

In Western Literature

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The visits of Auguste Comte to Clotilde's family continued, and the bond between him and the young woman grew ever stronger, deeper, and more intimate. Gradually, the remnants of social convention—those forms of restraint and decorum that custom imposes on ordinary life—began to fall away. Such barriers are dissolved only by pure affection when it reaches its furthest limit, or by genuine love when it attains its full intensity.

The family, however, grew increasingly uneasy. They hinted openly at the impropriety of these frequent visits and of a relationship that was steadily shedding its former reserve and self-consciousness. For a long time Clotilde resisted speaking to the philosopher about the suspicions that were stirring in her family's minds. In the end, however, she told him plainly what troubled her. He listened, and needed no prolonged reflection to feel his heart fill with joy and delight. A curious sense of pride took hold of him—strange at first glance, yet entirely familiar to lovers. Why should he not feel joy and pride, when the veils between him and the woman he loved were lifted day after day? Why should he not feel exalted, even triumphant, when he sensed that the family could no longer ignore his love for her, or deny that she did not despise him, did not disregard him, and did not treat him with indifference?

Perhaps she did not love him as he loved her. Yet there was in her heart a feeling that inclined her toward him and drew her nearer. And who could say? Might not this feeling grow stronger, subject—as all human faculties and emotions are—to development and change, until it was transformed from pure affection into ardent love? If so, why should he not renew his efforts and persist? Why should he not circle her heart, hoping to discover a path that would lead him to it? And so he did.

The tenderness he had long suppressed within himself—or cloaked in a seriousness that made it resemble friendship rather than love—began to cast off its artificial covering and to reveal itself in its true form, with all its irresistible force. The reserve he had affected in conversation gradually disappeared. He became open and explicit, renewing his declarations of love, repeating them insistently, and surrounding Clotilde with a web of entreaty, hope, supplication, persuasion, and appeal—addressed now to reason, now to feeling. How could she escape all these snares, when scarcely had she freed herself from one than she stumbled into another? She was compelled, then, to yield a little, to make some concessions, to retreat—as they say—from the first line of defense.

Was she truly indifferent to the philosopher, wholly disinclined to love him? I cannot say. What is certain is that she could no longer resist. She wrote to Auguste Comte, confessing her weakness, laying bare her own state of mind, and explaining her view of how she might extricate herself from this delicate situation. She told him that she had never imagined anyone could be so devoted to her, nor had she ever been inclined to devote herself to

anyone. If she had any hope in life—if she could be said to have hope at all—it lay in a single dream: to have a child on whom she might lavish her love, tenderness, strength, and energy. Any partnership with a man would exist only for the sake of realizing this hope. She was anxious that such a partner, if she were ever to find one, should be exceptional in character, elevated in spirit, generous of heart, and worthy of esteem. She found all these qualities in the philosopher, and she did not object to his being her companion in fulfilling this hope and bringing such a child into being.

Yet she did not wish to deceive or mislead him. She did not love him in the ordinary sense of the word. Her life, she said, was not the precious thing people might compete to share. She was unhappy and in need of consolation; poor and in need of support. All she could offer was sincere affection and boundless loyalty.

The philosopher read her letter and was seized by a kind of madness. The earth seemed to spin beneath him; then his spirit grew calm again, the world brightened before his eyes, and the days smiled upon him. Had he ever dared to hope that Clotilde would accept such a proposal—that she would consent to share life with him and to join him in the creation of a human being? He accepted with joy, contentment, and confidence, certain that this was but one step that would be followed by others. He wrote to her and signed his letter: “Your faithful husband, Auguste Comte.”

She came to visit him one day, like someone resigned and prepared to fulfill a promise and enter into this partnership. He received her with delight, seated her, knelt before her, and offered her a fervent philosophical prayer. But he was a scholar with little of the grace of men accustomed to women’s company or skilled in winning their hearts. His prayer was philosophical; his conversation afterward entirely practical. Even his movements, as he paced his room in agitation, were calculated and methodical. He lifted nothing without deliberation, set nothing down except according to plan, and made no gesture without an evident reason and rational explanation. He spoke of his income, of their expenses, of household arrangements, and of the material organization of life.

To this must be added his physical appearance: plain to the point of ugliness, short, with a protruding belly and an unsettled expression. What place had such a spectacle—such speech, such movements—in the heart of a woman not yet thirty? How swiftly she recoiled from this partnership and turned away from it. How quickly she laughed at herself inwardly, realizing that she had attempted something beyond her strength and capacity. She rose hastily, saying, “The hour is late; let me write to you.” She left at once, descended the stairs, reached the street, and went on her way, while the philosopher watched her from the window. She hurried forward without looking back. Later she wrote to him, apologizing and explaining that she had been too hasty in her promise, that she needed time for long reflection, and that it was better to grant herself a period of delay.

As soon as her letter reached him, he felt he had wounded her by his talk, and he wrote again, gently and insistently. She persisted in her refusal. When his pressure grew too heavy, she replied with firmness and severity: she could not sell herself or bargain over her

person. If the pure and sincere affection she offered satisfied him, then he might continue to see her at her family's home as before—but she required six months for reflection and calm deliberation. Otherwise, she would return to the solitude and isolation she had known.

At this point the philosopher awoke from the intoxication that had flooded his heart and mind. He returned to his former state—not full of hope, yet far from despair—confident that the outcome would be in his favor and that success would not elude him. He resolved to be patient and to resume his former life, visiting Clotilde at her family's home twice a week.

Both lived in straitened circumstances. She searched for work to support herself or to ease, even slightly, the harshness of her narrow life. She was willing to accept a position as a secretary, whether in an office or with a man of means, but found no opportunity—no one except her philosopher, in whom she trusted completely. She concealed nothing from him. He promised assistance, offered to lend her what she needed, and assured her that whatever money he possessed was hers to command. In truth, he possessed little. His labors were heavy, his expenses burdensome, and the future before him dark. He taught mathematics in private schools, though one proprietor threatened to abolish these classes for reasons of economy. He earned something from the School of Engineering, but far less than he required. He pressed his English pupils to secure him a regular income, but they did not grant him this right. He was obliged to provide three thousand francs a year to support his wife and had to reduce even this sum.

Despite all this, he worked and he loved, careful not to neglect either his philosophy or his beloved. She, too, devoted herself to literature when she was unable to earn money otherwise. Her first story had enjoyed modest success—why should she not write another? She began a new work, making herself its subject through symbolism and allusion. Each time she wrote a passage, she sent it to the philosopher, who read it with admiration and rapture, praising it extravagantly.

He resumed his visits to her family, enduring their manner toward him and often responding in kind. Matters worsened when her brother submitted a paper on mathematics to his teacher. The philosopher examined it at length and found it wanting. He did not hesitate to say so, nor to tell Clotilde that his love for her and his concern for her brother would not prevent him from stating plainly that the work was of no consequence. This only deepened the brother's resentment: here was the man who hovered about his sister and drank coffee in their home twice a week, yet refused to encourage his students or acknowledge their merit.

The family's hostility toward Clotilde intensified, and she stood firm against it, defending her teacher and arguing on his behalf. She left their presence exhausted and dispirited, nearly bereft of courage and energy. She thought of the philosopher as the only man who loved her sincerely, who offered her pure affection and compassion, and she felt herself drawn toward him. Yet a powerful aversion restrained her from surrendering fully to this love. She limited herself to complaint, accepting his kindness, his tenderness, and even his financial assistance.

Signs of weakness began to appear. She felt fatigue and debility, and was plagued by a persistent cough. She attributed it merely to exhaustion, and endured patiently. She continued writing her story, sought comfort in the philosopher's companionship, and allowed him to visit her in her own lodgings. She revived his hopes, even inflamed them, when she sent him a bouquet of artificial flowers she had fashioned herself, accompanied by verses of no great merit, which the philosopher nonetheless regarded as a marvel of eloquence.

One day he visited her and found her worn by pain. He spoke to her at length, and she found deep reassurance in his presence. When he rose to leave, he stole a kiss from her lips. Almost before he reached his home, he wrote to her a famous letter apologizing for that kiss, for he had not trusted his own purity of intent at the moment he took it. She replied with disarming simplicity: "Do not reproach yourself; it was I who gave you the kiss of a loyal friend."

Illness and poverty now pressed heavily upon Clotilde; passion and misery weighed equally upon the philosopher. Formal restraint vanished between them. Visits multiplied. He offered her his servant to help her manage life; she refused. She passed the winter alone, sustained only by his visits and his affection. A doctor attended her and diagnosed an illness far removed from what she truly suffered. The philosopher, despite his poverty, subscribed to the opera to provide her with occasional solace through music.

Yet he did not abandon his desire. He continued to press for the physical union that would crown the harmony of mind and heart between them. She resisted, until his insistence became excessive. At last she wrote, yielding to what he sought, saying: "You demand a recompense for the affection and assistance you give me; I will not delay in paying it." Ashamed and indignant, the philosopher rejected this surrender. He would accept nothing but a union born of love and desire.

She visited him one day, exhausted by illness, burning with fever. She lay upon a cushion, and he looked upon her with boundless love and boundless desire. Seeing her eyes clouded by pain and her cheeks flushed by fever, he perceived only seductive beauty. She lay helpless before him; he had power over her—but not over himself. His desire dissolved into a grave and reverent love, infused with a sense of moral sanctity.

Illness and misery consumed Clotilde; love and poverty consumed the philosopher. She was confined to her room, attended by his servant. The doctor now declared her tubercular and near death. Her mother came often; so did the philosopher. Between mother and philosopher there arose painful quarrels—sometimes tinged with grim humor—over that wasted body and that soul preparing to depart. The mother was bound by social convention and maternal love; the philosopher by a kind of philosophical devotion. He did not hesitate to declare himself the true master of the house, the eternal husband of the girl. Had he not provided for all her needs? Had he not tended her in sickness, openly and secretly alike? She had once written to him: "How greatly you, unhappy lover, stand in need of mercy; from your beloved you have received nothing but what wives usually grant their husbands."

It was both painful and faintly absurd to see the philosopher kneeling by the bed, praying to Clotilde, calling her his sister, his wife, and his daughter. He swore to save her from death, to guarantee her immortality if nature destroyed her body. "Are you not," he said, "the noblest woman humanity has known? Have you not encountered the noblest mind humanity has known? Death shall have no dominion over either of us."

Her condition worsened. A priest was summoned to prepare her for death; neither she nor the philosopher objected. The priest performed his rites while the philosopher looked on in silent anger. Once the priest departed, he denounced the religious custom that tore the sick from life and cast them into the arms of death.

Later he returned—gentle of voice, calm of spirit, tender of heart—knelt by her bed, and spoke words of hope and mercy. When he left and returned again, the whole family was assembled and barred his access to the sickroom. He flew into a rage, refused to depart, and threatened to expel them all, declaring that the woman was his wife and his alone, by her own confession and oath. The mother wept and denied him; the brother confronted him angrily; the aged father approached calmly and asked him to leave the girl to her family.

The philosopher fell at the old man's feet, pleading until the father relented. "Leave now," he said, "and we shall summon you if hope is lost." The philosopher withdrew. The next day a messenger came; he rushed back to the house. The family stepped aside and admitted him to Clotilde's room. He entered, locked the door behind him, and remained there for many hours. Imagination may roam freely in picturing what he said or did beside the dying woman, while death slowly prevailed over that great love.

When afternoon passed into evening, he opened the door and emerged in silence. He returned to his home and did not attend the funeral or accompany the body to the grave. What was the funeral to him? He had sought to reach her body and failed; he had sought her soul, and it had not resisted him, but hastened toward him and taken up residence in his heart and mind.

Clotilde did not die. She entrusted to him the best of herself. She lived on within him, sharing his mortal life until its end; and when that fleeting life was finished, her soul would mingle with his, forming a single immortal being. The philosopher withdrew into his house, devoting himself to this image, worshipping it, losing himself in it. His love for Clotilde was transformed into a religion, complete with rites, prayers, and devotions.

Strangest of all, his outward life did not change. His lectures continued with perfect regularity; his journals appeared on schedule; his correspondence was written and answered with methodical order.

How astonishing is the human being—so simple in appearance, yet so profoundly complex in reality.