Idealist Love as Egoism: Willoughby Patterne in George Meredith's *The Egoist*.

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In his masterful survey, *The Nature of Love*, Irving Singer observes that Western attempts to understand love have often taken an idealistic form. The stress of much, if not most, of this idealist thinking about love is on transcending the boundaries between two lovers in what amounts to a merging of identities.[1] Singer notes critics of this idealized love (whom he deems realists), such as Freud, who oppose the notion of a fused identity, question whether the notion is possible or even desirable.[2] In this paper I examine Willoughby Patterne, of George Meredith's *The Egoist*, who confirms the realist critique of love. In his destructive, idealized attempt to melt and merge with what he calls his "waxwork"[3] fiancée, Clara, Willoughby reveals that such a love is not for the other, but for oneself.

Willoughby's idealized love is best seen in the couple's differing views toward the world. These differing attitudes become "the principal topic of discussion between [the] two lovers."[4] Willoughby would like Clara to withdraw with him to Patterne Hall, "fence[ing] away the world"[5] in order to adore the divinity of their affections and oneness. Clara recognizes Willoughby's desires to withdraw from the world as vaguely unnatural; she herself loves the world as she loves nature: "The world has faults; glaciers have crevasses, mountains have chasms; but is not the effect of the whole sublime?"[6] Willoughby loves neither nature nor the world; to the egoist, the world threatens possession and prevents absolute control. He wants to create an artificial atmosphere where "the world cannot touch [them]."[7] But Clara's response to Willoughby's "airtight" and constrictive nature is to gasp for air: "We are in an atmosphere where the world cannot breathe," she says.[8] As scholar Clive Norcross argues, Willoughby's idealistic desires and expectations attempt to create an impervious, perfect unity with Clara that is completely shielded from the world and results in a repressive an impossible relationship.[9]

Willoughby's idealized love reaches its comic zenith when he tries to exact an oath of

fidelity from Clara that will be binding even after his death—an urging that Norcross describes correctly as "necrophiliac."[10] Willoughby wishes Clara to be inviolably true to his "dust" and his "name" should he die and leave her alone.[11] In his necrophiliac urgings of fidelity Willoughby thinks he is aspiring to a spiritual ideal, an absolute unity and placid agreement with his betrothed. But, as Rod Johnson relates, Willoughby's desire to isolate himself with his lover is ultimately a desire to isolate himself *with himself*.[12] His exalted idealized love needs isolation and control and is evidenced by his mythical dictum of oneness: "He took the one—love's mystical number—from which commonly springs multitudes; but, on the present occasion, it was a single one, and cold."[13] Willoughby's desire for Clara to merge, to "enter into [his] mind; think with [him], feel with [him],"[14] demonstrates his radical understanding of the nature of love: he would obliterate all distinction. "Unwilling to embrace anything outside himself," scholar Harold Smith articulates, "Willoughby produces an isolation so complete that no intercourse (in both senses) is possible; he does not converse, he engages in monologic soliloquy."[15]

Willoughby's desire to see and hear only himself is economically represented throughout the story by the symbolic use of the mirror. He feels that "in his more reflective hour the attractiveness of that lady which held the mirror to his features was paramount."[16] His desires ultimately set his thoughts on Laetitia Dale, which "would be marriage with a mirror, with an echo; marriage with a shining mirror, a choric echo."[17] As Tim Carver argues, the mirror demonstrates Willoughby's idealized love is merely a desire for self, a self-reflexive narcissism seen primarily in terms of reflection and therefore enclosure.[18] It is this idealized love that causes Clara to feel trapped within Willoughby's "inner temple": "the idea of the scene ensuing upon her petition for release, and the being dragged round the walls of his egoism, and having her head knocked against the corners, alarmed her with sensations of

sickness."[19] The "inner temple" becomes externalized and attempts to subsume his love objects into a hermetically-sealed self. However, it is the practice of his love objects to assert their individual selves, exploiting the weaknesses of Willoughby's idealized and mirror-walled temple where "one small fissure" lets in the "world with its muddy deluge."[20]

It is to Willoughby's pain and the reader's enjoyment that he begins his comical gyrations and contortions while attempting to stay the waters of the world before they pour through the ever-lengthening fissures surrounding his fragile and idealistic conceptions of love.[21] Willoughby's efforts to adapt to a new model of love come late, and Meredith leaves the question of Willoughby's sincerity and possible future success ambiguous.[22] Laetitia seems an unlikely partner as, by her own admission, she is "as good as dead."[23] It seems clear the evolution of concepts surrounding love have left Willoughby an endangered species, perhaps a fossil. It is indeed the case that through very love of self, himself he slew.

Notes

1. Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* (New York: Random House, 1966), 90.

2. Ibid., 120.

3. George Meredith, *The Egoist* (1879; reprint, New York: Norton, 2000), 14.

4. Ibid., 40.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 54.

7. Ibid., 53.

8. Ibid., 54.

9. Clive Norcross, "*The Egoist* and the Male Ego," in *Feminist Interpretations of* The Egoist, ed. William Anderson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 12.

10. Ibid.

11. Meredith, *Egoist*, 43.

12. Rod Johnson, introduction to *The Problem of Love in British Literature*, by Steven Prince (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), xi.

13. Meredith, *Egoist*, 45.

14. Ibid.

15. Harold Smith, *Eros and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Revere and Long, 1998), 77.

16. Meredith, *Egoist*, 17.

17. Ibid., 317.

18. Tim Carver, "Meredith's Ideal Lover," *British Literature* 34, no. 5 (1998): 40.

19. Meredith, *Egoist*, 82.

20. Ibid.

21. Erin Greene, "The Victorian Marriage Plot," *Victorian Literature* 88, no. 7 (1999):

98, accessed February 19, 2010, JSTOR.

22. Ibid., 99.

23. Meredith, *Egoist*, 412.