The Book of Love and Pain: Thinking at the Limit with Freud and Lacan

JUAN-DAVID NASIO

The Book of Love and Pain is David Pettigrew and François Raffoul's translation of Le Livre de La Douleur et de L'Amour (Editions Payot et Rivages, 1996), a remarkably brief (too brief) psychoanalytic treatment of two sizeable themes which, according to Nasio, are inadequately treated by both Freud and Lacan as well as in the larger literatures of psychoanalysis and philosophical psychology. The book endeavors to offer both "the first exclusive treatment of psychic pain in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic literature" (back cover) as well as a broadly Freudian-Lacanian analysis of love. In spite of the book's very catchy title, it is pain, not love, that is its principal theme. Indeed, Nasio's treatment of love itself is decidedly secondary and is approached in the main from the perspective of pain (a term he prefers to the broader and, for Nasio, ambiguous "suffering").

After a short Translators' Introduction, the book comprises six chapters (intriguingly titled "Clemence, or the Experience of Pain," "Threshold," "Psychical Pain, Pain of Love," "Archipelago of Pain," "Corporeal Pain: A Psychoanalytic Conception," and "Lessons on Pain"), and concludes with some very short excerpts from Freud and Lacan on psychical and corporeal pain. Among the principal contentions in the book is that "love is an expectation, and pain the sudden and unforeseen rupture of this expectation" (9), and that the pain of loss represents the sudden collapse of the ego—"a mixture of the ego being emptied out and contracted in a memorial image" (10)—and an encounter with the limits of meaning. Pain is an affect of the extreme; it is even "the ultimate affect" in that it is "the expression of a struggle for life" and "the last line of defense against madness" (10). The task of psychoanalysis, Nasio tells us, is the essentially hermeneutic one of transforming the brute fact of pain—"in itself ... [of] no value and no signification, ... [but] simply there, made of flesh or of stone"—through interpretation; "to ease it, we must understand it as an expression of something else, detaching it from the real by transforming it into a symbol" (13).

The coupling in the book's title of love and pain is not accidental since, in the account Nasio offers, psychical pain can be understood only against a background of love and loss. Psychical pain is in the first instance the experience of separation from an object, be this a person, value, material object, or a loss affecting the integrity of the body, and includes the pain of abandonment, humiliation, and mutilation no less than the loss of the beloved: "All these kinds of pain are, to different degrees, pains of brutal amputation from a love-object, one to which we were so intensely and permanently bonded that it regulated the harmony of the psyche" (14). Yet, for Nasio, the fundamental cause of pain is less the loss of the object itself than the internal turmoil which the loss occasions and our perception of that turmoil. Further, Nasio advances the view that in the experience of pain, the imaginative representation of the loved object invariably involves a certain idealization and overinvestment, an idealization that is brought about by the loss itself: "When we lose an arm, for example, or a loved one, the psychical image (or representation) of that lost object we
compensate for it through overinvestment" (24). The process, or "work," of mourning involves the gradual disinvestment and reinvestment of psychical energy from the lost object, or the representation of it, onto another.

Love itself, in Nasio's words, "is the fantasized presence of the loved one in my unconscious," while the beloved "is a complex being composed both of the living and actual person who is in front of me and its double within me" (28). Indeed, it is the imaginative representation of the other within the unconscious that emerges in Nasio's account as the primary object of love rather than the other—the flesh and blood person—him- or herself. This is undoubtedly among the more contestable positions Nasio puts forward. Another is that the beloved centers and regulates our desire while leaving us invariably dissatisfied (or "insatisfied"), and that accordingly "my partner has [a] castrating function of limiting my satisfaction." While "normally we attribute to our partner the power of satisfying our desires or providing our pleasure, ... his or her function in our unconscious is quite different: it assures psychic stability for us through the insatisfaction that it produces and not the satisfaction it provides. Our partner, the person we love, does not satisfy us because, while exciting our desire, he or she cannot—if he or she is even capable of it—and does not want to satisfy us fully. Being human, he or she cannot, and being neurotic, he or she does not want to" (27). The fantasized representation of the other centers and stabilizes our desire precisely by rendering it unsatisfied, yet within tolerable limits. "The person that we love the most," he writes, "remains inevitably the person who leaves us the least satisfied" (29). For Nasio, then, the true cause of pain lies invariably within the unconscious, while pain itself is the confrontation with our own "unhinged" and "panic-stricken desire" (37).

A difficulty with this book is that while Nasio puts forward numerous hypotheses, many of them highly intriguing, many call for far more support than they receive, or, at the very least, elaboration. While this is perhaps not unusual in the literature of psychoanalysis, it is especially problematic for Nasio given the brevity of this book. Some of Nasio's phenomenological descriptions ring true—others may not—yet to be convincing Nasio owes his readers more than he has given us.

Finally, a word about the structure and style of the book. While the book is written in accessible style, Nasio opts for short—often very short—sections which give the book an excessively fragmentary, even incomplete, appearance. There is frequent jumping from topic to topic and even more frequent repetition—not what one would expect in a book of 143 pages. Equally surprising is how poorly edited much of the book is (with sentences beginning with such constructions as "You will agree then that ....," "You see ....," "Do you remember our earlier discussion ....," and so on). The book shifts in the final chapter, "Lessons on Pain," to a seemingly unrevised transcription of an oral seminar, and while the content is well integrated with prior chapters, the stylistic shift is abrupt and jarring. The final impression one is left with is of a book that is of some importance in the literature of psychoanalysis and philosophical psychology, but that is nonetheless a draft or two away from completion.

PAUL FAIRFIELD, Queen's University