What Else?
Summer Notes After a Love Lost
Love

1. Last summer, long and hot, I repeatedly failed at remaining optimistic about love. This sentence need not provincia. It is certain that tears came easily, frequently, and in moments of despair seemed endless. They came in moments of felt disparity between the new and the future everyday and the ghostly remnants of the affective world I left behind with its familiar form of promise, reciprocity and being known. Desire however remained on the side of the break in between that moment of ending our relationship and that definitive move to London, which would separate me from friends and many accumulated comforting habits. There was time to improve and to be indifferent to the self as coping strategies there was space for desire to be “impractical and impractical”! Never final, it is now too early to reflect on where desire has led me. These are merely reflections of my summer notes after a love and a world: the experiences, without the luxury of wisdom that accompanies autobiographies written with hindsight.

It remains inconceivable that our last day as partners was spent on a flight from London to Ghana. Nothing sensational happened apart from the eerie experience of the bus driver upon which we both frowned. We could have continued the day after, yet we ended it. Similarly, we could have ended it before, but we chose to continue the day. A break-up needs to be rehearsed, someone said later. The contingency (that evening) and the banality that bus bared it nevertheless of all drama. That afternoon, I had been flying back each week between London (where I work) and Ghana (where I lived) on the Eurostar. Starting again, I was the other place demanded energy anyway, but during that year our love got more and more entangled with doubt. Doubt is not detrimental to love: the obstacles it creates come with the promise that, once overcome, love will be fortified. Doubt can fire theatrical scenes ending in passionate reconciliations. Tomorrow is another day to reach utopia.

But at one point body and mind get wore out. Deborah Levy writes in The Cost of Living (2018), the second part of her “living autobiography,” that she did not want to swim back home to the boat: “My marriage was the boat and I knew that if I swam back to it, I would drown.” Now I feel people that I felt tired of having swum back to the boat many times.

2. In the preface to her collection On Not Being Able to Sleep (2000) Jacqueline Rose comments on how all her reviews are on women’s writing whereas the psychoanalytic essays deal with men: “In this collection, then, is a man who struggles with the characters of his own making, women whose words travel on more unofficial paths?” I was sitting in the sun-drenched garden of the London house where I rented a room for three evenings a week, and I too wanted to travel those paths. The way we learn to understand female love is, after all, part of the male institution which is femininity, as also Levy contends.

Femininity, as a cultural personality, was no longer expressive for me. It was obvious that femininity, as written by men and performed by women, was the exhausted phantom that still haunted the early twenty-first century. What would it cost to step out of character and stop the story?

What Lauren Berlant calls the female complaint is that “women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking.” The phrase denotes a scene of disappointment over lived intimacy not living up to romantic fantasies but does not entail a detachment from them. Elsewhere because it holds the promise of conventional and of sharing a world with others. Along those lines one might think of the man aclaiming as “men do not live for love, but love is the gift that never gives enough.” This phrase suggests a scene of disappointment over lived intimacy not living up to romantic fantasies but does entail a detachment from them because it is not up to men to change. It is women who cannot be read transparently, act strange, by pluse parthe or no longer wish to sacrifice or endure, are “frigid,” act pathological because of the contradicting impulses society imposes on them and refuse to love the same way men — in short, do not confirm male presence. This is a simplifying, only partial statement, but not false: love will ever overcome social hardships, it will do so for hegemonic men as only for them nothing societally required.

This summer I found myself reading, apart from one novel by Don Delillo, only fiction by women. Maybe I did not read that same male writing in which a woman is presented as the cause and another woman as the solution to the male protagonist’s issues. The social toils of female desire and agency enlivened my own desire to desire and to want another story, and the hope, in a way attuned to the different parts men and women were and are forced to perform.

I’ve read these stories in gardens, on the beach, in trains and planes, on the couch, in parks and always in a cleansing sun.

4. I would like to think of my reading practice this summer as resurgent. It is related to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of reparative reading that understands the reader’s task is not to focus solely on hidden injustices and power relations — as paranoid reading proclaims — but to hold a more intimate relation to the text and to perceive it as an object that allows for sustenance “a reparative impulse […] wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will have resources to offer to an inchoate self?” The danger here might be that we focus on the private individual and private emotions as a means to understand the social and no longer perceive them as things that need to be explained socially.

That is Berlant’s interest: “the impersonality of the structures and practices that conventionalize desire, intimacy, and even society itself.”

Wherever we feel at all loss there is a repertoire of “conventional forms of the social” that help us to cover up our anxiety and guide us to “recognize only some of our attachments as the core of who we are and what we belong to.” In its therapeutic gesture, reparative reading risks repeating and affirming impersonal structures that might be adverse to one’s flourishing.

Therefore, a resurgent reading. There is no wounded self that needs to be healed, but a self that needs to rise into life through an understanding that one can be emancipated from social narratives and characters and through searching for openings and forms that allow the self to thrive more.

5. It is hard to keep one’s space and time open. “In fact, the first thing people sometimes did with their freedom was to find another version of the thing that imprisoned them,” it says in Pratiki (2016), the second book in Rachel Cusk’s masterful trilogy, flanked by Outline (2015) and Kudos (2018). In these novels the narrator Faye mostly just listens to her interlocutors. Their stories form echoes and mirrors of each other and these outline the figure of Faye without filling her in: it is the impersonal shape of a personhood without the actual experience. She however wishes to step outside of that form: “But other women thought of no longer any help to me. Those thoughts only existed within certain structures, and I had definitively left those structures”. She chooses to embrace her passivity as a virtue and abstain herself from desire “I was trying to find a different way of living in the world.”

One of those impersonal structures is growth: “They were both still young enough to believe that this principle of growth was exponential, that life was only expansive, and broke the successive vessels in which you tried to contain it in its need to expand more.” This is not unrelated to what Elizabeth Freeman calls “chrononormativity,” the implementation and naturalization of historical time schemes on bare life: “These are teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childbirth and death and its attendant rituals.” It certainly haunts the narrator in Sheila Heti’s Motherhood (2018) who questions through the whole novel whether or not she should become a mother. Heti as well incorporates a lot of voices in her novel as the many social forms of conventional life that want her to recognize which attachments are important. As a counterweight, Heti introduces a technique of randomness derived from the ancient Chinese I Ching text, in which the flipping of three coins gives her yes or no answers in an imaginary conversation that she wishes to reveal a truth about herself.
Through positing all these voices beside each other, these novels train us in the ambiguity that love or its absence creates and in the mediation of the many norms, voices, desires, opinions that are (mostly) unsolicitedly laid upon us. At the same time, the novels imply a more active shaping of life instead of waiting for the conventional narrative to behalf us. Faye moves on from impatience to a certain anger in *Famous and is remarked in *Radice* "I hoped to get the better of those laws (...) by living within them." In Heln’s *Adulthood* the narrator aims to set herself a similar task from the outside by turning the lack of particular conventionally ordained life events into a positive choice through which one shapes life.

But how do you describe the absence of something? (...) My lack of the experience of motherhood is not an experience of motherhood, Or is it? Can I call it a motherhood, too? (...) Maybe if I could somehow figure out what not **having a child** is an experience of—make it into an active action, rather than the lack of an action—I might know what I was experiencing, and not feel so much like I was waiting to act. I might be able to choose my life (...)..

6. I was struck by the speed with which I unaccountably seemed to want a new relation. As a **beautifully shaped web of lyrical mutuality**, the couple in its commercially romantic guise offers a promise of life completed and balanced. It presents and makes love hierarchically highest in what we need for the good life. Therefore, promises and desires can turn into obligations, *I Want My Time With You* (2018). Tracey Emin’s artwork that hangs above the Eurostar platforms, gets at this duality, I long to be with you, but equally the other’s longing as an order in neon letters cannot be ignored. If the couple is what one needs, to not want to give most of your time to being a couple might make one feel guilty, awkward, inadequate, doubtful, stuck. Betrand however reminds us that it is not about loving or hating the couple. Rather:

say there’s what being in a couple can do, and here’s the other things I need in order to flourish. Then you start to think of yourself as having a capacity to produce many kinds of patterning and attachment to.

7. Levy writes how a friend gave her a shed to write in and how that friend realized that no one was allowed to interrupt her and to leave her autonomy and time. "To be valued and respected in this way, if it were the most normal thing in the world, was a new experience."

I want love to be the mutual gift of a shed in which one can be alone or invite, beside the partner, whoever and whatever one wants to spend one’s time with in order to flourish.

---

**Footnotes**


14) Levy, Hot Milk, 104.


17) I would like to dedicate this essay to my friends, whose hospitality this summer has picked me up when I felt to have fallen down.
Love
3 Editorial
4 Love is What You Want
The Rittenhouse Messages of Tracey Emin’s Neon Lights
Jude Pooten
11 What Else?
Summer Notes
After a Love Lost
Hans Demeyer
16 This book is for W.R., to whom I wish all good things
Sophie Sanders
26 Truks
De reis is gelijk aan de afstand tussen ons
Dan Añila

29 TODAY
Drawing series
Marjaen Rijns

50 Love in the Age of Meritocracy
Andrea Knezevic

55 This Poem
Jiska Lombar

57 A spectroscopic love letter
Anouk Hoogendoorn and Francesco Trento

63 Colofon

"These machines are so alive, while these humans are so inert!" schreef Donna Haraway in A Cyborg Manifesto in 1985. In de huidige tijd waarin de scheiding tussen mens en technologie steeds meer lijkt te vervagen, kromt het humanistische idee van de mens als rationeel en kennisdrager op losse schroeven te staan. Wat het betreft om mens te zijn in een wereld waarin digitale technologieën op fundamentele wijze onder meer van ons bestaan, is een vraag die vis-a-vis kunsten onderzocht kan worden. In het volgende nummer van Simulacrum, Prettiboom, zullen we reflecteren op de veronderstellingen tussen mens en technologie.