THE EGO AND HUMAN LOVE

Ellen Rice

How often in 1996 does one see a magazine review of a play written in 1960? The acclaimed works of 1960 caused a sensation, gradually acquired established status, and by now have been retired to the classroom and the lecture hall, where they are venerated as quaint period pieces which somehow managed to say something timeless and enduring.

One work which was written in 1960 cannot easily slip into the stone walls of classic art. This play was not acclaimed, but rather published in obscurity. The subscribers to the Polish Catholic monthly Znak may have noticed "The Jeweler's Shop" in the December 1960 issue, but after an edifying read, perhaps they put it away, because no one had heard of the author Andrzej Jawien. The play was not even performed until years later when the true author was revealed.

Perhaps you have heard of "The Jeweler's Shop" and perhaps you have even read it. It is subtitled "A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony, Passing on Occasion into a Drama." For the unfamiliar, its author is our own Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. The play reveals the integrated understanding behind his teachings on Matrimony.

Many reject the Pope's teachings on sexuality and contraception. Some see Pope John Paul as a Luddite reactionary, afraid of the modern technology which separates sexuality from conception, afraid of modernity itself. Some also wonder how a celibate man can teach about sexual morality when he has no firsthand knowledge of the dynamics between lovers or spouses.

The form of "The Jeweler's Shop" allays the fear that the Pope is afraid of modernity itself. To be sure, Wotyla's roots lie in the medieval mystery, the Baroque allegory, and most nearly, the underground Rhapsodic Theater of which he was a part. Interestingly, though, his form echoes the concerns of the avant garde in 1960. As suggested by the subtitle, "A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony, Passing on Occasion into a Drama," the genre of the "Jeweler's Shop" is indistinct. The fluidity of artistic genre became a hallmark of our time. About the time "The Jeweler's Shop" was written, European and Japanese artists were developing the theater-object genre of performance art. Later, words as art enjoyed the status of gallery art. Wojtyla's work fits nicely into the modern pursuit of the unity of the arts.

I too wonder how a religious can grasp the mysteries of married love, but it is plain that Pope John Paul II has done so. I marvel at Wojtyla's incisive portrayal of love and marriage. I myself am single but I can attest that the play enlightens my own experiences. Only by reading his play can you confirm my suspicion that he sees the whole picture. Suffice it to say that his vision of the human soul is large enough to encompass the mysteries of human love.

The focal theme of the play, foreshadowing John Paul's exhortation, "Be not afraid," is that the conquest of ego and fear is essential to the two becoming one. The setting is an unnamed place during an unnamed time. It is distinguished only as a nation at war. One easily imagines the setting as 1939 Poland, but the script is much more universal. It is the story of every fearful self damaged by Original Sin; it is the story of every miracle of grace.
Act One, "The Signals," tells the story of Teresa and Andrew's courtship and wedding. The couple receives a signal that they belong together when they hear a cry on a hike in the wilderness; they feel drawn together by an unseen destiny. Andrew reflects that the attractions he had to other women were within the walls of his own ego, but he sees Teresa as his "alter-ego." He and Teresa were drawn together amid anxiety and fear which love is challenged to overcome.

The couple visits the jeweler's shop to buy wedding rings. The jeweler's meditation that "the weight of these golden rings is not the weight of metal but the proper weight of man, each of you separately and both together" confirms the rings as a sign of the sacrament in which "two become one flesh." The jeweler's shop emerges as a place where past, present, and future converge. The couple only sees the now although they recognize Providence is guiding them into the future. The couple's ability to cast out fear of the future proves pivotal, for in Act Three we learn that Andrew dies at the front only two years later.

The theme of ego continues in Act Two, "The Bridegroom," which shows the degenerate side of Holy Matrimony. Anna and Stephan are a couple that has grown apart, tormenting one another with silence and indifference. Anna, placing all the blame on Stephan, decides to return her wedding ring to the jeweler. He issues a rebuke rather than a refund. In a supernatural twist, the gold weighs nothing on his scales, because Stephan is still alive. Anna flounders in the streets; her eyes elicit several questionable proposals. A watchful stranger Adam rescues her, warning her to watch for the Bridegroom's passing. Instantly we are swept into a mystical realm, where parable meets present. As Adam points out the wise and foolish virgins, Anna indulgently wonders if the wise virgins are "really pure and noble, or is it just that they have fared better in life than I?" Ego flies from responsibility again.

The Bridegroom passes by, wearing Stephan's own face, much to Anna's chagrin. Wojtyla ends Act Two with Stephan lamenting "Two lamps are out. One didn't give its flame to the other." The point is clear: Holy Matrimony is doomed if each resides in the separate confines of ego.

Act Three, "The Children," joins the two couples together by the love and marriage of their children. Christopher, the son of Teresa and Andrew, falls in love with Monica. Wotyla reveals Teresa's motherly worries about Monica, "a being enclosed in herself, whose true value gravitates inward so much that it simply ceases to reach other people." The ill will of her parents has indeed been visited upon her. When the self cannot give love, the rightful recipient suffers.

We later learn that Monica knows she hides in her ego, afraid to come out, giving sparingly and demanding much. Wotyla here again writes with brilliant insight into fear and the ego.

Yet all is not lost. Christopher assures Monica he loves her, with the priceless line, "One does not love a person for his `easy character'." Christopher has his own battles; he worries he does not know how to be a man because he lost his father. Again, the misfortunes of the parents are visited upon the children. Christopher is more intact than Monica; he is the victim of misfortune rather than evil.

This third marriage plays against the tapestry of the two previous dramas. The loose ends are tied up, and the play is resolved with fitting fates, but not without hope. We learn that Anna and Stephan have matured to coexist in suffering, not yet partaking in the joy of love. Teresa still wears her wedding ring, and chose not to remarry. She feared that Adam, who was army buddy of Andrew, and surrogate father of Christopher, would ask for her hand. Adam reveals his mission is different: "I am here, I suppose, to take up every man's future fate, because his previous fate also had its roots in me." He is the original Adam; he is the original ego who failed to give; he is man suffering from Original Sin. Hope exists, though every damaged soul can learn to love and share others’ crosses.

The play is indeed a meditation, for it can be read over and over and still yield fresh insights. This is my second reading of "The Jeweler's Shop," and it so much impressed me that I felt that I had opened a new book.
"The Jeweler’s Shop" reveals the Pope's uncanny insights into human behavior, into the reluctance of individuals to plunge into that self-surrender called love, into the ugliness of marital relationships that become a tug of war between two egos. It is a marvel.

To all Catholic aficionados of "The Jeweler’s Shop": why hasn't the rest of the world heard of it? Rather than a Catholic cult classic, this should be a means of evangelization. Many have not heard; those who have heard may be put off by a perceived cloud of alienating religiosity that we have not done enough to dispel. Those who do not know the man Karol Wojtyla are the very ones who need to see his remarkable sensitivity and understanding of human love.

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