

“*Eros in Rome*”

(from *Love*)

by Norman Weeks

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The culture of the Mediterranean is an erotic one. Here love has always been *in the air*.

That pervasive aura may have had its source in the Mediterranean environment, a suggestive environment if ever there was one. The very lay-of-the-land was sensual, curvaceous hills and shrubbed valleys descending toward the sparkling, translucent salt-sea. Waters of springs bubbled from the earth, as did the flowing fire of volcanism. The weather was as capricious as love, now gentle and caressing, now sultry and sensual, now stormy and punishing.

To the peoples of the Mediterranean, their environment was alive with spirits, *numina* as the old Romans used to call them. And those spirits—nymphs, naiads, dryads, and nereids, fauns and satyrs—animated every place with erotic mischief.

Out of the environment came sustenance of a stimulating sumptuousness and cornucopian variety. The peoples of the Mediterranean turned food into a banquet culture of the senses. The grape became wine became intoxication became love. All hail to Dionysus! All hail to Bacchus! The Greeks and Romans developed culinary epicureanism,—*symposia* in Athens, *convivium* in Rome—, and on to orgies of food and sex. They loved to eat, and they ate and drank to love.

In culture proper too—music, literature, art—the Greeks and Romans were erotic. Musical scores have not survived from ancient times, but there are evidentiary reliefs of maenads and bacchantes in frenzied, orgiastic dance. The myths of the Greeks were all about promiscuous intermingling, erotic attractions, seductions, and couplings, between gods and goddesses, between those divinities and human beings, between men and men, between men and women, with now and then a virile or nubile animal thrown into the mix. A main motif of ancient pagan mythology was cosmic lovemania.

Nymphomania and *satyriasis*, two modern words out of ancient etymology, words that we take to describe neurotic excesses, were, to the Greeks and Romans, mere typical behavior, approved of, and modeled by, the gods and goddesses themselves. As for classical art, it was all body-love, *somatophilia* as I have called it. Greco-Roman pagan idolatry was erotic awe.

Naked were the idols, as the Greeks and Romans themselves were naked, in their athletics or in the public Baths. Nothing is more provocative to love than simple nakedness. The Mediterraneans provoked themselves and one another to love.

Even in what we consider the most abstract realms of culture, namely, religion and philosophy, the Mediterraneans were erotic. Zeus himself was a panerotic maniac, and his devotees practiced their *imitatio dei*. But surely Christianity put an end to all that, you might say. In fact, no. The Christians merely transmuted, or sublimated, *eros* into *agape*, that is, love to love once again, albeit of a noncarnal and spiritually refined type. Ostensibly, the Christians attacked erotic culture, but they themselves were practitioners of a heterodox form of eroticism. "Love everybody" was their motto. (Zeus must have smiled at that one.)

And what about philosophy? Well, with Plato, even philosophy became thoroughly erotic.

Life-lovers and lovers of love, these Mediterranean peoples.

Wouldn't we ourselves benefit from such a cultural bath of love? How we love-starved moderns need a therapeutic immersion into the bright blue living waters of the Mediterranean!

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I recall an anecdote in ancient lore that reveals much about the essential nature of Mediterranean paganism.

There were a couple of young men, the story goes, who were devotees of Aphrodite (Venus), the goddess of love. They decided to go to her temple to render homage to the goddess. Arriving there, they bribed the temple custodian to admit them to the inner sanctum, where stood the statue of the nude goddess. They wanted to admire her up close, from all possible angles.

Sacrilege!, we moderns would shake our heads. But such a reaction only betrays our own scruples. Isn't love-longing a fervent religious emotion? What better homage to the goddess of love than a craving for physical intimacy with her? The goddess must have been pleased by such worshipful admiration and adoration.

Those young men were good pagan somatophiles. I can imagine a pagan girl experiencing similar feelings in gazing upon a statue of Apollo.

Again, we moderns would tsk-tsk such idolatry. Worshipping a sculpture of stone, an inanimate thing? How primitive! Our higher religion conceives of the divine in terms of the sophisticated abstractions of theology. Our God is no body we could lust after.

Not only primitive, idolatry has also been considered perverse, sinful, and blasphemous. The Jews and Moslems have an absolute abhorrence of idolatry. The Christians too...No, wait. This is Rome. Christian religion is still idolatrous here.

After all, how different from our worshippers of Aphrodite's statue is a Catholic devotee on knees before a Madonna statue of a beauty to rival that of the goddess of love? Or one in earnest prayer of appeal to the divine heroic image of the resurrected Jesus?

When, in the eighth and ninth centuries, the Orthodox Church in Constantinople reacted against the proliferating religious images in its churches by ordering their destruction, such *iconoclasm* did not transfer to our Rome, where pagan idolatry was deeply rooted and treasured as a cultural legacy.

The churches in Rome are chock full of idols. Theology may make a distinction that Catholics only reverence, do not worship, images, but the psychologist perceives no difference in the practice.

Women adorn and festoon with jewelry the statue of the Madonna del Parto in the church of Sant'Agostino. The Blessed Virgin is carried on a litter in procession through the streets, to the enthusiasm of the throngs. Pilgrims in St. Peter's press warm lips to the feet of the bronze statue of that saint. Catholics wear crucifixes and scapulars and medals and other such charms and talismans. Candles glow in front of a statue or painting at streetcorner shrines. Statuettes of saints occupy every home.

All such Roman Catholic devotional practices are typical of pagan idolatry. The names of the statues are different, but the worship is the same.

I'm not dismissive of such idolatry. How could I live here in Rome and shun images? I love to look, and I came to Rome to see something. There are many beautiful things to see in Rome, thanks to the heritage of pagan idolatry.

A religion of words-only, such as Judaism or Islam, feeds the mind but starves the senses. How sterile the geometric art of the Jews and Moslems, due to their abhorrence of human flesh images.

The somatophilia of the pagans and its continuance in the Christianity of Rome provide an aesthetic that enriches culture. Idolatry is the great stimulus to art. Set against the austere religions of words and the mind, religion in Rome, all images for the eyes, promotes a spirituality of the senses.

Here I am, back in Rome, the world headquarters of the institutional religious love-cult. Love, that's my theme. What do I know about love in Rome? What do I remember about it?

I was twenty years old, a student on a university campus on the Tiber, below Monte Mario. It was the Sixties, decade of peace and love; as for me, I was in favor of the former and in search of the latter.

On the campus were three American co-eds, *the love sisters*. They shied away from the carnal love that was the type of the times, however. Their love was spiritual. They were in love with Jesus. And, because they were in love with Jesus, they would love everybody, all indiscriminately, but none particularly, and certainly none physically.

I used to encounter the threesome in the corridors of the campus, where, even there they were effusive in their love of Jesus and enthusiastic in their shared ideal of amorous chastity.

Why not a little love for me too?, I wondered.

I approached them pleadingly. But they would have none of me, nor of any other man on the campus. They were already in love.

It was a strange jealousy I felt, jealousy against a dead man. And a resentment that a mere myth could be more seductive than a living, breathing here-and-now embodiment of virility.

The love sisters were inseparable, but, except for their infatuation in common, they were quite different one from the others. The first of them was homely and uninteresting. We men were happy to leave her to her fantasies, so that we would not have to deal with any longings she might bother one of us with. The second love sister, however, was the most gorgeous girl on the campus. That she should reject all men for a ghost exasperated our male ambitions and mocked our male pride. The third sister was an exotic. Her father was chief of an Indian tribe on some peninsula in northern Wisconsin or Michigan, I don't remember which; he had sent her to a Catholic university in Rome for a good dose of Christian religion and European civilization. The princess of peninsular primitives was as alluring for her ethnic origins as for her personal and physical charms.

A few men tried to drive a wedge into the threesome to separate out either the gorgeous goddess or the Indian princess, but none succeeded. The love sisters were Three Graces, arms linked eternally, as they danced their inward-facing ring dance, spinning and circling until they dizzied in their own righteous ecstasy. (It goes without saying that, unlike the pagan Three Graces, the love sisters were fully and modestly clothed.)

I once offered to join them in their Jesus love, but they saw through to my motive and refused me admittance; their circle of love was perfect, complete, closed.

My seething lovelonging and frustration aroused in me such repulsion that it nauseated me to even get near the love-sisters. Let them have their fantasy lover, each other, and no man, I thought, but please keep that kind of love away from me.

Only much later did I have inklings of what is wrong with the Christian version of love:—I want love to be personal, I want love to satisfy need, I want love to love *me*.

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When I was a young man, I asked an old woman about love. I wanted to know why one person falls in love with another and why love is sometimes a success and sometimes a failure.

Speaking to me as if I were a boy and not a man, she answered my questions like this:—

“Every human being is born with a little spark inside him or her. That spark is a kind of spirit that is more what a person really is than what we call the *soul*. If we have to choose a name for that spark of individuality, let’s call it our *charm*.

“You can see the little light of the charm even in an infant, in its very first smile or laugh, in fact. The charm of each one is unique, different from any other charm that has lived, is living, or will live. You can locate the mind in the brain, the heart in the middle of the chest, and the soul somewhere inside you, but the spark of your charm glows from within, alights on your limbs, dances around your body. Your charm is always somewhere about you. Your charm, not your mind or heart or soul, is what animates you. And it enspirits both your character and your personality.

“But parents and teachers, those who value control and so-called discipline, consider the charm a disruption and a nuisance. They try to stifle it or even snuff it out. But really they can’t. Our charm is so much a part of us that we wouldn’t be ourselves without it.

“If we have been too much controlled and restrained, our charm flickers only dimly. That’s what happens to most of us, I’m sorry to say. There are very few people whose spark has been able to grow and glow and flame up into a brilliance that surrounds their bodies and their whole lives. If you thought for a while, you might be able to think of someone you know like that, but there are very few.

“That is too bad, because our charm is what is lovely in us and what we find lovely and attractive in others.

“Anyway, to answer your first question:—

“We don’t fall in love with anybody, and nobody falls in love with us. Instead, it is our charms that are the true lovers.

“That’s why it doesn’t matter whether the other person is beautiful or plain, intelligent or simple, rich or poor, well-placed or adrift, socially acceptable or disapproved. There is no point in criticizing those attributes or inadequacies. The charms don’t pay any attention to such things.

“One person’s charm falls in love with another person’s charm. And the charms are very wise, I can tell you that. A charm seeks its complementary charm, recognizes it, and loves it, with an accurate and fulfilling love.

“For every charm there is a complementary charm somewhere, a delight and happiness and fulfillment to be searched for and found. And each charm has the instinct to find its matched lover.

“To answer your second question:—

“When one body chooses another, or one person chooses another, their attempt at love will be a failure, because all the body knows is lust, all the person knows is self-centeredness. Both lust and self-centeredness are destructive of love.

“When the charms are allowed their freedom to choose for us—the body and the person just tagging along—, then love will be a success. The charms choose well.

Just let your charm choose. That’s all. . .”

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