

**Naomi Rokotnitz, “‘Passionate Reciprocity’: Love, Existentialism, and Bodily Knowledge in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.” *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12.2 (2014): 331-54.**

The interest in John Fowles’s work has not waned since the author’s death in 2005. In fact, a brief search of academic articles on my university’s library website yielded 96 articles published in only the last three years. Among these recent articles is Naomi Rokotnitz’s fascinating “‘Passionate Reciprocity’: Love, Existentialism, and Bodily Knowledge in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.” This original and provocative work pursues a multidisciplinary investigation into Fowles’s 1969 novel through the lenses of philosophy, cognitive science and neuropsychology.

In the article, Rokotnitz examines specifically the phenomenon of love first as a Kierkegaardian existential act of choice. However, she goes on to argue that Fowles’s novel considers love as being too complex for one discipline to fully explore. Instead, she suggests that Fowles’s novel anticipates, in its treatment of love, “very recent findings in cognitive science and neuropsychology” (331). Specifically, she notes, such science has proven what Fowles’s central characters, Sarah Woodruff and Charles Smithson, enact: when we fall in love, we make that decision in “a fraction of a second” (332) and, as the notoriously unreliable narrator informs the reader in chapter 10, when Charles and Sarah make their fateful decision to begin a relationship on the Undercliff, this decision is made in “brief poised seconds” and yet in such a brief span of time, for the protagonist at least, the “whole Victorian Age” can be lost (Fowles, 66).

Rokotnitz’s examination considers the notion of love and how our decision to fall in love is shaped by numerous forces, many of them outside the realms of our conscious mind. She begins with Heidegger’s premise that to know ourselves and the forces that might impinge upon future decisions, we must own and assess the contents of our own “facticity”; our genes, cultural conditioning, education and all the forces that have influenced the person we have become, so that we might determine clearly formulated criteria on which to base decisions in our lives (333). She suggests that it is this investigation of decision making in regard to falling in love that animates the novel.

This is an interesting departure for an investigation into this much-analysed work. Fowles’s novels in general, and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* in particular, have repeatedly been interpreted through the lens of existential philosophy (see, for example, Mike Marais, John V. Hagopian, Jeff Rackham, Ji Qiming, Li Ming and Michelle Buchberger). However, these examinations tend to draw more on Sartre, as Fowles did himself in his own work of philosophical pensées, *The Aristos* (1964). The influence of Sartre is not entirely surprising given that while both Fowles and Sartre rejected Christianity, for Kierkegaard, religion is a guiding principle. But what really differentiates Rokotnitz’s investigation is her inclusion of cognitive science and neuropsychology along with philosophy, as she investigates the motives of Charles, Sarah and the novelist himself, as they develop their respective paths towards existential authenticity.

Rokotnitz leverages the insights engendered by the “The Cognitive Turn,” a paradigm shift that coalesced in the 1980s and early 1990s, changing the way in which psychologists, philosophers, and cognitive scientists characterized how knowledge is acquired, processed and distributed by our bodies. Love, as Rokotnitz explains, is a

process that has eluded our conscious examination because of its existence at the periphery of our ability to apprehend it. It lurks in those areas where science has, as of yet, been unable to probe and measure; at both the “lowest neuro-evolutionary levels of the brain” and in our areas of “fringe consciousness” (343). In order to process the thoughts associated with love, the brain ultimately must extricate itself from its reliance on logical argumentation. For Charles, this extrication occurs along with a reengagement with bodily knowledge. The realization that he must pursue Sarah, whether she reciprocates or not, occurs after he spends the night with a prostitute and is awoken by the sound of her crying child. After comforting the child, his “tactile engagement with others” is acknowledged, and it is this new knowledge of himself, previously suppressed or unacknowledged, that prompts him towards a unity with his beloved (347).

Ultimately, Rokotnitz suggests, awareness of such bodily cues is crucial as we negotiate the many decisions that bombard our conscious minds. As Charles learns to attune himself to “pre-conscious, sensory modes of reception” and to take these cues into account as part of the decision making process, particularly as it pertains to falling in love, he also approaches authenticity (351). The reader, the article suggests, like Charles, must learn to either repress or to succumb to such bodily cues, being aware that surrendering may force us to reject social norms and conventions in pursuit of authenticity.

This is a fascinating article, offering another reminder of the power of this novel to evince thought that draws upon so many academic spheres of knowledge.

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