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Two Erotic Ideals

FIONA ELLIS

Department of Philosophy, Heythrop College, University of London, W8 5HN, UK.
f.ellis@heythrop.ac.uk

Abstract: In his paper ‘Nietzsche, *Tristan*, and the Rehabilitation of Erotic Distance’ Joseph D. Kuzma identifies two seemingly opposed erotic ideals in Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. He claims that Nietzsche applauded the first and sought to dispense with the second, and that this was his solution to the problem of nihilism. I argue that this ‘solution’ is as ill-defined as the ideals it involves, and that it either consigns us to hell or offers a terminological variant upon theism. I rescue Schopenhauer from some familiar charges and make a link with Simone Weil’s reflections upon love’s impossibility.

Introduction

In his ‘Nietzsche, *Tristan*, and the Rehabilitation of Erotic Distance’,¹ Joseph D. Kuzma identifies two seemingly opposed erotic ideals in Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*.² The first, courtly, ideal involves ‘love of and from a distance’. It eschews the very idea of satisfaction, involves a desire for endless desire, and is predicated upon absence rather than presence. The second ideal – to be found in the likes of Plato and Schopenhauer – involves a desire to eradicate distance and absence so as to attain the kind of satisfaction to which the first ideal remains opposed. Ultimately, however, it is a desire for death. Kuzma argues that the presence of both of these ideals in *Tristan* is problematic, and that Nietzsche sought to applaud the first, dispense with the second, and in this way to offer a possible solution to the problem of nihilism: Nietzsche’s aim was to ‘[f]orge an alternative conception of erotic desire – a conception no longer subordinated to the pursuit of fusional reconciliation but rather linked to the eternal return and the unconditional affirmation of distance itself’.³ Kuzma notes a similar theme and interest in Robert Pippin, who suggests that the ‘the possibility of...an unrequited love, especially the possibility of sustaining it, turns out to one of the best images for the question Nietzsche wants to ask about nihilism...some form of erotic longing might yet remain tenable – even in the perpetual absence of all satisfaction’.⁴

The possibility will be greeted with either rapture or horror, depending upon how one interprets the kinds of longing and satisfaction at issue. The interpretations are various, for the relevant ideals are ill-defined as they stand, as is the question of how they are to be related and appraised. I shall argue that Wagner’s tendency to play them off against each other is understandable, and that it is only within the context of such a play off that we arrive at a satisfactory solution to the problem with which Nietzsche is grappling, albeit a solution that challenges the framework within which this problem is usually articulated.

A preliminary gloss of the two ideals and Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*

The first erotic ideal has its origin in the tradition of courtly romance. This tradition operated outside the economy of institutionalized marriage, which latter ‘had little to

do with romantic fulfilment and even less to do with the mystical communion of souls'.⁵ This 'apparent marginalization of the erotic' demanded to be rectified, and there was fabricated 'a new erotic ideal which was predicated on the glorification of "a love which is beyond all bounds"'.⁶ It 'replaced the pursuit of Christian virtue with the deification of yearning itself', and, 'unlike Christian love, with its model of charity towards one's neighbour', 'recognized only love of and from a distance'.⁷ The protagonist of this courtly drama 'despite his frequent insistence to the contrary, seeks neither the full possession of a desired object nor the realization of some felicitous end but rather only the unrelenting intensification of desire itself'. Hence, '[i]t is my desire that I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool'.⁸ The upshot is that 'everything that leads to the augmentation of erotic longing is sought by the courtly knight *as if* it were an end in itself, while everything that diminishes this longing, especially the act of coitus, is carefully avoided'.⁹ It is for this reason that the courtly lover endeavours 'to sustain and prolong the courtship as long as possible, even indefinitely, expending his energy and resources but always "without an end in sight...without orgasm"'.¹⁰ It follows that courtly romance 'opposes itself to the *satisfaction* of erotic loving as much as to matrimony',¹¹ and this is why we find in such tales 'a seemingly endless accumulation of obstacles and crises, all of which serve to keep the amorous pair indefinitely separated'. As Denis De Rougemont put it: '[o]bstruction is what passion really *wants* – its true object'.¹²

The second erotic ideal is aimed towards consummation and 'the attainment of blissful release',¹³ and it involves a 'deep yearning for the thing-in-itself and the eternal *gloire* of abiding presence'.¹⁴ However, it seems to point equally in the direction of an *absence*, for the desired blissful release is said to be equivalent to a 'blissful nothingness' – an 'eternal repose' the desire for which gives expression to the will to nothingness.¹⁵ Hence Tristan and Isolde 'end up seduced by the promise of eternal repose and fulfilment, preferring to will even nothingness rather than endure the indefinite prolongation of what Proust describes as the "incurable malady" of erotic love'.¹⁶

Tristan and Isolde may well be seduced in this direction, but Wagner's treatment of their story is said to give equal expression to the first erotic ideal, the upshot being that its audience is offered two separate tales:

[o]ne culminating in presence, satiety, and release and another in which the tireless movement of courtly deferral remains utterly unvanquished. It is a work that pushes the longing for amorous proximity and consummation to its furthest point possible while also offering us at the same time an account of absolute and unrelenting erotic forbearance.¹⁷

The second tale – the one involving a tireless movement of courtly deferral – is expressed in the lovers' predicament. To return to the previous characterization of the relevant erotic ideal, there is 'a seemingly endless accumulation of obstacles and crises, all of which serve to keep the amorous pair indefinitely separated'. It is for this reason that the work has been considered an 'archetypal exemplification of courtly romance'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, and no doubt because there is a competing ideal at work, the lovers experience their predicament with anguish rather than pleasure – they are *hopelessly ensnared* in the relevant predicament, and seek the one thing they cannot have, namely, erotic fulfilment and the elimination of the distance which stands in its way. Hence: 'Destined for me, lost to me', 'How long apart! How far apart so long!', 'Blessed nearness, tedious distance!'¹⁹

Questions and clarifications

The initial characterization we are given of the first erotic ideal suggests that it is to be applauded. After all, it has its origin in a tradition which repairs the marginalization of the erotic, there is the promise of romantic fulfilment, and even a mystical communion of souls. The idea that the love it involves is 'beyond all bounds' suggests that it is unlimited in the sense that it is without end. The further claim that it replaces the Christian pursuit of virtue with 'the deification of yearning itself' suggests that the yearning which is so deified is to be set against the love one has towards one's neighbour. Perhaps we are to suppose that Christian love is not boundless in the relevant sense. It is unclear where the deification of yearning leaves the ideas of romantic fulfilment and a mystical communion of souls, but the idea that such yearning is directed towards itself - 'it is my desire that I desire' - need not imply that these putative aims have been abandoned. After all, the desire I desire could be directed towards a significant other, and it remains open that its pursuit involves a form of communion which brings fulfilment.

We are told that the desire for desire involves 'love of and from a distance'. However, these loves are not equivalent, nor are they inevitably connected. One can love from a distance without loving distance itself, when, for example, one's love cannot, but longs to, speak its name. In such a scenario, and other things being equal, there is no obvious reason for doubting the lover's sincerity when she tells us that it is her beloved she desires, although there is a question about what it could mean to talk of wanting the beloved's 'full possession' in this context, and whether these terms of description are remotely appropriate.

The lover *of* distance need not love anybody *from* a distance, and the picture we have been given suggests that contact with others, and indeed, love for them, is to be avoided. In two ways: first, this 'distance love' stands opposed to Christian love, eschewing the model of charity towards one's neighbour; second, it involves a desire for desire - more specifically, its unrelenting intensification - and we are told that the desired object comes into the equation, if at all, only at an instrumental level - 'it is my desire that I desire, and the loved being is no more than its tool'. This 'loved being' - presumably the object of erotic rather than Christian love - is likewise to be kept at a distance, her purely instrumental role suggesting that she is no such thing.

Kuzma opposes 'distance love' to a love which culminates in 'presence, satiety, and release'. This suggests that distance love remains unsatisfied, although there is a question about what this really means, and whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. Doubts on the first score arise when we ask whether there could be satisfaction in the pursuit of endless, intensifying desire. Intuitively yes, for it would be difficult otherwise to see what could motivate such an aim. Yet we know that Kuzma has an interest in the question of whether there could be a form of erotic longing which remains tenable 'even in the perpetual absence of all satisfaction'. Perhaps the idea is not that the envisaged form of erotic longing brings no satisfaction at all, but, rather, that the satisfaction it affords is of a different order from that of the love to which distance love is opposed. Christian love is distinguished from distance love on the ground that it takes as its object a person in need. So it involves 'presence' to this degree at least, but it would be odd to say that it *culminates* in presence, at least in so far as we are concerned with the presence of someone in need. It sounds equally odd to say of such a relationship that it brings satiety and release, although one might suppose that Christian love, to the extent that it orients the lover towards God, carries an implicit reference to such notions. That is to say that it culminates in 'presence,

satiety, and release' in the sense that this is what we get when we come face-to-face with God.

These notions are a clear part and parcel of the love which defines the second erotic ideal, and we are offered various, potentially conflicting, conceptions of the satisfaction at issue. The lover desires 'full possession of the desired object', the realization of a 'felicitous end' which will bring 'blissful release', 'fusional reconciliation', 'amorous proximity and consummation', the 'thing-in-itself and the eternal gloire of abiding presence', 'blissful nothingness'. The idea that the lover desires full possession of the desired object can be variously interpreted, depending upon how the notion of possession is interpreted and what kind of object is at issue. It carries connotations of control and conquest, but these become less compelling if, say, the desired object is goodness. After all, there is nothing remotely controlling about wanting to possess goodness if this means simply that one wants to be good. This is not to deny that there are readings which favour the opposing interpretation - one thinks of the desire to make goodness in one's own preferred image.

Wanting to possess a person seems very different from wanting to possess a quality, for there is no immediate implication that one wants to *be* that person. Indeed, if 'possession' is understood in the aforementioned 'controlling' sense, then it seems more appropriate to say that it goes the other way round - that one wants to take over the other person so that they are or do what one wants them to be or do. Is this how we are to interpret the claim that the lover desires 'full possession of the desired object'? Certainly there are lovers who desire this kind of control, although we might hesitate to call them lovers, except in so far as we are using the term in the misleading sense at issue when it is said that one's beloved is a mere tool.

The idea that the lovers in question desire 'fusional reconciliation' seems a far cry from any controlling tendencies on their parts. It suggests also that talk of wanting to be or to become the beloved is not so wide of the mark after all. Witness Tristan and Isolde: 'Tristan you/I Isolde/No longer Tristan/You Isolde/Tristan I/No longer Isolde!/Un-named/Free from parting/New perception/New enkindling/self-knowing/warmly glowing heart/love's utmost joy!'²⁰ These terms of description are commonplace in the literary and philosophical tradition. As Lucretius once said, it is the desire of lovers 'to penetrate and pass with body entire into body'.²¹ Roger Scruton interprets this to mean that lovers seek to abolish 'the separateness that underlies desire', and responds that 'it is not *this* that we seek in desire, even if what we seek may be evocatively described in these terms'.²² His grounds for dismissal are not spelled out, but we are to suppose perhaps that there is something paradoxical to the idea that lovers desire to be without desire. The possibility of there being a fusion in which desire is preserved is not considered.

Simone Weil has more sympathy for Lucretius' position, taking him to have identified the fact that love 'cannot attain its desire in this world'.²³ Love, she tells us:

is the need to emerge from what the Hindus call the state of duality, the separation between subject and object; to imitate the Trinity, where lover and beloved form but a single entity, where the lover, by the same act, creates, knows and loves the beloved who is himself.²⁴

She claims also that '[w]hen Lucretius reproaches love with containing this element of impossibility which is essential to it, what he doesn't understand is that therein lies precisely the principle of its providential design'. Hence: 'it is the fact of *impossibility*

which leads to God'. It does so because such love 'is forced to climb upward toward what lies above it, on the other side of the sky'.²⁵

We are returned to the idea of fusional reconciliation, albeit with some significant modifications. First, and as per Lucretius, the desire for such reconciliation is common to *all* erotic lovers and not just those driven by Kuzma's second erotic ideal; second, and as per Lucretius and Scruton, this desire cannot be satisfied; third, it follows that there is an element of impossibility which is essential to love; and finally, this element somehow leads us to God. We are to suppose that reconciliation with God repairs the duality from which we 'need to emerge', although the Trinitarian model Weil utilizes in this context brings a significant complication. After all, the lover and beloved within the Trinity form a single entity whilst also being separate.

There lurks a providential design in Kuzma's claim that pursuers of the second erotic ideal seek 'the eternal gloire of abiding presence'. We are told also, however, that such an aim presupposes a desire for 'eternal repose and fulfilment' which, in turn, gives expression to the will for nothingness.²⁶ The desire for eternal repose and fulfilment seems perfectly reasonable at one level, even more so if the alternative is 'the indefinite prolongation of what Proust describes as the "incurable malady" of erotic love'. However, there is malady and malady, and we cannot assume that erotic love's incurable malady is equivalent to endless and unrelenting suffering. Perhaps if it were, then nothingness would, indeed, be preferable. Second, however, we can ask what the justification is for equating eternal repose and fulfilment with nothingness. The link is immediate if these things are equivalent to death, and there is motive for insisting upon this equivalence once the word 'eternal' is brought into the equation. After all, how could a state of eternal repose or fulfilment be anything *other* than death? It is surely not *this* that we seek in desire. Weil's position offers a potential response to this complaint, assuming that it makes sense to suppose that we can be reconciled with God. However, there is a question about what such reconciliation could mean, and where it leaves our human loves, and indeed, lives.

Weil's conception of fusional reconciliation suggests a way of accommodating the distinctness of the relevant fused beings, and if, as Scruton suggests, it is separateness that underlies desire, then the model concedes equally to the first erotic ideal. The concession is evident already in the claim that love involves an essential element of impossibility, and this element is further elaborated in a passage which returns us to the theme of courtly love. Hence:

It is because homosexual love is impossible, since carrying it into execution constitutes too great a defilement, that the Greeks placed it on so high a level... In the moral customs of that society, the love between men and women encountered insufficient obstacles. Later on Christianity, and still more the chaste moral habits the Germans brought with them turned the love between a man and a woman into something *impossible*. Thenceforth, the Platonic form of homosexual love became knightly and courtly love.²⁷

The impossibility at issue here is different from that operative when two lovers strive to be *literally* one. For homosexual and courtly love are said to be impossible in the sense that there are moral and social obstacles which prevent the lovers from 'coming together' in the more intuitive sense of that expression. So we have love *from* a distance in the sense that the love is not, as Weil puts it, 'carr[ied] into execution'.²⁸ Do we have a love *of* distance? Not if this means that the lovers love the distance between them, for they desire to be together. At least, this is the natural way of

reading Weil's version of their predicament. She seems to be suggesting, however, that the distance between them - which prevents them from trying to unite in the metaphysically impossible sense - puts them in a better position to relate to God. It is unclear whether she thinks that relating to God is an alternative to loving another human being erotically, but we are encouraged to suppose that it is an alternative to giving physical expression to that love, and a superior alternative at that.

Elsewhere Weil tells us that we relate to God at the level of neighbourly love.²⁹ Another clear sense in which her position stands opposed to Kuzma's distance love, for this latter, he claims, "replaced the pursuit of Christian virtue with the deification of yearning itself", and, "unlike Christian love, with its model of charity towards one's neighbour", "recognized only love of and from a distance". On Weil's position then we love God *from* a distance in the sense that we love Him by loving others. She claims further that, in loving God in this way, we are partaking in His life. It is in this context that she talks of our "imitat[ing] the descending movement of God so as to turn ourselves towards the world", going so far as to claim that, in such a scenario, God is "on the side of the subject" - He sees the things that we see.³⁰

Loving God from a distance in this sense brings him as close to home as could be. We are to suppose that, in such a context, lover and beloved "form but a single entity", and that this is what it means to carry our love for God "into execution". But what does this have to do with the distance love of the star-crossed lovers - a distance which serves as an *obstacle* to carrying their love into execution? Weil seems to be suggesting that this "impossibility" leads them to God. That is to say that the fact that they cannot carry their love into execution means that they can execute their love for God.

If this is right, then we are given a clear sense in which erotic love - or at least its physical expression - is to be transcended, and it will be remembered that Kuzma's lover of distance stands similarly opposed to such expression on the ground that abstinence offers the only way of satisfying his desire for the "unrelenting intensification of desire itself". Thus, we are told that everything that diminishes erotic longing, "especially the act of coitus, is carefully avoided", and that such a lover endeavours "to sustain and prolong the courtship as long as possible, even indefinitely, expending his energy and resources but always "without an end in sight...without orgasm"³¹.

Coitus leading to orgasm can occur outside the context of erotic love, when, for example, we are concerned with sex with an insignificant other for the purposes of sexual release. This distinction is fudged with the claim that the act of coitus diminishes erotic longing, for it does no such thing if this is taken to mean that it diminishes one's desire for the beloved. What it diminishes is the desire for sex - temporarily at least, and there is a difference between desiring sex and desiring one's beloved, even if desiring one's beloved involves a desire to have sexual contact with her.

The idea that the lover of distance seeks to prolong the courtship as long as possible "without an end in sight, without orgasm" *could* be read as an expression of her interest in the beloved - she's not just in it for the sex. We are told, however, that she's in it for the desire - or more accurately, its unrelenting intensification - where this is intended to be incompatible with the possibility of desiring the beloved - "it is my desire that I desire and the loved being is merely its tool". The rather significant caveat is that the lover will tend to challenge this version of events, claiming to the contrary that what she really wants is "full possession of a desired object" or the "realization of some felicitous end". The sincerity of the lover is surely to be granted

in some such scenarios, although it should be clear from what has been said that the meaning of these alternative aims is entirely unclear – perhaps she thinks that she wants a sex slave or maybe this talk of possession is just a misleading way of capturing her unrelenting desire.

The lover's desire for desire need not be incompatible with her desiring the beloved, for the desire she desires might be essentially a desire for her beloved. We are told, however, that the beloved's role is purely instrumental - a mere tool for intensifying the lover's desire. De Rougemont seems to have some such scenario in mind when he says of Tristan and Isolde that they 'do not love each other... *What they love is love and being in love*... Their need of one another is in order to be aflame, and they do not need one another as they are. What they need is not one another's presence, but one another's absence'.³² Hence the claim that what passion really wants – its true object – is obstruction. The situation offers a reversal of that of Weil's star-crossed lovers – *they* love from a distance without loving distance itself - and gives a clear enough sense of what it could mean to use the beloved as a tool for generating the desired desire. After all, 'their need of one another is in order to be aflame, and they do not need one another as they are'.

We have an example of what it could mean to deify yearning. Yearning is more important than anything or anyone else, and the lover's desire for yearning imposes a distance between herself and the world which guarantees that she remains satisfied in this respect. The enterprise is hedonistic in one obvious sense, but De Rougemont claims also that it involves a desire for death. It is left unclear why the desire for desire should will its destruction in this way.³³ After all, it is one thing to say of such a lover that she wants to be apart from her beloved for the purposes of enjoying her own private yearning, and another to say that she wants death, not least because death provides the ultimate guarantee that her desire for desire will be thwarted. We can note, however, that De Rougemont's prototype for this seemingly self-defeating enterprise is *Tristan and Isolde*, and it is familiar from Kuzma that there is a tension in this work which can be traced back to the two opposing erotic ideals it embodies – one heralding desire, the other heralding death. It is equally familiar that Kuzma seeks to dispel this tension by dispensing with the second ideal, his aim being to link this move to Nietzsche's solution to the problem of nihilism. Our findings suggest that this oppositional framework is too simplistic, and that there is a real question to be asked about what these ideals are and how they relate. We must consider now what this means for the putative problem of nihilism and its solution.

Nihilism

Nihilism is as ill-defined as the ideals we have sought to clarify, but Kuzma, following Pippin, takes it to be inextricably linked to the idea that the ultimate goal of desire is death.³⁴ Pippin himself claims that the problem of nihilism consists in 'a *failure of desire*, the flickering out of some erotic flame',³⁵ and he points us towards some of the images which are used by Nietzsche to convey this condition: 'bows that have lost their tension, human archers who have lost sight of a goal, an enervating contentment... a simple fatigue, the "weariness of man," and so forth'.³⁶ We have been told already that Nietzsche's proposed solution is to introduce an alternative conception of erotic desire which is 'no longer subordinated to the pursuit of fusional reconciliation but rather linked to the eternal return and the unconditional affirmation of distance itself'. The further claim is that we are concerned here with the possibility of sustaining a form of erotic longing 'even in the perpetual absence of all satisfaction'. We are to suppose that this longing – which is described also as a form

of unrequited love - will reignite the lost 'erotic flame' to bring desire (and hence life) back into the human picture.

So the problem to which this solution is proposed involves a failure of desire, where this means not simply a failure to form a particular desire, but a failure to desire anything at all. To revert to Pippin's metaphor, we are concerned with the 'flickering out of some erotic flame'. It is unclear whose failed desire we are talking about here, but context suggests that some of Nietzsche's contemporaries are to be implicated, and that this failure has something to do with their pursuit of the second erotic ideal, which latter is the defining feature of nihilism. It follows that we can solve the problem of nihilism only by dispensing with the offending ideal and replacing it with an alternative which will re-introduce and sustain the desire which has somehow been lost.

The failure of desire at issue arises when the ultimate goal of desire is death. But what does *this* mean? Perhaps we are concerned with one who desires death above everything else - a rather poignant reversal of Sartre's claim that man, fundamentally, is the desire to be God.³⁷ But in what sense does this involve a *failure* of desire? And who is to be implicated in this respect? Given the images used by Nietzsche to capture the offending condition, we are to suppose that this failure is expressed in a certain world-weariness and lack of motivation. And perhaps someone who desires death above all else will be indifferent to the world in this sense, although it would be misleading to say that she is like an archer who has lost sight of a goal, or, indeed, that she has an enervating contentment.

The picture is more complex than this initial characterization suggests, for what really motivates in this context is the desire for ultimate fulfilment, the belief connecting this with the desire for death being that ultimate fulfilment requires death. This helps to make better sense of the idea that we are concerned with a condition which is prevalent enough to warrant diagnosis, for we all desire fulfilment, and even the most Godless anti-metaphysician can allow that the fulfilment we desire is 'ultimate' in some sense of that term. But what is the connection between ultimate fulfilment and death? Is the idea that ultimate fulfilment is to be found in death? Seemingly not, for the belief in question is that 'the path to ultimate fulfilment leads ineluctably through the gates of death and renunciation',³⁸ the implication being that death is a mere parenthesis. Kuzma finds such a belief in Schopenhauer, offering us the following summary of his soteriological message:

[o]ne must turn away from life itself and pursue the sheer mortification of the will. The path to ultimate fulfilment leads ineluctably through the gates of death and renunciation. Death, in other words, becomes the ultimate goal of all desire'.³⁹

This is a misleading characterization of Schopenhauer's position for various reasons. First, he does not think that we can *pursue* the sheer mortification of the will on the ground that this would be self-defeating - we would be willing not to will.⁴⁰ Second, although the life he implores us to turn away from is a life of will/desire, he believes that there is more to life than the pursuit of desire, and that such a pursuit can bring no genuine fulfilment. This is what he says:

[s]o long as our consciousness is filled by our will, so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears, so long as we are the

subject of willing, we never obtain lasting happiness or peace...without peace and calm, true well-being is absolutely impossible. ⁴¹

And:

Absolutely every human life continues to flow on between willing and attainment. Of its nature the wish is pain; attainment quickly begets satiety. The goal was only apparent; possession takes away its charm. The wish, the need, appears again on the scene under a new form; if it does not, then dreariness, emptiness, and boredom follow, the struggle against which is just as painful as is that against want. ⁴²

The result is that:

The subject of willing is constantly lying on the revolving wheel of Ixion, is always drawing water in the sieve of the Danaids, and is the eternally thirsting Tantalus. ⁴³

Schopenhauer is operating with a version of the claim that desire is impossible. It is impossible in the sense that its pursuit can only ever bring suffering and dissatisfaction. I strive for something (suffering), and either my desire remains unsatisfied (suffering) or I get what I want. If I get what I want then there is satisfaction and pleasure, but this pleasure is short-lived and quickly gives rise to boredom (itself a form of suffering), and then more willing (suffering). Alternatively, if I don't get what I want then I may continue to strive for it (suffering), or fix upon another goal (suffering) which, if attained, will give way to boredom, and then more willing, and so on, and on, forever. It is in this sense that the desiring being is the eternally thirsting Tantalus. Schopenhauer claims further that, *qua* desiring being, 'man is a wolf for man' ⁴⁴, and that:

[h]e who keeps this last fact clearly in view beholds the world as a hell, surpassing that of Dante by the fact that one man must be the devil of another. ⁴⁵

This is all rather interesting when taken in the Nietzschean context in which Schopenhauer's position has been introduced, for we have been encouraged to suppose that his philosophy is the embodiment of nihilism, that it helps to motivate a failure of desire, and that this attitude stands opposed to life and all that really matters. Schopenhauer does indeed stand opposed to desire, but this is because he believes that its pursuit can bring no genuine fulfilment. It fails on this score not simply because the satisfaction afforded is merely temporary, but because such a pursuit is purely self-serving. The implication here is that all desires are I-desires in Bernard Williams' sense, and that genuine fulfilment requires that this egoistic stance be transcended.

I have noted already that Schopenhauer denies that we *pursue* the mortification of the will if this is intended to imply that such a 'change in the subject' proceeds from the will we are seeking to transcend. So the change cannot 'rest with us' if this means that the egoistic will can will its own destruction. ⁴⁶ However, Schopenhauer talks of our 'severing' the bonds of willing that tie us to the world, referring to a *voluntary* renunciation on our part. ⁴⁷ This suggests that our motivational make-up extends beyond egoistic will/desire, there being no immediate implication that a failure of desire in this sense spells death. We can note also that Schopenhauer's

description of this renunciation is steeped in religious imagery. We are said to be concerned with ‘an effect of grace,’⁴⁸ and in the context of describing how difficult it is to resist the pull of egoism, he cites Jesus’ claim that ‘[i]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God’.⁴⁹ He makes it clear also that the Kingdom in question is one in which, to repeat the words of Weil, we shall have emerged ‘from what the Hindus call the state of duality, the separation between subject and object’, and although Schopenhauer does not go so far as to talk of our imitating the Trinity, he is quite happy to say of ‘the good man’ that he ‘draws all things up to God, to the source whence first they came’.⁵⁰

Thus far, I have suggested that a failure of desire need be nothing more innocuous than a description of what we have when egoistic desires no longer hold exclusive dominion. As Schopenhauer puts it, they are deprived of their sting⁵¹ so that our motivations extend beyond ‘particular things and their relation to [one’s] own person’ to encompass disinterested love and self-sacrifice.⁵² Are we to say of such a person that she suffers from an enervating contentment or weariness? Or resembles an archer without a goal? Schopenhauer agrees that world-weariness or boredom is a lamentable condition, and he agrees also that it occurs when the will is held in abeyance. However, he believes that this kind of ‘failure’ is not genuine, and that will remains in the background nonetheless: it involves an implicit second-order willing – the will to will with nothing to will.⁵³ As he sees it then, boredom is part and parcel of an existence which is desire-driven in the offending sense, and does not therefore constitute a state in which the will is truly disengaged. The implication here is that there is a kind of disengagement (or ‘failure’ to use this rather loaded term) which paves the way to genuine fulfilment. We are to suppose also that one can be motivated in this direction, the implication being that it is quite inappropriate to describe such a person as an archer without a goal.

Schopenhauer is moving towards a form of religious asceticism which has much in common with that of Simone Weil, and although he can be rescued from some of the Nietzschean charges which are thrown his way, one is left with a sense that the mystical state of consciousness towards which he is gesturing, even if not tantamount to blank non-existence, is in danger of being inimical to life itself, even once the notion of life has been rescued from a narrow egoistic interpretation. This need not be a devastating problem, for Schopenhauer makes it clear that the mystical path is not for everyone. Nevertheless, it sometimes seems as if anything less will simply re-open the gates to an unbridled egoism. Take, for example, his conception of erotic longing. Schopenhauer objects that this is just one more egoistic enterprise in which ‘the notion of an endless bliss’ is associated with ‘the possession of a particular woman’,⁵⁴ and he describes lovers as ‘traitors who secretly strive to perpetuate the whole trouble and toil that would otherwise come rapidly to an end’.⁵⁵ There is no room for erotic *love* in this scheme of things, and it is implied that sexual activity is to be avoided – understandably so if it conforms to the structure of willing, and if that structure is as hellish as we have been led to suppose. Schopenhauer’s distaste for sexual activity suggests that he is not seeking to eliminate the distance between lovers in *this* sense. However, this is not because he believes that abstention will intensify desire. On the contrary, we are to suppose that it will have the opposite effect by bringing about a similar ‘change in the subject’ to that which occurs in a non-sexual context when desires are deprived of their sting. It is at this point that ‘the whole trouble and toil’ will seem hardly

worth the bother, and it is at this point that *we* might begin to wonder whether the nihilistic label is not so inappropriate after all.

A Nietzschean response

Kuzma tells us that:

[a]gainst the many thinkers, poets, and philosophers who since the dawning of Western thought had raised the affirmation of fusional reconciliation to the highest summit of erotic life, Nietzsche would ultimately seek to affirm something even more extreme, “something higher than any reconciliation.”

He continues:

But what, we might ask, could be more extreme than a desire for death and reconciliation? Nietzsche’s answer: the Dionysian longing for a ‘deep, deep Eternity’...bereft of either release or consummation. To desire eternity in the absence of every end and object – would this not be to subject eroticism to a fundamental reorientation, away from the pursuit of consummatory fulfilment and toward an unprecedented valorization of distance itself?⁵⁶

It should be clear from what has been said that the notion of fusional reconciliation admits of several interpretations, and that it is not unambiguously affirmed by Schopenhauer. Likewise, we have questioned the assumption that he is affirming a desire for death. Indeed, it seems more appropriate to describe his own position as one which involves a desire for ‘deep, deep Eternity’ - ‘bereft of either release or consummation’ and ‘in the absence of every end and object’ in the sense that the longing in question transcends the structure of willing.

Thus far Nietzsche sits rather comfortably in the mystic’s camp – an impression which is further consolidated with some of the quotations used by Kuzma to illustrate his position. So, for example, he cites the following words from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘Higher than love of the nearest is love of the farthest’⁵⁷ – hardly a love *of* distance, but rather clearly a love *from* a distance whose object cries out for a religious interpretation. Witness the following:

To think of that which is truly most distant, in other words, demands of us that we conceive of something *even further away* than every object of possible acquisition. It demands of us that we attempt to think of that which remains incapable, by necessity, from ever being grasped – not simply by a contingent incapacity on the lover’s part or by some provision of amorous conduct but rather of the object’s sheer incommensurability with any form of presence.⁵⁸

This could be Weil talking about God or Schopenhauer talking about the thing-in-itself. Are we to suppose then that Nietzsche is committed to the second erotic ideal after all? Or would it be more appropriate to say that the distinction between the two ideals has been compromised? After all, the ‘distance love’ at issue here is supposedly desire-involving, and irreducibly so.

Kuzma then asks ‘what could possibly remain for us to love and to desire when *every* object, *every* other, and *every* end has been disqualified or rendered vain?’⁵⁹ This is similar to the question thrown at Schopenhauer by those who complain that his eschatology is nihilism,⁶⁰ and what has been said so far on

Nietzsche's behalf suggests that a mystical response would not be entirely inappropriate in this case too. We are told, however, that, for Nietzsche, to love that which is truly furthest:

[i]s to love nothing less than the vast and illimitable circuit of circuits itself – the ring of eternity that transforms the infinity of time into a spiralling pathway bereft of either beginning or completion... To love that which is most distant, in other words, is to love distance itself'.⁶¹

The meaning of this is unclear, but Kuzma refers us to some of the language deployed by Nietzsche when writing about Wagner's *Tristan*, in particular, his claim that the love in question involves a 'voluptuousness of hell', and a 'weird and sweet infinity'. The word 'voluptuousness' is said to evoke 'a kind of enchantment or attraction' which 'incites desire while leaving it permanently unsatisfied', this because 'all voluptuousness is inspired by things half-concealed', and we are concerned with 'that which entices one with a promise but that leaves its fulfilment unceasingly deferred'.⁶² Nothing too hellish in any of this, and the religious connotations suggest that we are moving, rather, in the direction of heaven. We are then told that, in his *Tristan*, Wagner converts this endlessness into a 'voluptuousness of hell' by making the relevant desire something 'to renounce, to denigrate, to curse'.⁶³ This because he 'had sensed the endlessness of yearning as humanity's most profound damnation and had turned against life on account of it'.⁶⁴ By contrast, Nietzsche's Zarathustra:

[c]omes to summon a truly unprecedented affirmation in the very face of this futility, allowing Nietzsche to juxtapose, in a most stunning manner, the Tristanian longing for death and consummation with a longing still more provocative and extreme, a Dionysian longing for deep eternity bereft of either consummation or release.⁶⁵

It is in this way that erotic desire is reconceptualized 'outside the restricted economy of teleological constraint, outside any reference to fusional or consummatory fantasy' so that we are left with:

[t]he notion of an endless, objectless, desire – the trauma of eternal recommencement that consigns every yearning to dissatisfaction and every love to failure. This is what the denouement to Wagner's opera so visibly attempts to conceal and to subdue. And it is this, precisely that Nietzsche is then attempting to reassert so affirmatively at the very heart of his own thought. To love most fully, as Nietzsche would suggest to us, is to love without fulfilment. It is to discern, in those voluptuous distances of an endless circuit, the scintillating intimations of an unprecedented affirmation, an unprecedented conception of what it means to live – and to love.⁶⁶

6. Conclusions

Let us return to the initial gloss we were given of Nietzsche's solution to the problem of nihilism, namely, that it concerns 'the possibility of...an unrequited love, especially the possibility of sustaining it...even in the perpetual absence of all satisfaction'. This unrequited love is either humanity's most profound damnation or its best hope of salvation, and Kuzma argues that, in Wagner's hands, its

soteriological significance is lost. It is lost because Wagner looks eternity in the eye to curse this 'voluptuousness of hell', and we are to suppose that this response stems from a residual commitment to the erotic ideal which remains within the economy of 'teleological constraint' and 'fusional or consummatory fantasy'. The question-begging terms help to suggest that Wagner's response is to be rejected.

We are then given a characterization of this unrequited love which makes Wagner's response seem perfectly reasonable, for it is said to involve an endless, objectless, desire in which every yearning is consigned to dissatisfaction and every love to failure. Yet this is very different from the other half of the picture with which we are presented, the focus there being upon the ineffable nature of love's object which 'attracts', 'enchants', and 'entices' without ever giving itself away.

An endless, objectless, desire in which every yearning is consigned to dissatisfaction suggests that its subject really is the eternally thirsting Tantalus, and one wonders how this could be a viable model in terms of which to comprehend what it means to live and to love. Indeed, we seem to be returned to the futile activity of Schopenhauer's egoistic lover or De Rougemont's desirer of desire with a compelling case for concluding that this is, indeed, humanity's most profound damnation.⁶⁷ What would it be to see this as our best hope of salvation? It would be to treat the ingredients of the second erotic ideal as products of fantasy so that every yearning is consigned to dissatisfaction and every love to failure. One wonders what the difference is between this condition and that of nihilism as previously defined.

The answer, we are to suppose, is that these putative failures of love and yearning do not entail a failure of desire, for desire can be sustained in the absence of satisfaction and in the light of love's failure. But what does this really mean? Is the idea that our human loves are doomed to failure? That our yearnings are consigned to dissatisfaction by virtue of being fated to collapse back upon themselves? The idea that our human loves are doomed to failure seems premature to say the least, although we can note that, on one interpretation, Nietzsche's principle failing lies in his inability to enter into relationship with others – to accept their trust and love.⁶⁸ What of the idea that our yearnings are fated to collapse back upon themselves? Such an image flies in the face of the idea that love's object attracts and entices with a promise which leaves its fulfilment ever deferred, and I have noted already that this latter way of thinking offers an appropriate and not entirely uncommon way of capturing our relation to God.

A theistic framework along these lines is compatible with much of what has been said on Nietzsche's behalf. It offers a way of accommodating an endless longing for an object which can never be wholly comprehended yet which continues to attract and to entice as we are taken up into its life. A Dionysian longing for deep eternity if you like, although it would be equally appropriate to talk of our imitating the Trinity. Could this endless longing be viewed as our most profound damnation? Only on the assumption that we remain irrevocably sealed off from its object, but according to the position at hand this is not the case. On the contrary, we are capable of partaking in God's life, and, if Weil is to be believed, of becoming 'one' with Him as we turn towards the world and enter into loving relations with others.⁶⁹ Loving relations with others are eschewed by a proponent of the first erotic ideal, and this is so whether we are talking about neighbourly or erotic love. We know also that both Weil and Schopenhauer have a tendency to play down the significance of *eros*, even whilst acknowledging that its 'impossibility' carries a providential design. It is no doubt this kind of move which

leads to the conclusion that such frameworks are nihilistic in the offending sense, and we might note that Schopenhauer, in his more extreme ascetic moments, suggests that moral relations with others are to be transcended – a further sense in which his successor remains true to his roots.

Doesn't it beg the central question at issue to suppose that Nietzsche's problem can be solved by re-introducing God into the equation? After all, hasn't it been shown that such a move is no longer acceptable, and that the problem of nihilism is the problem of how there can be life (and desire) after God? First, it has not been shown that a theistic framework must be rejected, although there are conceptions thereof which make such a conclusion seem inevitable. Second, however, it is not ruled out that an atheist can accommodate the possibility of desire. All that I have sought to show is that the proposal with which we have been concerned on Nietzsche's behalf – if it is not simply a terminological variant upon theism – is inadequate to this explanatory task. It is inadequate because it dispenses with the second erotic ideal in favour of the first, and, in so doing, leaves us cut loose from anything but ourselves. It is this move which creates the problem with which Nietzsche is struggling. The mistake is to suppose that it provides a solution.

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¹ 2013, 69-88.

² I shall follow Kuzma in focusing upon Wagner's *Tristan* rather than any of his other works. However, it is worth noting that Parsifal can be interpreted as a representation of a love ideal which takes us in the direction of Christian caritas or Buddhist compassion, and which, as such, transcends the dichotomy of endless deferral of the love object for the sake of endless desire or desire's satisfaction in death. I thank the anonymous referee for bringing this interesting point to my attention.

³ Kuzma (2013), 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The quote comes from Roland Barthes (1990), 31.

⁹ Kuzma (2013), 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* The final quotation comes again from Barthes.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See Denis De Rougemont (1956), 35.

¹² De Rougemont (1956), 44

¹³ Kuzma (2013), 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁰ Act 2, s.2.

²¹ *On the Nature of Things*, bk IV, 'The Passion of Love'.

²² Scruton (1994), 125.

²³ 1976, 442.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ 2013, 77.

²⁷ 1976, 443.

²⁸ What I say below will go some way towards disambiguating this expression.

²⁹ See Weil (1976), 358-359.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 358. Compare Augustine's 'God is closer to me than I am to myself' ((1961), III, 6).

³¹ Kuzma (2013), 73. The final quotation comes again from Barthes.

³² 1956, 43.

³³ Hence M.C. D'Arcy (1947), 311: '[De Rougemont's] account of Eros becomes at important points too vague. He calls it hedonistic, and this implies that it is selfish, but he does not show how this idea of Eros is compatible with the one which he is more inclined to emphasize, namely, that of self-extinction.'

³⁴ Kuzma (2013), 76. There are other conceptions of nihilism. M.A. Gillespie tells us that it involves 'the absolute negation of everything, which leaves only a chaotic and meaningless activity' ((1984), 20). David E. Cooper objects that Gillespie's 'subsequent explanation of the possible senses of 'nihilism' does not confirm the cover-blurb's reference to his book as a 'marvel of clarity' ((1999), 19).

³⁵ 2005, 177.

³⁶ 2005, 173.

³⁷ 1958, 556.

³⁸ 2013, 76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Schopenhauer says of denial of the will that '[t]he change in the subject required for this, just because it consists in the elimination of all willing, cannot proceed from the will, and hence cannot be an arbitrary act of will, in other words, cannot rest with us ((1966), II, 367). He claims further that it is 'a product, not of "works" but an "effect of grace"' ((1966), I, 404.) The religious connotations are both clear and telling.

⁴¹ 1966, I, 196.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, 231-234.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I, 196. Compare Lucretius' description of the erotic lover as someone who 'thirsts even whilst he gulps' (*On the Nature of Things*, IV, 'The Passion of Love').

⁴⁴ 1966, II, 577.

⁴⁵ 1966, II, 577-578.

⁴⁶ 1966, II, 367.

⁴⁷ See 1966, I, 379.

⁴⁸ 1966, I, 404.

⁴⁹ 1966, I, 379-380.

⁵⁰ 1966, I, 381. For some interpretations of Schopenhauer which give due regard to the religious dimension of his thought see Gerard Mannion (2003) and W.M. Salter (1911).

⁵¹ 1966, I, 379.

⁵² 1966, I, 378.

⁵³ Compare Tolstoy's definition of boredom as 'The desire for desires' (1995, Part 8).

⁵⁴ Schopenhauer (1966), II, 551.

⁵⁵ Schopenhauer (1966), II, 560.

⁵⁶ Kuzma (2013), 79.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 80. The Nietzsche quotation comes from 2005, 77.

⁵⁸ Kuzma (2013), 81. Compare Levinas (1961), 179 who claims that the desire for God involves a 'distance more precious than contact, a non-possession more precious than possession, a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself'. He goes on to say that 'this is not some romantic dream, but what from the beginning of this research imposed itself as Desire....Desire is situated beyond satisfaction and non-satisfaction'.

⁵⁹ 2013, 81.

⁶⁰ Salter (1911), 304 defends Schopenhauer as follows: '[e]ven a scholar like Otto Pflleiderer calls nihilism his eschatology. But many times Schopenhauer indicates that the nothing which the saint awaits is relative, not absolute – there is nothing of this world in it, that is all. Nirvana is the word he often uses (borrowing from the Buddhist vocabulary), which means an extinguishing; but this of itself is not decisive, for the will to live *is* extinguished in the saint, and with it the will to life sooner or later, and this is the sole positive reference and meaning of the term – but whether there may not be something else in man than the will to live, and whether there may not be some other state or condition

than that which we call life, is wholly undetermined. Schopenhauer quotes what the Buddhists say: “Thou shalt attain Nirvana, that is, a state in which four things do not exist – birth, age, sickness, and death”. That this state is a mere nothing is a presumptuous assertion, ‘Schopenhauer’s contact with theology’.

⁶¹ Kuzma (2013), 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

⁶⁷ The conclusion is compelling on the assumption that hell is a matter of being locked up in one’s egoistic concerns. Rowan Williams (2014) describes hell as being alone with his little selfish ego for all eternity. Compare John McDade (2010): ‘The doctrine of hell is a way of saying that it is within our power so to enclose ourselves, so to make ourselves a “black hole” into which no light can penetrate, that not even God can come into us. Augustine has a phrase about someone *involutus in se*, “enfolded inwards into himself”’.

⁶⁸ Giles Fraser (2002), 161-166 argues for this conclusion.

⁶⁹ Compare Eric L. Santner who replies as follows to Pippin: ‘[t]he understanding of love that Pippin gleans from Nietzsche’s text paradoxically returns us to the very Judeo-Christian legacy that Nietzsche takes such pains to dismantle in his work’ ((2005), 195). Santner’s proposal has something in common with Weil’s (and, indeed, Levinas’s position), for he tells us that ‘the infinitization of desire that Pippin identifies as specifically Nietzschean can perhaps best be understood on the basis of a certain understanding of the I-Thou relation, the relation to one’s neighbour... What I am suggesting is that the surfeit of restless desire... is ultimately generated by our proximity to this neighbour-Thing, the opaque, enigmatic density of the Other that we can never fully integrate into our symbolic universe’, (*ibid.*).