

Miray ÇAKIROĞLU\*

## The Unspeakable in Love: A Nietzschean Perspective

### Abstract

Selflessness is among the most valued traits in human nature. It takes on forms according to the kind of relationships it appears in. Love, the one-to-one relationship between the lover and the beloved is no exception as to the praise of selflessness. It is even assumed that selflessness is one of the things that true love brings with itself: If  $x$  is in love, s/he cares more for his beloved  $y$  than he does for himself/herself. This commonsensical formulation is full of examples in love poems, specifically the sonnets. These poems claim to show the ways of love to the reader through the personae's own life experience, most often the suffering he has experienced. The personae suffers because he has been selfless all the while, but in spite of that he cannot fulfil his wishes as his lady is too cruel. However, the question is whether there can be such a thing as selflessness. Nietzsche's point is that will to power, the principle that governs all the relationships, is apparent in the realm of love, too. Sonnets must be read through this kind of a perspective once again; clues as regards to the egoistical nature of love could actually be found.

### Key Terms

Love, Poetry, Egoism, Will to Power, Nietzsche.

## Sevinin Konuşulmayan Tarafı Olarak Güç İstenci

### Özet

Özgeçilicilik insan doğasındaki övgüye layık addedilen özelliklerin en başında gelir. İnsanlar arasındaki ilişkilerin türüne göre, özgeçilicilik farklı şekillerde karşımıza çıkar. Bunlarda birisi de seven ve onun sevgisinin nesnesinin arasındaki birebir ilişkidir. Kendini düşünmeme, karşıdakinin ihtiyaç ve isteklerine odaklı olma durumu, gerçek anlamıyla sevenin beraberinde getirdiği/getirmesi gereken bir özellik olarak dahi anılır.  $x$ 'in  $y$ 'yi sevmesi durumunda,  $x$ 'in kendisinininkilerden çok  $y$ 'nin çıkarını gözetecektir. Bu basit formül, özellikle sevenin deneyimlerini aktaran sone tarzındaki şiirlerde sağduyunun bize söylediği şeylerden biri haline gelmiştir. Bu şiirler, sevenin deneyiminden, genellikle çektiği acılardan bahseder, okura sevenin nasıl olması gerektiğini anlatır. Seven acı çeker, çünkü sevdiğine karşı elinde olmadan özgeçildir. Burada asıl sorulması gereken insan ilişkilerinde

---

\* Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Lisans Öğrencisi.

özgeciliğin mümkün olup olamayacağı. Nietzsche'ye göre, evrendeki bütün ilişkileri yöneten prensip olan güç istenci sevide de kendini gösterir. Soneler böyle bir bakış açısıyla tekrar okunduğunda güç istencine işaret eden ipuçlarına da rastlamak mümkündür.

### Anahtar Terimler

Sevgi, Şiir, Egoizm, Güç İstenci, Nietzsche.

“Love is a portion of the soul itself and it is of the same nature as the celestial breathing of the atmosphere of paradise.” This is how Victor Hugo defines love, and in defining it so, he is not far from the norm in the canon of love. After all, when one thinks about love overall, s/he tends to count love as the most precious experience. All the beautiful things that make life worth living are in some way or another related to love. “Beauty will save the world/With love everything will begin.” This poetic expression by Zulfu Livaneli<sup>1</sup> sounds quite charming to a disciple of love. Love is quite often defined in the sphere of emotions, which is strictly set apart from that of rational thinking. Unpredictable, inexplicable as it is –and having no need to be the other way around-, love seems to have been given more thought by poets than by philosophers. Yet, both parties have had a say in the subject, and I see no need to emphasize how much literature and philosophy could have in common at times. Love poetry is nothing but the outlet of powerful emotions that force their way into creation through the artist, and being blended by the imagination and aesthetic concern, it is not necessarily grounded in the real, empirical state of affairs, one might think. Even if this is taken this to be true, the validity of which is the subject of yet another discussion, the clear-cut essence of love poetry unfailingly points to one fact, that life is centered on love. I would like to bring a Nietzschean perspective to the reading of love poetry and point out to the intentional or unintentional ‘slips of thought’ as I would call them that come up in the love poems that seem to be nothing other than all-praise at the first sight. What will be dealt with in this essay is *eros*, though love can take on a variety of meanings context-dependently.

Victor Hugo not only portrays love as a major component of the soul, but also attributes sacredness to love. Thus, love's dominion exceeds the limits of worldly values and reaches as far as the borders of paradise: the ultimate perfection in human conception. Love is so good, so beautiful a thing that it must be an expression, an indication of paradise. Because it is quite convincing<sup>2</sup> that love deserves nothing less, people put it on the highest pedestal all the while and bow down to its glorious majesty. One takes all its implications for granted and is happy to witness love as being victorious over every obstacle, difficulty and trap the enemies of love (the men in black)

<sup>1</sup> The first part of the expression is attributed to Maxim Gorki and Fyodor Dostoevsky, as uttered by a character in the latter's *The Idiot* and the whole of it, to Sait Faik who completed the expression as it is now.

<sup>2</sup> The bold claims I make here and throughout the paragraph without giving any reference are just to draw a rough picture of what romances and love poetry usually imply. I do think it is not very hard to find instances like Yeats' poem here quoted, to give an example.

might set. It is even the case that one favors death as crowning love, when the latter is not possible. The last remark is all too weird. The perception of death as something good and desirable is at odds with the most general rule of life: living beings fight for survival. If love can upend even death, death being the major thing to be avoided by living beings, love must just be too powerful. Here is the most important feature of love that makes it valuable. This is its selflessness. What the beloved needs and feels surpasses the lover's most basic needs. It is portrayed that the lover is ready to die for the sake of the lock of the beloved. Moreover, the condition of loving and the symptoms of *love sickness* make life unbearable for the lover, intentionally or not. We are familiar with the portrait of the pale and unhappy man who just can't eat and sleep because of his unrequited love for a lady.

Had I heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

(Yeats 1899)

The picture is complete. One sighs with reverence, as does W. B. Yeats in his poem above, and becomes a willing subject of the playful angel. In Plato's *Symposium*, where the participants of the Socratic group design to talk about and make a praise to love, what comes out of the dialogue is not very different from a mainstream romance point of view. Phaedrus maintains nothing can give the guidance to one that he desperately needs, better than love, while Agathon, another participant, reasons that violence is incompatible with love as every service given to love is given willingly. Finally Socrates, to the applause of all, makes his speech where he establishes earthly love as one rung in the ladder on the way to Beauty, and necessarily to Virtue. Though what is meant by love might be different from what one could today say what love is, the point to make is that it is mentioned and defined as an object of respect and desire. The German philosopher Hegel in *A Fragment on Love* says "Love neither restricts nor is restricted...it is not finite at all.", and adds "In love the separate does not remain still, but as something united and no longer as something separate; life [in the subject] senses life [in the object]." It sounds contradictory that love makes a unity and besides there is no restriction in love, in that the end of the separate existence indicates a restriction for the separate self. If I may be excused a hasty generalization, philosophers seem to be agreeing with poets on love. But, is there something missing? Does not this black-and-white conception of love make it impossible to notice something about the very essence of it? Maybe, it is not so pure and selfless as it is taken to be.

Arthur Schopenhauer does not seem quite content with the noble state that love enjoys and challenges that love is nothing more than a seeking after reproduction driven by a particular child's will to life, who is yet to be begotten. He regards love's merits in people's mind as an illusion they themselves create unknowingly as serving actually to

the procreation of species, and places egoism as present in all human actions. Friedrich Nietzsche is known to have inherited Schopenhauer's concept of will, that at least as an inspiration in the structuring of his 'will to power'. In waging war to the established institutions of morality by far the most important of which is Christianity, Nietzsche plays the role of the defender of the devil in his own playful and mocking way. By including 'egoism' to the equation, he actually captures something that the conventional love sonnets miss.

According to Nietzsche, any human action has a motivation behind that is centered on the doer's will to power, which is a main doctrine in his philosophy. At first glance, it seems implausible that all human actions are centered on a very coarse will: the will to power. However, Nietzsche in a transformation intrinsic to him, turns so far fixed values upside down and reevaluates them in a different light. He shows what people regard as honorable actions to be ingenious forms of egoism. This is, indeed, a very closely related notion to the will to power. By discovering the hidden egoistical drives behind actions (even behind those which seem to stand in complete contrast to egoism) one can notice the will to power as a fundamental characteristic of humankind. All in all, the lust for possession is clearly egoistical and directed towards one's increase of power. The human being is after the fulfillment of his/her feeling of power all the time; every experience is regarded as a piece of 'land' to be possessed and controlled. This shows itself clearly in every kind of love one experiences. However, what fits best to the analogy of "the possession of land" is sexual love. The claim that though it may not show up directly in the consciousness, the lover is actually interested in the absolute possession of his beloved's body and soul is utterly in contrast with the traditional definition of love. According to the fixed notion, Romeo must be self-sacrificial. However, Nietzsche portrays Romeo as the exploiter, who is after another possession through the fulfillment of his love.

"...The lover wants the unconditioned, sole possession of the person longed for by him; he wants just as absolute power over her soul as over her body; he wants to be loved solely, and to dwell and rule in the other soul as what is highest and most to be desired. When one considers that... the lover has in view the impoverishment and the privation of all rivals, and would like to be the dragon of his golden hoard, as the most inconsiderate and selfish of all 'conquerors' and exploiters...-one is very surprised that this ferocious lust of property and injustice of sexual love should have been glorified and deified to such and extent at all times; yea, that out of this love the conception of love as the antithesis of egoism should have been derived, when it is precisely the most unqualified expression of egoism."

(Nietzsche 1882)

In Sir Thomas Wyatt's sonnet "Whoso List to Hunt", on the bejewelled band around the beloved's neck is written "Noli me tangere/ For Ceasar's am I". "And I am wild for to hold/ Though I seem tame." (1557). The male persona of the sonnet, with whose mourning over an unsuccessful hunt for his beloved we are expected to sympathize, depicts love or at least the pursuit of it; as hunt for deers. He complains

that, though he is too tired to go on hunting, he cannot “draw his wearied mind from the deer.” Of course, the image of the hunt here is to be taken as an extended metaphor that is aimed at helping the reader visualize. But, this metaphor also tells us something important. In the image of the deer, there is some reality we can extract. If we can come to terms with the woman being treated as a commodity, the fact that the male persona will enlarge his “kingdom” when he wins requital for his love is still uneasy. It is motivated by his will to power, or at least by the experience of it in seeking love.

In John Keats’ sonnet “Fears That I May Cease To Be”, among the other fruits of life that disappear with death, which the persona enumerates is the following : “That I shall never look upon thee more/ Never have relish in the faery power/ Of unreflecting love...” . (1818) Here, the word “power” is to be underlined, and also the power of love and that he relishes in this.

Besides an urge for possession, a passion to dominate and be the sole dominator over each others’ body and soul are present in love. That is what makes Nietzsche regard love as the most exemplary case of the will to power, one may say.

She is to be kissed  
Only perhaps by me  
She may be seeking  
Me and no other.

(Thomas 1916)

Thus hopes Edward Thomas in his “The Unknown”. “She may not exist”, he concludes in the last line, but well, that is how he would like his beloved-to-be. She is an ideal possession that belongs only to him. If this is so, Nietzsche rightfully complains that love has been deified so much in all ages- indeed, that this love has furnished the concept of love as the opposite of egoism while it actually may be “that most ingenious expression of egoism.”

Although when Nietzsche talks about domination what he suggests is male’s domination over female because if male is driven to dominate by nature, so is woman to submission, here one finds an exception with the lesbian poet, Gertrude Stein, rejoicing “Very fine is my valentine/ Very fine and very mine.” in her “A Very Valentine” (1922). John Dryden admits “The pleasure of possessing/ Surpasses all expressing.” in his “Farewell Ungrateful Traitor” (1668). By far the most realistic of all, however, seems to be D. H. Lawrence, who says “We’ve made a great mess of love/ Since we made an ideal of it.” (1929).

Jessica Benjamin, in her book that explores the interplays between psychoanalysis, feminism, and domination presents the dialectic of control in that way: “If I completely control the other, then the other ceases to exist, and if the other completely controls me, then I cease to exist. A condition of our own independent existence is recognizing the other. True independence means sustaining the essential tension of these contradictory impulses; that is both asserting the self and recognizing the other. Domination is the consequence refusing this condition.” If, as Nietzsche claims, will to power is the governing principle of the universe and human life is characterized by the war of clashing wills that seek to gain dominance over others, it is

not hard to imagine the intermediary position that enables true independence will easily be disrupted. It is another issue how independence relates to love, whether it presents a paradox in the face of a love relationship; I have so far tried, so to say, to spy on the distinguished agents of the other side –love sonnets-, which make love itself unspeakable by decorating it with –if not false- unrealistic attributes.

Whether altruism really exists or not has been a subject of debate for quite a long time. The love of a mother for her children might be asserted as egoistical, because she actually cares for her genes and thus, her survival in a sense, and the propagation of the species. As a counter-argument to this, the case of adoptive parents, who definitely cannot be concerned about genes or immortality could be put forward. Yet, here, an acquired intimacy is the point at issue. Even if an adoptive parent is not interested in the biological propagation, the child is still more close and dear to them; they may be said to have the underlying motive of being regarded and remembered. When it comes to erotic love, in which case a lover suffers and makes sacrifices, it is motivated by a requital of love in return. Still, one counter-example to that view may be the case of platonic love, where the lover directs a whole life in the vain pursuit of gaining the attempted beloved's favor with the absolute knowledge that there is in fact no chance for some reason or another. I would claim, this seemingly self-devastating act profits the lover in a way that could be unknown to others, and even to the lover itself. To give an example, Shakespeare quite often boasts at the end of his sonnets that these verses give immortality to his beloved. Yet, the sonnets seem to have given immortality to the poet himself equally, if not more than the beloved. Here the lover is a creator of something valuable. Love has provided the lover with artistic creation, if not a requital of love. Though not well-known or successful as Shakespeare is, the artist of such a product must still be content with a feeling of completeness. In this example, love has provided the lover with artistic creation along with the feelings of recognition, or at least self-awareness through literary projection. Even if love is of platonic kind, it enlarges the sphere of possession of the lover, in the mental sense as well. It is not an essay to form a counter-argument to the egoistical nature of human beings relying on what happens in love. Even when they praise love, they do not fail to provide glimpses that love is essentially another facet of will to power.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BENJAMIN, Jessica (1998). *The Bonds of Love*. (53). New York: Pantheon Books.
- DREYDEN, John (1990). "Farewell Ungrateful Traitor". In Kate Farrell (Ed.), *Art&Love: An Illustrated Anthology of Love Poetry*. (105). New York: Bulfinch Press.
- GERTRUDE, Stein (1990). "A Very Valentine". (78). –.
- HEGEL, G.W.F. (1991). "G.W.F. Hegel: A Fragment on Love". (117,118). In Kathleen
- HIGGINS & SOLOMON, Robert C. (Eds.), *The Philosophy of Erotic Love*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- HUGO, Victor. *Victor Hugo Quotes*. June 30, 2008, from <http://www.korpisworld.com/Quotes/Victor%20Hugo.htm>.
- KEATS, John (2001). "Fears That I May Cease To Be". In John Hollander (Ed.), *Sonnets: From Dante to the Present*. (136). London: Everyman's Library Pocket Books.
- LAWRENCE, D. H. (1990). "The Mess of Love". (86). –.

- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich (1991). "Friedrich Nietzsche: Selections". (143). -..
- PLATO. (1991). "Plato: From Symposium". (16, 21). -..
- SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur (1991). "Arthur Schopenhauer: From World as Will and Idea." (124)
- THOMAS, Edward (1990). "The Unknown". (50). -..
- WYATT, Sir Thomas (2001). "Whoso List to Hunt". (37). -..
- YEATS, William Butler (1990). "He Wishes for the Clothes of Heaven". (61).