



Martha Nussbaum:  
Feeling, Fragility,  
Flourishing

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4. Love's  
Knowledge

‘The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know’ – Pascal,  
*Pensées*

‘There is always some madness in love. But there is always, also, some reason in madness.’ – Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

The ‘great quarrel’...



'Lovers and madman have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact:

One sees more devils than vast hell could hold,  
That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,  
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:  
The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,  
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from heaven  
to earth

- Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

The 'star cross'd lover', a 'madness most discreet'







‘Having defined the field of investigation, we can now sketch the concepts analytically presupposed in our use of ‘love’. An idea of these concepts can be gained by sketching a sequence of relations, the members of which we take as relevant in deciding whether or not some relationship between persons A and B is one of love. ...

1. A knows B (or at least knows something of B)
2. A cares (is concerned) about B  
A likes B
3. A respects B  
A is attracted to B  
A feels affection for B
4. A is committed to B  
A wishes to see B's welfare promoted

The connection between these relations which we will call 'love-comprising relations' or 'LCRs' is not, except for 'knowing about' and possibly 'Feels affection for' as tight as strict entailment'

- W. Newton-Smith, “A Conceptual Investigation of Love” (1973)

‘there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it ... that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose’

‘what if it is love one is trying to understand ... source at once of illumination and confusion, agony and beauty? Love, in its many varieties, and their tangled relations of the good human life, to aspiration, to general social concern? ... What is, in short, love’s knowledge – and what writing does it dictate in the heart?’ (3-4)

*Love's Knowledge*  
ESSAYS ON PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE



*Martha C. Nussbaum*





## *Love's Knowledge* (1990)

- Collection of essays aimed at a wider audience
- Literary texts and styles can communicate deeper philosophical truths than conventional prose
- Can we draw a line of influence from the previous work on tragedy?
- Learning from Henry James, and Proust
- 'Knowledge of the heart must come from the heart – from and in its pains and longings, its emotional responses'.



‘We deceive ourselves about love — about who; and how; and when; and whether.

We also discover and correct our self-deceptions.

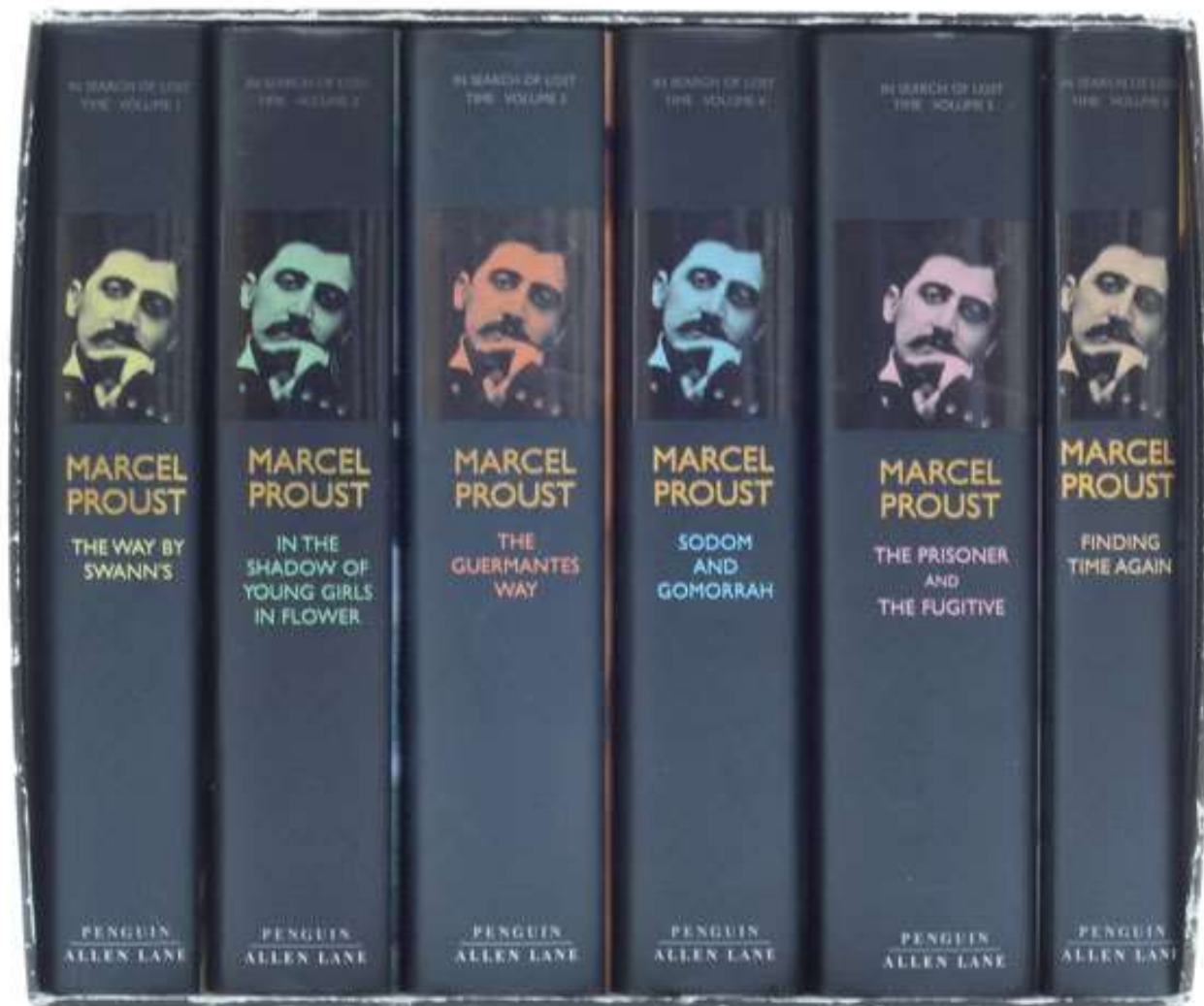
The forces making for both deception and unmasking here are various and powerful:

the unsurpassed danger, the urgent need for protection and self-sufficiency,

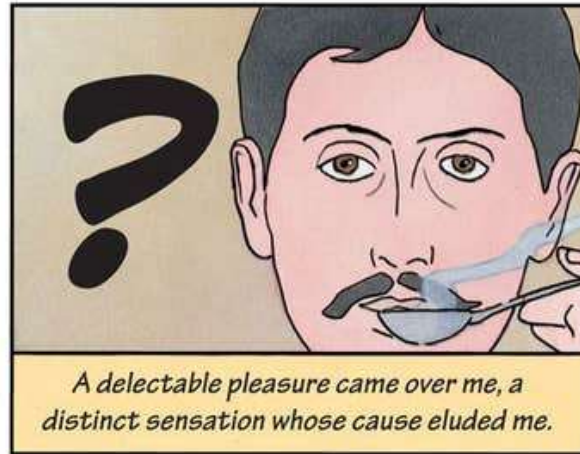
the opposite and equal need for joy and communication and connection.

Any of these can serve either truth or falsity, as the occasion demands.

The difficulty then becomes: how in the midst of this confusion (and delight and pain) do we know what view of ourselves, what parts of ourselves, to trust?’ (261)



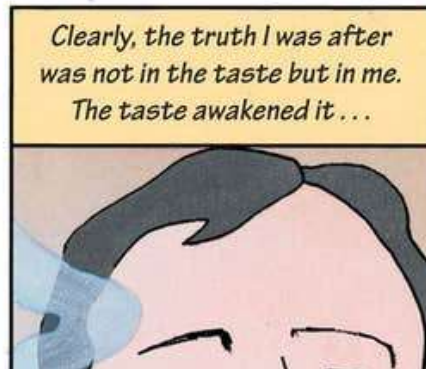




What was pulsating within me had to be the image, the visual memory linked to that taste, which was seeking to find a way into my consciousness.



Where might that powerful pleasure have come from?



Clearly, the truth I was after was not in the taste but in me. The taste awakened it...



"... SOON IT WILL BE TIME FOR MASS ..."  
"... GOOD MORNING, LÉONIE ..."

# Proust's challenge

- *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27)
- Marcel, the protagonist, rationally and coolly concludes that he no longer loves Albertine. He breaks off their relationship
- Not long after, she dies in a riding accident, and he realises that actually he did love her, and remembers her with fondness and nostalgia over vol. 6
- For Nussbaum, it points to a conflict of two forms of knowledge...

# 1. Philosophical detachment, passion-free

‘a detached, unemotional, exact intellectual scrutiny of one’s condition, conducted in the way a scientist would conduct a piece of research’  
(262)

‘I had believed that I was leaving nothing out of account, like a rigorous analyst; I had believed that I knew the state of my own heart’ (Proust)

‘move the passions and thereby mislead the judgment’ (Locke)





## 2. Anguish, vulnerability

‘How much further does anguish penetrate in psychology ... than psychology itself’ (Proust)

‘his theories were forms of self-deceptive rationalization – not only *false* about his condition but also manifestations and accomplices of a reflex to deny and close off one’s vulnerabilities that Proust finds to be very deep in all of human life

... habit, which makes the pain of our vulnerability tolerable to us by concealing need, concealing ... vulnerability to loss, concealing all the pain-inflicting features of the world’ (264)





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Over to you

‘This cost-benefit analysis of the heart – the only comparative assessment of which intellect, by itself, is capable – is bound, Proust suggests, to miss differences of depth’ (264)

*What do you think of this conflict being drawn out between the intellect, and the feeling heart through suffering?*

*In what way does the above approach ‘oppose ... love itself’?*

# Catalepsis

- A powerful mark or impression left on the soul: 'one that is imprinted and stamped upon us by reality itself and in accordance with reality, one that could not possibly come from what is not that reality' (Sextus Empiricus)
- Suffering delivers that mark far more than intellect. Why?
- Surprise disrupts habit, punctures self-deceptions. Anguish forces us to 'grasp' at what we love, to recognise our dependency on it
- Marcel discovers 'his neediness, his hunger for possession and completeness'. In denying this, he became 'temporarily self-sufficient, closed, and estranged from his humanity'

André Breton  
Nadja





‘No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.’

John Donne – Meditation 17

“The Flea” ...





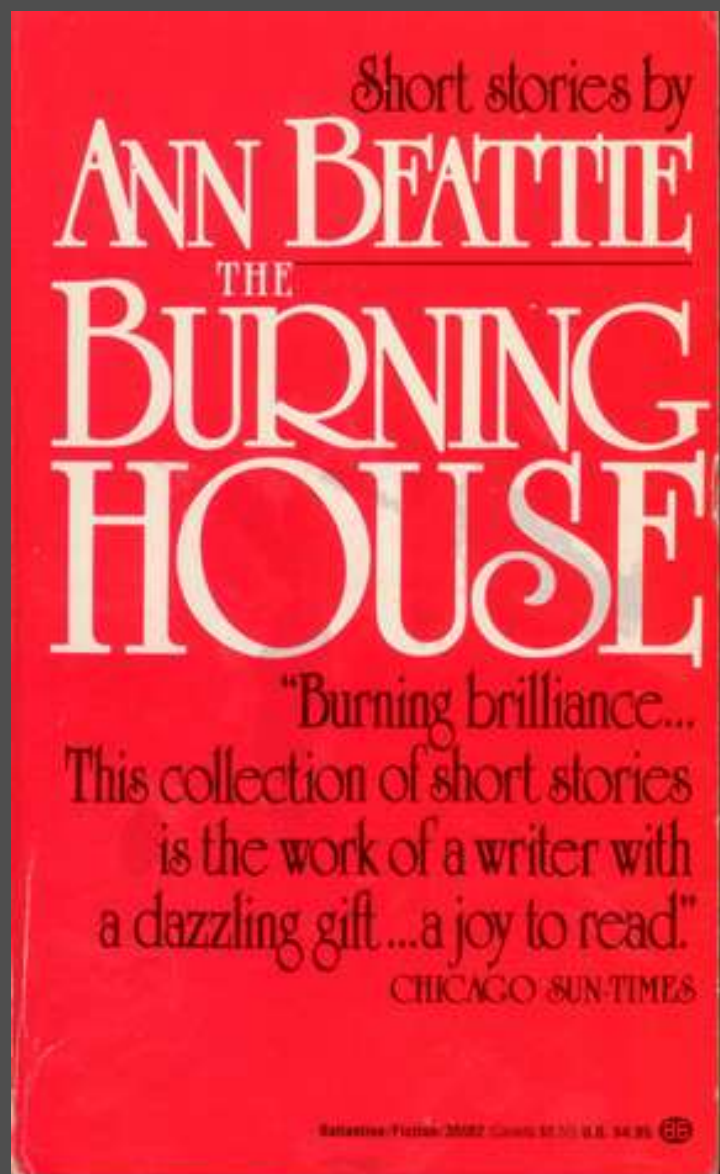
‘To make use ... of the sufferings that chance inflicts upon us is better than inflicting discipline upon oneself.

The way to make use of physical pain. When suffering no matter what degree of pain, when almost the entire soul is inwardly crying “Make it stop, I can bear no more,” a part of the soul, even though it be an infinitesimally small part, should say: “I consent that this should continue throughout the whole of time, if the divine wisdom so ordains.’

- Simone Weil, “First and Last Notebooks”

# Stages of love's knowing

- **Scepticism**: 'I understood that my love was less a love for her than a love in me... It is the misfortune of beings to be for us nothing else but useful showcases for the contents of our own minds' (Proust)
- **Solipsism**: 'It is because he wishes not to be tormented by the ungovernable inner life of the other that he adopts a position that allows him to conclude that the other's inner life is nothing more than the constructive workings of his own mind' (Nussbaum, 271)
- **Reflection**: 'Finally, reflection shows us "the intermittences of the heart" – the alternations between love and its denial, suffering and denial of suffering, that constitute the most essential and ubiquitous structural feature of the human heart' (273)
- **Openness**: 'To know one's love is to trust it, to allow oneself to be exposed' (274, Beattie, "Learning to Fall")



# Ann Beattie, “Learning to Fall”

‘this story not only describes falling and learning to fall; it also enlists us in just such a trusting and loving activity. We read it suspending scepticism; we allow ourselves to be touched by the text, by the characters as they converse with us over time

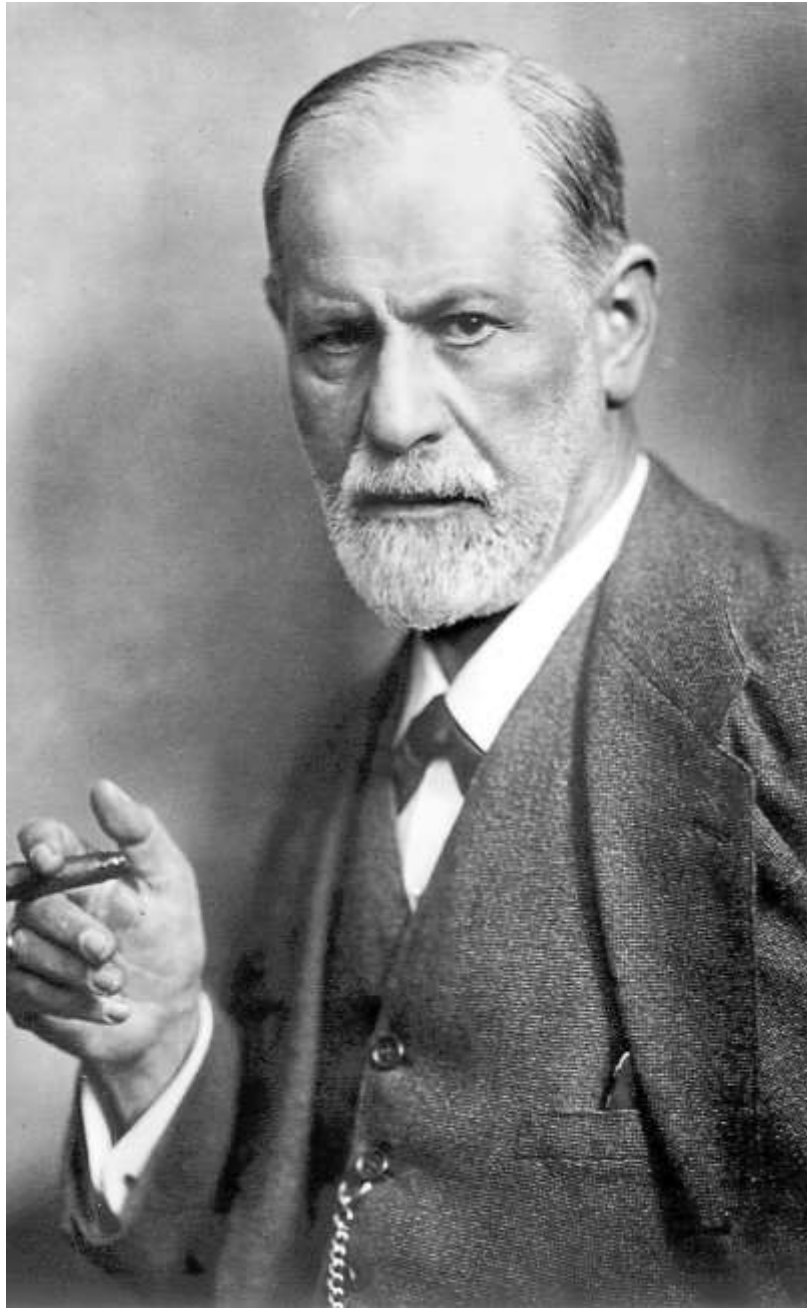
... Before a literary work (like this story) we are humble, open, active yet porous. Before a philosophical work, in its working through, we are active, controlling, aiming to leave no flank undefended and no mystery undisputed.

... It’s not just emotion that’s lacking, although that’s part of it. It's also passivity; it’s trust, the acceptance of incompleteness’ (282)

# The problem of Romantic love (ch14)

- Conventional morality discourages discussing deep feelings...
- But philosophers also avoid discussing love in any real depth. Why?
- Romantic love is 'passive' (falling...), it 'simply happens to us'
- Challenge accounts based on a government of the will
- Kant: pathological love (romantic/erotic, impulsive) vs practical love (moral concern)
- End of *Fragility of Goodness*: as human beings we long to live in a simpler, purer world, but that is not possible – without also losing the 'richness and fullness of life' (421) – in our relationships with others







Over to you

Can love and its constant vulnerability to loss be a sufficient basis for the good life? Does Nussbaum overplay or leave out any other vital factors?  
Or is this inherently, practically, wise?

‘By ascribing value to *philia* in a conception of the good life, we make ourselves more vulnerable to loss. And we can add one further point: we also, through our attachments, make ourselves susceptible to losses that are not, properly speaking, our own. A person with no strong attachments has only his or her own health, virtue, and success to worry about. A person who loves another will be grieved or made anxious by a double number of events and becomes doubly susceptible to luck, 'being pleased together by good things and grieved together by painful things, for no other reason than on account of the *philos* himself’  
– *Fragility of Goodness* (361)

## Next week... *The Therapy of Desire*

- We turn to a particularly wonderful 1994 book by Nussbaum
- After Greece... Epicurus, Lucretius and the Stoics
- Read Chapter 4: Epicurean Surgery: Argument and Empty Desire
- How can we use desire to living a more contented life, without sacrificing either ethical commitments or overlooking the fundamentally fragile, even disappointing nature of human life?
- For background, delve into the philosophy of Epicurus! (See Moodle)
- If you have time, read Chapter 6 – a fine treatment of Lucretius
- Questions and thoughts to [Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk](mailto:Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk)