasons why this is the case. First, the question attempts to identify the grounds of love, the qualities of the beloved that explain love, justify it, or make sense of it. These qualities, regardless of what they are, could be possessed by someone else. Thus if the question had an answer, the beloved could also be replaced by someone else. But since the object of love is the irreplaceable individuality of the beloved, that is impossible. Love does not have a foundation. It rather grounds the experience of the lovers as an *a priori* of their lives. Second, notice that if the question “Why do I love you?” had an answer, it would reduce love to something else. The response, “I love you because you are ... beautiful, witty, wealthy, sexy,” and so forth grounds love in something that is not love. As a result, it violates Simmel’s doctrine that “either the psyche possesses love as an ultimate fact, or it does not possess it at all” (Simmel, 1984: 162).⁵ Thus the question “Why do you love me?” commits a category mistake. It erroneously

⁵ Simmel claims that love is a “distinctive inner attitude” that is not comparable to anything else, neither can it be constructed from any other elements (Simmel, 1984: 158). The experience of love cannot be reduced to more elementary phenomena or reconstructed from the concomitant interaction of such phenomena. This is why a “rationalistic psychology” cannot succeed in analyzing love as egoism, altruism, or sexuality. Any such analysis represents an attempt to construct love from a plurality of factors, none of which can be identified with love itself. The basic error of these derivations lies in their “mechanistic character,” which violates the quality of love as a primary and distinctive mode of being (Simmel, 1984: 156-157).

assumes that love is something that can be explained or justified, rather than something that itself provides an explanation of justification by forming the basis of the lover's existence.

Radicalism

Simmel calls love “one of the great formative categories of existence” (Simmel, 1984: 159). Like religion, science, and art, it is a transcendental presupposition of a certain experience of the world. Love transforms the subject or actor into the lover and the object of love into the beloved, thereby creating two new beings. “As the one who loves, I am a different person than I was before, for it is not one or the other of my 'aspects' or energies that loves, but rather the entire person” (Simmel, 1984: 161). The same holds for the beloved, who becomes a different person as a result of the fact that love “determines the total and ultimate essence of its object and creates it as this object, which prior to this did not exist” (Simmel, 1984: 181). This is why love is a revolutionary force, an agent of disintegration that produces social and emotional crises. Like Eduard, lovers are frequently uncomfortable, uncivil, and untrustworthy. This is because their passion often cannot be accommodated within the framework of existing institutions. Is not general incivility the very essence of love, Jane Austen asked, playfully and rhetorically. The connection between love and incivility is actually much more profound than she supposed. It extends far beyond the bad manners and social laxity and carelessness often characteristic of lovers. This is because lovers say no to what exists. They destroy or realign what existing forms of life integrate, and they unite what these forms of life differentiate. They create new distances and break down established proximities. The status quo is debased as contemptible and worthless in comparison with the absolute value represented by the new world of eros. This

means that love is a great risk, not merely because it represents something new, but because the new life it envisions is a radical challenge to the institutions that made the past life of the lovers possible. Thus the lover is correctly perceived as a dangerous radical. The transformation of Eduard into a lover and Otilie into his beloved results in an attempt to remake the world in such a way that their new intimacy and the new distance between the lovers and all others become possible. The old forms and their rules and obligations, friendship, marriage, fatherhood, and economic responsibility, are devaluated and deprived of their legitimacy and significance. The world must be dismantled and reformed so that it is consistent with the new immediacy of the erotic dyad. This means that all of Eduard's relationships – his friendship with the Captain, his duties as the owner of a large estate, his marriage, and his obligations as a father – must either be annulled or recast to meet the requirements of his relationship with Otilie. Consider the typical complaint of the practical realist against lovers: that they live in an unreal world, a fantasy spun by the erotic imagination. There is, of course, a sense in which this reproach is sound. Love rejects reality as defined by the status quo. It represents an attempt to recreate the world by realizing the lovers' version of their union. Because the logic of love departs so radically from the logic of existing institutions, the lovers' intentions seem irresponsible and absurd, and the lovers themselves are perceived as irrational, immoral, or even mad.

Love and Modernity

The erotic person is not a one-sided careerist.

Simmel (1967: 103)⁶

Modernity

Simmel analyzes culture as the sphere in which life first reproduces itself as “more life” and then transcends itself by creating forms that are “more – than – life.” Erotic love as a cultural form is originally generated by life in the rudimentary proto-form of sexual attraction. However, when love develops its own distinctive structures and begins to function according to its own principles, one of the “axial revolutions” characteristic of Simmel’s thought occurs. Although love as “more life” serves the procreative needs of the human species, it now becomes an end in itself or “more-than-life,” making possible the intimacy of the lover and the beloved and the autonomy of the erotic dyad.

Simmel analyzes culture as a dialectical process. On the one hand, the activities of the person are formalized in the structures of *objective culture*, the world of cultural forms and their artifacts that become relatively independent of personal life. On the other hand, these forms and artifacts are also incorporated into *subjective culture*, the personal synthesis of cultural forms in the life of the individual. As a result of the interaction between subjective and objective culture, the person becomes not merely heterogeneous, or different from every other person. The personality is also formed heteronomously, according to its own immanently determined energies and interests, which govern the interplay between

⁶ "Was der erotische Mensch jedenfalls nicht ist: ein sparsamer Haushalter, ein differenzierter Berufsmensch, ein Hypochonder" (Simmel, 1967: 103).

subjective and objective culture. This synthesis is individuality, the life of the person as a cultural being.

Erotic love appears only under cultural conditions in which the interaction between subjective and objective culture makes individuality possible. Although Simmel never developed an explicit sociology of love, some of the materials for such an analysis can be derived from his sociology of individuality. As the above account shows, individuality is a necessary condition for love. This means that the elimination of individuality also destroys love. Simmel's sociology of individuality focuses on two large questions: the conditions for the formation of individuality and the conditions under which it is nullified. Thus by implication it is also an inquiry into the conditions for the formation and destruction of love. In Simmel's analysis of modern culture, he concentrates on the conditions for the degradation and destruction of individuality and has much less to say about the conditions for its formation. This is because he believes that modernity represents a threat to individuality. In light of the relationship between cultural development, individuality, and love, we can expect that love will be jeopardized under the following circumstances. Either individuality is no longer valued for its own sake, but is treated only as a means for something else; or individuality is destroyed.

In Simmel's thought, modernity may be understood as a state of culture characterized by two processes: *reification* and *instrumentalization*.⁷ Simmel claims that at advanced levels of cultural development, objective culture becomes increasingly detached from personal life. This occurs whenever cultural artifacts relevant to

⁷ For a more thorough analysis of these processes see Oakes (1980, 1984) and the essays on Simmel and modernity in Dahme and Rammstedt (1984).

individuality can be only incompletely integrated into subjective culture. Because the products of objective culture have a tendency to evolve into self – contained worlds governed by their own immanent laws, the universe of cultural artifacts becomes progressively complex, recondite, and diversified. The incorporation of cultural forms into personal life cannot match the pace at which objective culture evolves. As a result, the development of objective culture becomes relatively self – sufficient, self – perpetuating, and estranged from the subjective culture of the individual. It can be said that a cultural form is reified when these conditions obtain. Because reification is a process, a cultural form can be more or less reified, depending upon the extent to which these conditions are satisfied. Moreover, a given historical culture comprising a specific ensemble of forms can also be more or less reified, depending upon how many of its forms are evolving in this direction. Modernization is a function of the progressive reification of cultural forms, and modernity is a state of culture in which an increasing number of cultural forms become increasingly reified.

Simmel claims that in certain highly reified cultural forms, the distance between aims and their achievement increases because of the number of instrumental links that intervene between purposes and what is required for their realization. As a result, actors lose sight of their real purposes, which are defined by the things that are valued for their own sake. These are the circumstances under which instrumentalization occurs (Simmel, 1986: 3-5). It may take either of two directions. Actors who have lost sight of their ultimate purposes and can no longer grasp the objectives they originally intended may transpose means into ends, with the result that an intrinsic importance is ascribed to techniques or instruments. Or, in their confusion, actors may treat ends as means, transposing their original purposes into instruments. A cultural form can be more or less instrumentalized, depending on the extent to which these conditions obtain. A given historical culture can also be more or less

instrumentalized, depending upon how many of its forms satisfy these conditions.

Modernity, therefore, is defined by two variables: the internal differentiation or complexity of any given cultural form, which is a function of instrumentalization, and the number of different, relatively autonomous cultural forms, which is a function of reification. Because instrumentalization and reification threaten to destroy individuality, they also endanger love, which becomes increasingly problematic and compromised in modern culture.

Love and the Instrumental Attitude

According to Simmel, a certain attitude is characteristic of modern culture. Nothing is valued for its own sake. On the contrary, everything tends to be treated as a way to get something else. As applied to persons, this means that any given person can be replaced by someone else, for in principle, any instrument can be replaced by any other that serves the same purpose equally well. As a result, no one is treated as an individual. This mentality may be called the instrumental attitude. It includes several distinct but closely related dispositions (Simmel, 1971d).

The Analytical Spirit

The attitude that assesses persons with reference to their appropriateness as means depends upon an analytical approach to human beings. Persons are reduced to their various qualities with a view to determining which qualities are instrumentally relevant. This disposition is obviously inconsistent with love, which excludes both the analysis of persons in terms of their qualities and the use of the beloved for non – erotic purposes.

Sachlichkeit

The analysis and assessment of persons as instruments requires the cool and dispassionate mentality that Simmel calls *Sachlichkeit*, a posture of impersonality that depends upon conceiving persons as objects. This purely matter – of – fact approach to the treatment of all things involves an uncompromising severity, an unconcern for personal considerations, and above all an indifference to individuality. Because *Sachlichkeit* depends upon a detachment and reserve on the part of the actor, it creates an emotional distance between the actor and other persons. Because it violates both individuality and immediacy, *Sachlichkeit* also conflicts with love.⁸

The Calculative Spirit

Modern culture also depends on a quantitative approach to all things. This is due to the functional necessity of increasingly rigorous standards of precision and punctuality in modern life. It is expressed in the reduction of all qualities to the same scale, the quantification of all values, and the disposition to abstract from the individual distinctiveness of things those properties that are

⁸ *Sachlichkeit* literally means the disposition to treat something as a *Sache* or an object. It is not an intrinsically pejorative term. For example, a judge who decides a case impartially and solely on its merits, without regard to the persons involved, is said to have *Sachlichkeit*: impartiality or objectivity. This does not signify that he is callous or insensitive, nor does it imply that the parties in the case mean nothing to him as individuals. It means only that their individuality has no bearing on his decision. According to Simmel, it is the universalization of *Sachlichkeit* characteristic of modern culture — the detached and impersonal treatment of all persons as objects in all contexts—that threatens individuality. Thus, it is the universalization of *Sachlichkeit* exhibited in the instrumental attitude that is inconsistent with love.

common to all of them. The determination of how serviceable someone is for a given purpose requires an impersonal standard or a transpersonal set of criteria against which all persons can be measured, with a view to establishing how much they can be expected to contribute to a certain purpose or how many of their qualities are relevant to a certain end. The logic of the instrumental attitude is the logic of a utilitarian calculus or a cost/benefit analysis. In its approach to persons, the only appropriate question to ask is: How much? This disposition is, of course, blatantly contrary to love, which repudiates the quantification of the person. Love never counts costs, and the lover never asks "Is it worth it?". This means that lovers cannot be calculative. The question "How much do you love me?" is an expression of confusion or vulgarity. It reduces love – which cannot be analyzed or quantified – to something that can be measured.

Modernity and The Perversion of Love

The opposition between love and the instrumental attitude has a number of interesting consequences. It means that "keeping score" rules out love. People who worry about whether they are getting enough or giving too much, whether they are ahead or behind, and whether their partners are good enough are not lovers. The same holds for the woman who sees a man as a provider of economic security, household maintenance, gifts, entertainment, and the latest fashions, or the man who sees a woman as a childbearer, housekeeper, or ornament, as a purveyor of domestic or sexual services, or as an instrumental expression of his sociocultural status or consumption power. Because lovers are irreplaceable, love cannot be a commodity. Thus, love cannot be bought or sold, nor can one shop for love.

Consider the "Strictly Personal" columns in newspapers and magazines, advertisements submitted by solicitors in the market for love. A man who claims to be a "bi-coastal publisher" with all the

trappings of success and a “fast-lane lifestyle” says he is interested in a woman who is “ultra feminine,” sophisticated, and “elegantly sexy.” Such a notice assumes that love can be defined by qualities that could be possessed by an indefinite number of persons and that are comparable as regards their exchange value. Persons are reduced to their features that are disposable on the love market, and they are compared on a scale that measures the relative utility of these features. Love is reduced to need satisfaction, and it is consummated in a trade. The man with the “fastlane lifestyle” exchanges one of his townhouses for the “elegant sexuality” of the woman. This notice is not, of course, “strictly personal” at all. It is not tied to the individuality of the advertiser, nor does it ascribe an authentic value to the respondent, “the beloved,” who is regarded as a means for something else. Although the tastes of the consumers may differ considerably, from the standpoint of love this notice has the same status as a more candid and unambiguous entry by a young woman (“42DD”) who says she is interested in a gentle older man with money and describes herself as “into oral sex, brown showers, erotic enemas, and rectal therapy.”

Because love is inconsistent with the instrumental attitude, all utilitarian approaches to love are based on a general error, which Simmel describes as “the invasion of the domain of love by the teleological category” (Simmel, 1984: 169). His primary instance of this error is the conflation of love with sensuality. According to Simmel, there are three reasons why love cannot be reduced to sensual desire, to Faust’s passion for the “sweet body” of the beloved. First, sensuality fractures the unity of the lover as a person and abstracts sensual desire from his individuality. Thus, sensuality destroys the individuality of the lover. Second, the object of sensuality can always be replaced by any other object that serves the same purpose. Thus, sensuality also destroys the individuality of the beloved: “The individuality with which love apprehends its object, and nothing but its object, is reversed in favor of a completely non-individual pleasure, the object of which can in principle be replaced

by any object at all" (Simmel, 1984: 168). Finally, the replaceability of the object of sensual desire entails its instrumental status. "Since replaceability always has the character of a means," the object of sensuality is disclosed as "nothing more than the mere means for the realization of a solipsistic purpose" – the sensual pleasure of the actor, which can be consummated independent of any reciprocal relationship between actor and object (Simmel, 1984: 168).

These same considerations also apply to the reduction of love to sexual attraction, or to what Freud calls "genital love." Love is debased as sexual attraction when the virtuoso of the emotions, consumed by a passion for the beloved and desiring only that this passion be returned, is replaced by the "sex machine," or, more recently, by the sexual "performer" or "athlete." Simmel, of course, does not deny that sensuality or sexuality can be a vehicle of love. On the contrary, love is typically expressed in a de-instrumentalized and highly individualized sensuality that is tied to the uniqueness of the beloved. Sensual pleasure and sexual attraction are transformed in a "powerful axial revolution by means of which attraction becomes love" (Simmel, 1984: 171). Sensuality is eroticized when it exists for the sake of love or as an expression of love. It is only "isolated sensuality, the autonomy of sensual pleasure as an end in itself," that is inconsistent with love (Simmel, 1984: 168). When sensuality takes the place of love, the transposition of means into ends that is characteristic of the process of instrumentalization occurs. Sensual desire, an instrumental value and a mode in which love is expressed, acquires the status of an authentic value.

However, the instrumentalization of love can also take directions that have no essential connection with sensuality. For example, love may be instrumentalized as a way to achieve other more domesticated values, as Jane Austen has shown in *Pride and Prejudice*. Consider her account of the declaration of "love" and proposal of marriage by Mr. Collins – the sanctimonious and conceited clergyman – to the charming Elizabeth. Collins provides Elizabeth

with a list of general reasons for marrying at all, followed by a list of more specific reasons for choosing Elizabeth herself. Because she satisfies his conditions, his feelings for her seem justified. Put another way, Collins has performed a cost/benefit analysis on his feelings for Elizabeth, and such an analysis shows that she is a profitable object of emotional attachment. Collins's interest in Elizabeth exhibits all the characteristic features of the instrumental attitude: the analytical spirit, which reduces Elizabeth to her instrumental qualities and assesses them in terms of their appropriateness to his purposes; the dispassionate mentality of detachment and reserve, in which Collins maintains the emotional distance between himself and Elizabeth that is essential to an objective assessment; and the calculative spirit that measures Elizabeth against his impersonal criteria. When Elizabeth rejects Collins's advances, he turns instead, with shameless alacrity, to her friend Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte's principles and values seem to approximate his own fairly closely. Any partner who satisfies the proper criteria will do. Charlotte returns Collins's "love" in a way he did not perhaps expect: namely, in kind. She accepts his proposal "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment," the estate Collins stands to inherit. Charlotte finds Collins disagreeable, unattractive, and something of a fool. Throwing her plain looks, small fortune, and advancing age into the balance together with her own desire for domestic comfort and security, she calculates that her chances of happiness with Collins "are as fair as most people can boast of on entering the marriage state" (Austen, 1949: 107). As she remarks, somewhat unnecessarily, to Elizabeth: "I am not a romantic, you know."

Although it is clear that Jane Austen places Elizabeth and Darcy on a much more elevated emotional plane, from the standpoint of love there seems to be no essential difference between their relationship and that between Collins and Charlotte. Collins wants a socially acceptable wife with modest material expectations, in exchange for which he is willing to provide a respectable domestic

establishment. Charlotte accepts these terms and the instrumental criteria that govern them. It is not that she wants Collins. She wants a house. Nor does Collins want her. He wants bourgeois respectability. When Elizabeth, after considerable deliberation, finally concludes that Darcy is, after all, the man for her, different values obviously come into play. However, the principle on which she bases her decision is still that of the exchange governed by utilitarian considerations. Darcy, she judges, will benefit from her vivacity and easy ways. She, in turn, will benefit from his superior judgment and knowledge of the world. In other words, both relationships instrumentalize love as a way to happiness, conceived either as domestic security (Charlotte), middle class respectability (Collins), or an emotionally elevated complementarity (Elizabeth).

Love is the perfection of the individual in a certain direction or in the interest of a certain value. Given the conflict between love and the institutional status quo, lovers may have to abandon other values in order to achieve erotic perfection. They may also have to sacrifice themselves as agents or exemplars of these values, just as Eduard was obliged to renounce the responsibilities of marriage, work, fatherhood, and friendship in order to consummate his love for Ottilie. This means that love may lead to the-loss of status, humiliation, guilt, and shame. Lovers may be compelled to perform acts that are irresponsible, absurd, or abominable from the standpoint of other values, and they may cause incalculable suffering to others and to themselves as well. But none of these considerations have an essential bearing on love, nor do they necessarily compromise love in any way. However, they do suggest that there is no essential relationship between love and happiness. If this is the case, then it is obviously a mistake to conceive love as a means to happiness. Unrequited love – love without reciprocity – may make one unhappy. But the same may hold for love that is consummated or reciprocated. In order to become a virtuoso of the emotions like Eduard, the lover must behave with a supreme

contempt for morality, comfort, security, self-respect, and any other value that conflicts with the erotic perfection of the individual. As the case of Eduard also indicates, this renunciation of all values in the interest of the sovereign value of love may lead to misery and wretchedness rather than happiness. It follows that the instrumentalization of love as happiness fails for three reasons: the contingency of the relationship between love and happiness; the conflict between love and the instrumental attitude, which entails that love cannot serve as a means for any end, including happiness; and the incommensurability between love and other values, which requires that the lover sacrifice all other interests to the erotic.

Modernity universalizes the instrumental attitude and thereby nullifies the possibility of love. In modern culture, all choices between authentic values are reduced to questions of technique, and life as a whole becomes a technical problem.

Mere instruments have acquired the dignity of ultimate values. This completely transposes the natural order of our spiritual and practical existence. Objective culture develops to an extent and according to a tempo which increasingly transcends the level of subjective culture, even though the authentic significance of the perfection of objective culture lies in its contribution to subjective culture. The individual domains of culture develop along divergent paths, with the result that the different provinces of culture become juxtaposed and estranged from one another. Culture as a whole is really approaching the fate of the tower of Babel. As a result, the most profound value of culture, which consists in the interconnection and coherence of the structures of culture, seems to be threatened with destruction (Simmel, 1917: 62).

The “most profound value of culture,” the coherence of the structures of culture, lies in subjective culture, the personal synthesis of the forms of objective culture that constitutes individuality. Because of the relationship between love and individuality, this

means that the collapse of individuality entails the destruction of love. It means that erotic virtuosi such as Eduard are no longer possible in modern culture. In modern culture, the Eduard's of this world become careerists, for according to Simmel the primary motive force of reification and instrumentalization is the economic division of labor. In order to adapt to an increasingly complex and comprehensive division of labor, individuals become increasingly one – sided and fragmented. The specialization of production perfects the product at the expense of the producers, who are homogeneously formed by the process of production itself, not by their own inner forces and energies. As a result, they no longer have the properties of heterogeneity and heteronomy that qualify them as individuals and as potential lovers.

Thus, it should not be surprising that the great lovers of modern literature are, as Max Weber might have said, economically expendable: in other words, relatively independent of the constraints of the economic division of labor and its fragmentation of personal life. Like Eduard, Rochester was a member of the gentry. Heathcliff lived the life of a somewhat debauched rentier, and even Jay Gatsby, although a former entrepreneur on a large scale, was retired from business. Two of the best recent love stories by American writers illustrate this connection between love and economic independence in an interesting way. The hero of Richard Brickner's *Tickets* writes interviews for a slick magazine and sets his own schedule. His lover is a novelist who works at home and lives off her husband's income. The main character of Alison Lurie's *Foreign Affairs* is a tenured professor on sabbatical in London from a prestigious Eastern university. Although these contemporary lovers are professionally active – as required by aesthetic realism and the exigencies of contemporary economic life – they all have careers in which work does not utterly exhaust life and destroy the erotic qualifications of the worker.

References

- Austen, J. (1949). *Pride and Prejudice*. Philadelphia: John C. Winston.
- Dahme. H. J., and K. C. Köhnke. (1985). "Einleitung", in H. J. Dahme and K. C. Köhnke (ed.) *Georg Simmel: Schriften zur Philosophie und Soziologie der Geschlechter*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 7- 26.
- Dahme. H-J., and O. Rammsledt (ed.) (1984). *Georg Simmel und die Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Lichtblau. K. (1984). "Das 'Pathos der Distanz.' Praliminarien zur Nietzsche Rezeption bei Georg Simmel", in *Georg Simmel und die Moderne*. Dahme, H- J. & O. Rammstedt (ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 231- 281.
- Nedelmann. B. (1983). "George Simmel: Emotion und Wechselwirkung in intimen Gruppen", in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 25, pp. 174- 209.
- Oakes. G. (1980). "Introduction", in: *Georg Simmel: Essays on Interpretation in Social Science*. Oakes, G. (ed.). Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 3- 94.
- Oakes. G. (1984). "The Problem of Women in Simmel's Theory of Culture", in: *George Simmel: On Women, Sexuality, and Love*. Oakes, G. (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 3- 62.
- Simmel, G. (1913). *Goethe*. Leipzig: Klinkhardt and Biermann.
- Simmel, G. (1917). *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen*. Munich and Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot.
- Simmel, G. (1921). *Kant. Sechzehn Vorlesungen gehalten an der Berliner Universität*. Munich and Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot.
- Simmel, G. (1950). *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Wolff, K. H. (ed.). New York: The Free Press.

- Simmel, G. (1957). *Brücke und Tür*. Landmann, M. (ed.). Stuttgart: K.F. Köhler.
- Simmel, G. (1967). *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlass und Veröffentlichungen der letzten Jahre*. Kantorowicz, G. (ed.). Hildesheim: Georg Olms.
- Simmel, G. (1968). *Das Individuelle Gesetz*. Landmann, M. (ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Simmel, G. (1971a). “Eros, Platonic and Modern”, in: *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Levine, D. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 235- 248.
- Simmel, G. (1971b). “Freedom and the Individual”, in: *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Levine, D. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 217-226.
- Simmel, G. (1971c). “Group Expansion and the Development of Individuality”, in: *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Levine, D. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 251- 293.
- Simmel, G. (1971d). “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, in: *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Levine, D. (ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 324- 339.
- Simmel, G. (1984). “On Love (A Fragment)”, in: *On Women, Sexuality, and Love*. Oakes, G. (ed.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 153- 192.
- Simmel, G. (1986). *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.