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Books Recommended for Courses: Denis de Rougement. *Love in the Western World*

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Texts and Teaching

Books Recommended for Courses

Denis de Rougemont. *Love in the Western World*, tr. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton University Press: Princeton Paperbacks, 1983). 396 pages. \$27.95.

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Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* has become something of a classic since it first appeared in 1939. Rougemont traces the development of romantic love from its origins in the twelfth century to its mutated condition in the twentieth. His thesis is that romantic love and marriage are fundamentally opposed. "My central purpose," he wrote in his Preface to the 1956 revised edition, "was to describe the inescapable conflict in the West between passion and marriage; and in my view that remains the true subject, the real contention of the book as it has worked out." Whereas romantic love is passionate love, based on eros and completely absorbed in itself, marriage is an expression of Christian love or *agape*, which recognizes and accepts the existence of others in their whole concrete reality. The profanation of romantic love since its inception in twelfth century has debased the institution of marriage, which formerly contained passion through Christian love. Now, however, "*passion wrecks the very notion of marriage at a time when there is being attempted the feat of trying to ground marriage in values elaborated by the morals of passion.*" Rougemont intends not only to defend marriage, but also to advocate its value and importance for

modern society (pp. 23-25; 71; 286; 315).¹

In what follows I shall discuss how I use *Love in the Western World* in my undergraduate course, “Love from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Centuries,” which attracts majors and non-majors alike. Students and I construct an historiographical critique of Rougemont’s argument about the influence of romantic love from the twelfth to the twentieth centuries (although my approach also can be used in courses primarily focused on medieval or early modern Europe). I chose this book because it coincides with the time frame covered in my course, and because it is still in print and considered standard reading on the subject of romantic love. A more significant reason is pedagogical: *Love in the Western World* is useful in getting students to consider how history should be practiced, how it should be used, and how it differs from other fields in the humanities. Rougemont is not an historian—in fact, he disavows that he is doing history—but he makes a causal claim about the past without recourse to historiographical standards. In a capstone assignment, a review of Rougemont’s book, students apply their historical knowledge and skills to identify his thesis, summarize his argument, and assess his claim *as an historian would*. This assignment allows me to determine how well they have learned the four major lessons of this course: the appropriate use of historical evidence; historical context; textual interpretation; and causality. It also allows me to assess critical thinking and writing; mastery of historical content; and making arguments. In short, the chief value of *Love in the Western World* is to get students to think *historically* and to reflect on doing history itself.

I

I assign readings from the book in parts. Books I-IV are the most relevant for courses on medieval and early modern Europe, so I shall focus on them here. In the Preface to the 1956 Edition and Book

¹ The Preface to the 1956 edition does not appear in the 1983 edition. All italics in quotations are Rougemont’s.

I (my first reading assignment) Rougemont lays the foundation for his argument. The problem of romantic love derives from the so-called “Tristan Myth” as developed in the various versions of the Tristan story, the poems of the troubadours, and courtly romances. The great paradox of romantic love is that it fosters both passion and unhappiness. Romantic love is not only a love of love, a selfish love, in which the person is more interested in being in love itself than being in love with the other person; it is a love of death, a desire for death, which will purify romantic lovers after a series of ordeals. This desire for death is ultimately the goal of passion, Rougemont suggests, and what destroys it. Since romantic love thrives on obstruction, impediments must constantly be created to renew ardor and to fabricate passion, the true object of desire (pp. 41-45).

The source of unhappiness in the Tristan story was the potion, the lovers’ “alibi for passion,” which exonerated Tristan and Iseut morally by allowing them to place the blame for their illicit affair elsewhere (pp. 47-48; but see Chap. 10 in general). “Both passion and the longing for death which passion disguises are connected with, and fostered by, a particular notion of how to reach understanding which is itself typical of the Western psyche.” Why, Rougemont asks? Because Western man “reaches self-awareness and tests himself only by risking his life—in suffering and on the verge of death” (p. 51). Having summarized the story of Tristan from “an objective standpoint,” Rougemont reiterates that romantic love is at bottom a desire for death that ultimately redeems those tormented by their passions (pp. 54-55).

As with all readings, I begin our discussion of the Preface and Book I by asking rudimentary questions. What type of book is it? What is the genre? Who is the author? When was it written? Is it in English or a translation? Has it been edited? And so on. I do not give students questions in advance. I want to gauge what kind of information they gather from their own reading, and to encourage the habit of asking the rudimentary questions. Next we figure out the author’s purpose. What clues do we get from the text and the author himself? What issue is the author trying to address?

What problems is he creating? Then comes the crucial question: is Rougemont doing history? By asking these questions and focusing on his statements I hope to initiate our discussion about the nature of history itself. At first students tend to accept Rougemont's argument and use of history. I ask them to write down their reflections and hand them in. These will be used later in the semester to compare how their views about the practice of history may have changed.

To get students to think concretely about the appropriate use of historical evidence, the first major lesson of this course, our discussion addresses such questions as: What constitutes evidence? What kind of evidence does Rougemont use? Why is it important to cite sources? Prompted to think like historians, students soon discover that Rougemont inadequately cites evidence or sources to substantiate his claims, a chief defect of *Love in the Western World*. For example, early in Book I he states that the Tristan myth was established in the twelfth century "at the very time the leading caste was making a great effort to establish social and moral order. The intention was, indeed, 'to contain' the surges of the destructive instinct; for religion, in attacking this instinct, had been exacerbating it." He then adds, "Contemporary chroniclers, sermons, and satires show that in this century there occurred an early 'breakdown of marriage,' and the breakdown made a vigorous reaction imperative" (p. 22). Yet he gives no citation, no examples, and no evidence.

To fill in some of Rougemont's gaps, and to show students how historians substantiate their claims, I assign Bérout's *Romance of Tristan*, translated by Alan S. Fedrick (Penguin, 1970) and selections from other primary sources. A useful edition (with a substantial bibliography) is *Love, Sex, and Marriage in the Middle Ages: A Sourcebook*, ed. Conor McCarthy (Routledge, 2004). Bérout's *Tristan* and the selected readings serve as a basis for students to evaluate with some primary source evidence the accuracy of Rougemont's fundamental claim. I also provide additional information through lectures on topics raised by these readings, such as the nature of feudal society in the Middle Ages, chivalry in the twelfth century, and the decretists' debate about sex and marriage. A useful tactic

while lecturing, I have discovered, is to explain to students what I am doing as I am doing it. I ask aloud (as if asking myself, for example) what additional sources should I consult? What other problems or questions arise? This demonstrates to students and emphasizes the point that history is a process of thinking.

Students are now ready for the first writing assignment on the appropriate use of historical evidence. In a short paper (five to six pages) I ask them to use specific examples and evidence from the *Romance of Tristan* and the supplementary selections to evaluate one of Rougemont's major claims about romantic love. I prefer that they choose their own topics, but I also suggest some, such as his definition of romantic love, the role of chastity, and the significance of the potion in the Tristan story. The assignment is short, isolated, and controlled. There is little room for students to stray beyond the point of this exercise, and for this reason they often find it difficult and challenging. My specific goal here is to force them to analyze sources and to use evidence to make a historical claim. They are evaluated on how well they do this, as well as on content, organization and argument, and proper English usage. This is the first building block for the capstone assignment.

II

The next reading assignment is Book II ("The Religious Origins"), the more controversial part of Rougemont's thesis. Rougemont claims that romantic love was a cryptic expression of Catharism, a religious heresy that flourished in southern France in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. This not only made it different from Christian love, it explains why marriage and passionate love (now *cortezia*, or courtly love) were fundamentally opposed. "*The cultivation of passionate love began in Europe as a reaction to Christianity (and in particular to its doctrine of marriage) by people whose spirit, whether naturally or by inheritance was still pagan*" (pp. 74-75). Rougemont offers two essential points for his connection between the Cathari and the troubadours, between heresy and love poetry in

the twelfth century (Chap. 7). First, both developed simultaneously in southern France; second, and coincidentally, both extolled the virtue of chastity. Like the Cathari, he adds, the troubadours scoffed at the marriage bond, reviled the clergy, and scorned members of the feudal caste; they led wandering lives and wrote verses derived from Catharist liturgy (p. 85). Rougemont then traces the development of courtly love from the Arthurian romances to the Tristan stories of Thomas, Gottfried of Strasbourg, and Richard Wagner (Chaps. 11-13).

At this point I address historical context and interpretation, the second and third major lessons of this course. Of course these have been raised before, but now they are brought into focus and used to build on what students have learned about historical evidence. In strategically planned lectures, derived from our discussion of primary sources—judicious selections from troubadour poems and Andreas Capellanus's *The Art of Courtly Love*—I talk about the different types of troubadour love, such as *fin' amors* and mixed love, or the difference between romantic love and courtly love. I discuss where these notions came from, and why they appeared at this time, offering a different explanation than the one Rougemont provides, showing students the relationship between historical context and interpretation.

Because students generally have difficulty understanding this relationship, I allow them to work on their second writing assignment in groups. The size and number depend on class enrollment. Each group must use historical context to address a particular issue from Rougemont's book and present its conclusions to the class (although each student must turn in an individual paper). This requires some investigation, and students are allowed to consult secondary sources, with my guidance. One group addresses where romantic love came from and why it developed at this time; in particular students address why romantic love would have appealed to many aristocratic and strong-willed women, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine or Marie of Champagne. Another group discusses the historical debate about courtly love. Another addresses the four

possible objections to Rougemont's thesis that he himself raises against his claim that romantic love was a cryptic expression of the Cathar heresy: 1) the religion of the Cathars is still misunderstood; 2) the troubadours never said Catharism was part of their poetry; 3) the love they extol is an idealization or sublimation of sexual desire; 4) too many other influences can explain the rise of romantic love in the twelfth century (Book II, Chap. 8). Tackling the same problem from different angles, students are tasked with showing how historical context may or may not affect Rougemont's claims.

Let me give an example of what I would look for in student papers. Responding to the second objection, Rougemont maintains that symbolism was part of medieval mindset. Therefore, most things were never explicitly stated, or needed to be justified, even in the popular mind. Therefore, one can easily "understand that the peculiar position of heretics caused some poets to be very discreet in indicating that, apart from the habitual symbolism which spoke for itself, their work possessed an exact double meaning. Hence symbols were sometimes vehicles of allegory as well, and took on cryptographical guise" (p. 95). (In this chapter Rougemont actually cites some authorities, such as troubadours Alegret and Marcabru, and modern historians like Jeanroy and Huizinga.) According to Rougemont, this justifies why he "took care not to go into the actual detail of the 'influence,' as many historians go for whom the real is only established by means of written records" (p. 109; see Book II, Chap. 10). Whereas the use of allegory would lead historians to examine the sources and the context more closely, basing their interpretation on these, medieval use of allegory seems to give Rougemont more interpretive leeway, allowing him to infer connections or influences that are not explicit.

Thinking *historically*, students should not implicitly reject such suppositions, but I am training them to be suspicious of theoretical leaps unsubstantiated by facts. Furthermore, they should consider how historians would bolster their case, especially if circumstantial like Rougemont's, with corroborative evidence from the historical context. More specifically, they should discuss how

they would explore historical context to substantiate Rougemont's claim. One area they might consider is the notion of double meaning or truth which was not alien to the Middle Ages, as I cover in a lecture. Opposing the realm of human love with the realm of divine love, for instance, Andreas Capellanus allegedly preached a doctrine of double truth, for which he was denounced by Bishop Tempier in 1277; and St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance again, was possibly targeted as well for mentioning the notion of a double truth in the *Summa contra Gentiles*. In doing this exercise students assess how historical context bears on interpretation and vice versa.

This assignment has great pedagogical value. It requires some specific investigation, sifting through evidence, using secondary sources, and understanding the appropriate historical context. Clearly students do not have all the information or sources available to them, and I do not expect them to give me a definitive answer to the question; however, they have been presented with a specific issue and can apply what they have learned to it. If students can recognize appropriate sources and additional information that could substantiate Rougemont's position, and if they have reflected on the significance of historical context to interpret the sources and information accurately, then they have successfully fulfilled the requirement for this assignment. The methodological component gets them to think *historically*, and the reflective component *as an historian would*, about a problem from the past.

III

This takes us to causality, the fourth major lesson of the course, which is directly related to historical context and interpretation. In Book III ("Passion and Mysticism") Rougemont looks at the connection between passion and Christian mysticism; in Book IV ("The Myth in Literature") he traces the influence of romantic love on the late medieval and early modern periods. Book IV contains a useful survey of many prominent works on romantic passion and love, whose influence down to the twentieth century is "due to the

rhetoric of the myth, as inherited from Provençal love.” Since the masses imitate the elite, Rougemont claims that few people would fall passionately in love if they had never heard of romantic love; they might have the emotional impulse, but they would not have the language (“rhetoric”) to express it or to act upon it. Literature can be blamed for this. As “the way downward to manners,” it has been responsible for popularizing the romantic myth, or rather profaning it, by which he means sacrilege and secularization (p. 174, n.1). Rougemont argues that the stages of the transformation of the myth of romantic love correspond with literary transformations and trends, which he traces in medieval literature (the *Romance of the Rose*, the *dolce stil novo*, the writings of Dante and Petrarch), and in works by several early modern authors (e.g. Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Milton).

This is where I have the most trouble with Rougemont’s book. No one doubts that ideas recur over time, but the ordinary historian gets uncomfortable with theoretical leaps and prefers tighter connections between ideas and authors than Rougemont provides. Is it enough to assert that because the *Romance of Tristan* had been translated into every language in the West and its message appropriated, both the Cathar heresy and the romantic myth were transmitted to writers like Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Milton (Book III, Chaps. 6-7)? Too often he sounds more like a conspiracy theorist than a literary or historical critic. He insinuates that the authors of romantic literature (the elite) are in on the secret of the Catharist/heretical origins of romantic love that the rest of us (the masses) do not know about but somehow imbibe and imitate through the romantic myth (Book IV, Chap. 1).

I concede that if literary transmutation explains the progression of romantic love from the troubadour creation of the myth to early modern popularization and enthusiasm, then it does not matter whether authors were in on the secret; but if authors knew they were transmitting the heresy because they were part of the elite who read the *Romance of Tristan* and the poetry of the troubadours, from which they obtained the secret behind romantic

love, as Rougemont claims, then he must make causality clearer. This could be shown by answering a few basic questions: had the elite authors had actually read this literature; did they understand it to contain such messages and meanings; did they use it—and intend to use it—in the same way; and most important, how do we know? Rougemont not only fails to consider these crucial questions, he never attempts to establish causality or the influence of Catharism on the late medieval and early modern authors, despite claiming that they knew they were perpetuating the same heresy and romantic myth as the troubadours.

His treatment of Shakespeare best illustrates the point. Rougemont maintains that since Shakespeare's life and identity are "matters of speculation, it is futile to inquire whether or not he was privy to the secret traditions of the troubadours. But it may be noted that Verona was a main centre of Catharism in Italy" (p. 190). Rougemont implies causality between the secret and Shakespeare because Shakespeare chose Verona as the setting for *Romeo and Juliet*—otherwise why bring it up? Yet once again, despite claiming a connection, he offers no direct evidence or source to show it. Instead he refers in passing to an obscure monk, Ranieri Saccone (Rainerius Sacchoni), a heretic of seventeen years who wrote that Verona contained nearly five hundred Cathari and numerous other Believers, to establish that Verona was a hotbed of Catharism. What he fails to mention is that Sacchoni was writing in the thirteenth century! He was a former Cathar turned Dominican and Inquisitor who wrote the *Summa on the Cathars and the Poor of Lyons*, which included information on the beliefs, activities, and locations of dualist churches in 1250. Rougemont would have had access to the *Summa* and the list of churches, which were published in A. Dondain, *Un traité néo-manichéen du XXXe siècle: le Liber de duobus principia, suivi d'un fragment de ritual cathare* (Rome, 1939).

The class discussion of Book IV (and of Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Milton in particular) makes the point that causality cannot be separated from evidence, historical context, and interpretation. Building on everything we have covered so far, I try

to show students potential pitfalls in making historical connections, particularly when it comes to circumstantial cases, which can only take us so far. It is one thing to assert them as a theory or possibility, which Rougemont should have done; it is quite another to assert them so definitely without recourse to historiographical standards, which is what he actually does. I will not say that Rougemont is proving the facts with theory, but he comes dangerously close. But then, he can always fall back on his claim that he is concerned with the “*existential*” meaning of romantic love (Preface, 1956 edition).

My students do not get off so easily. In their third writing assignment they grapple with causality in some late medieval or early-modern writer, such as Shakespeare, as I have just done. I usually assign *Romeo and Juliet* (because it is Rougemont’s example), and ask students to discuss causality between the troubadours and Shakespeare. Based on class discussions and lectures, they should be able to explain how Shakespeare would have acquired romantic ideas, why such ideas would have appealed to him, and what sources informed them. Furthermore, they should address Rougemont’s claim about causality and reflect on how the historian would approach this similar problem.

IV

Whether Rougemont’s conclusions are solid or tenuous is what students address in their capstone assignment, a critical review of *Love in the Western World*, for which they have been adequately prepared. They are aware of the intellectual tools available to them and have practice using these tools. In addition, they have covered the appropriate use of evidence, historical context, interpretation, and causality, the four main learning goals of this course. Every writing assignment has been a building block for the final assignment, and I expect students to incorporate their previous papers (now revised and edited) into this assignment. Students must also discuss and assess how their own thinking and approach to sources may have changed, for which I return their previously written remarks about

what history is so that they can reflect on what they have done. By the end of the semester, most students seem to understand what I was trying do. More significantly, most have been able to identify Rougemont's thesis, summarize his argument, and assess his book *as an historian would*. Above all, most leave the course realizing that history is more than an accumulation of facts, and that doing history requires serious thinking and hard work.

Jeff Anderson served in the U.S. Army and received his Ph.D. from Syracuse University. He teaches European history at the State University of New York at Oswego, and has recently finished a book entitled The Skinny on Teaching: What You Don't Learn in Graduate School. A firm believer in making specialized knowledge accessible to non-specialist and general audiences alike, he is currently writing A History of Love from Antiquity to the Renaissance. This is the first of two volumes that will trace the history of love from classical antiquity to modern times. His e-mail address is: janders3@oswego.edu.

