

Replaceable You

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It was a Monday evening in Toronto, and I was sitting in Our Lady of Lourdes Church, waiting for my first Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous meeting to begin. Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* had recently been revived at a nearby theater, and I thought of Stoppard's Henry, whose lover Annie dares him to find a part of his life where she is not important, "or you won't be worth loving." Just when we think Henry might reassert his autonomy and set their bond on "healthier" grounds, he comes out with one of the better—I mean, most addiction-marred—declarations of love in the last twenty years of English-speaking theater. "The trouble is, I can't *find* a part of myself where you're not important. I write in order to be worth your while and to finance the way I want to live with you ... Without you I wouldn't care. I'd eat tinned spaghetti and put on yesterday's clothes." If Henry were to consult any SLAA self-diagnosis kit, he'd find himself waist-deep in unhealthy attachment.

Or take Charles Swann, of Proust's *La Recherche*, who we learn early on is—unreasonably, for somebody of his worldliness, embarrassingly, for a man of his position—in love with a fantasy of Odette. Swann, in the parlance, is a romance addict, a co-sex addict with Odette, and a sex addict in his later extramarital conquests of women of lower social standing. And don't forget Caspar Goodwood, who repeatedly fails to get the eponymous lady in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Goodwood won't take no for an answer, covets somebody else's wife, does quite a bit of cross-Atlantic stalking, remains obsessed even when the other party has made clear her unavailability, and has what SLAA would call anger management issues. Then there's Malcolm Lowry's Consul and *Without you, I am nothing, Yvonne*; Gluck's "Cosa farò senza Euridice," Verdi's "Willow Song" ... but enough of this. I am here to learn to practice sobriety, and the chair just started the meeting with the reading of the 12 Steps of the SLAA.

There were always plenty of reasons I could cite for not trying the SLAA. Besides the absurd acronymic affinity with Patty Hearst's kidnappers, I resented the philosophical sleight of hand that the modern notion of addiction carries: you get assigned the identity of an addict, the emotional equivalent of a criminal record. Your future actions will be closely monitored and interpreted—by yourself and fellow SLAAers—within this framework. Was the expressed wish to change your ways genuine? Have you reoffended once out on probation—that is, did you slip after a period of sobriety? Adopting the first step in the 12-step program—"We admit that our lives have become unmanageable"—also means giving up the assumption of free will, and therefore full responsibility over

your own actions. While this may have appealing aspects, from that point forward you are officially besieged by a foreign, unnatural substance—in the modern addiction-speak—or by demons that cloud your judgment, in the older Platonic vocabulary.

Further, although I did find myself in some of the 40 Questions for Self-Diagnosis for Love and Sex Addicts, I also found anybody who's ever loved. "Do you find yourself unable to stop seeing a specific person, even though you know that seeing this person is destructive for you? Do you get 'high' from sex and/or romance? Do you have sex or 'relationships' to try to deal with, or escape from, life's problems? Do you find yourself in a relationship that you cannot leave?" Me and you and everyone we know. I also didn't want to participate in yet another personal sharing event. There is already too much 'intimate sharing' in the chatter of contemporary culture: I could at least choose not to contribute to it.

My personal reasons for giving SLAA a chance persisted, however. I was running out of ideas on how to deal with a broken heart; I had, well, some difficulty realizing that a relationship had ended. I found myself being guilty of the worst aspects of what Edmund White calls (while finding too much of it in his own life) the "female culture": melodrama, tears, blame, monomania, the narcissism of wallowing in misery, loss of control over emotions in public spaces, catatonic days alternating with days of urgently seeking a substitute object. I was becoming a specimen of the dreaded Woman in Love whom de Beauvoir described with such precision in the 1950s and laughed off as a patriarchal doll. My story felt outdated, and the fact that I wasn't in thrall to a man but to a woman didn't make it less so. There were seemingly simple things to be learned—that no one person can define any other person, and that people are not unique but replaceable.

Besides, art and the world of ideas didn't give any comfort anymore. A close friend kept talking about the SLAA as the only thing that ever worked for what she described as her badly mismanaged sexuality. In the end I decided to go to this "North American thing" as an ethnographer from another culture.

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The much younger sister of Alcoholics Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous began in the mid-seventies as many AA members realized that their relationship problems warranted a separate set of meetings. Like the other subgroups of AA—Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, et cetera—SLAA adopts a 12-step structure, which includes recognizing addiction, abandoning the illusion of control and giving yourself to the trust of a God as you understand him, making amends, and spreading the message of recovery by helping others. AA had from its inception a strong evangelical component, and understood addiction as a phenomenon that calls for spiritual healing. Still, the program and its offspring remain unaffiliated with any one church or religion and largely decentralized, with donations and publishing as the main sources of revenue.

The SLAA meetings in Toronto usually take place in quiet back rooms of inner-city churches. There is always some basic SLAA and AA literature at hand, and a few cupboards and shelves may display printouts of the simplest of SLAA slogans. *Easy Does It. One Day at a Time. Let Go, Let God. Keep Coming Back. First Things First.* Less is definitely more in SLAA, and there is no overanalyzing or unnecessary complication. *The urge will pass; The hardship will not last forever;* the SLAAers will have to rediscover the common sense of this kind over and over. Many of the procedures in the 12-Step regime have been justly parodied in the pop culture and I found it impossible to utter “Thanks for sharing” without sarcasm, or to New Age-ily stand in a circle and hold hands with strangers.

Each time a set of readings opens the session: the 12 Steps of SLAA, the 12 Characteristics of Sex & Love Addicts, the 12 Traditions of SLAA. The bigger groups then divide into smaller groups with different assignments: getting current, readings from the Big Book of AA or SLAA, love/sex addicts only, recovery groups, step groups. There is no conversation proper at 12-step meetings; since everybody gets equal time, cross-talk is verboten and everybody’s right to his or her own truth is honored. It is the telling (or confessing, if you will), self-monitoring, and companionship that are crucial.

There seems to be a method behind such procedural meticulousness—since addicts like repetitive steps, the SLAA meetings create their own. When madly in love or madly in lust, we develop procedures and rituals to which we return with relish. Anything can do the trick—rewinding certain memories, walking from point A to point B through the same significant street, playing a particular piece of music over and over for that one phrase or lyric that sings our pain and happiness, the daily mapping out of our lover’s movements.

The SLAA procedures superimpose a new structure onto the existing one of obsession, a structure that involves meetings, sponsors, micro-practices of the self, and giving account of oneself to others:

Hi, my name is Jon and I’m a Sex and Relationship Addict.

Hi, Jon!

35 years ago I went to a vacation to Florida after a particularly grueling year. I expected to find romance; I created a romantic setting, found a good candidate, and indeed a few days later I proposed. I realized what I did at my wedding day, but it was obviously too late. After 35 years of similar mistakes, I finally became aware of my patterns.

Thanks for sharing!

Hi, everyone. I am Jane and I’m a Love and Relationship Addict.

Hi, Jane!

I don’t have much to report this evening, which is a good thing ... I almost fell off the wagon recently, when I thought I’d found yet another dark and depressed man to ‘save’ with my love. I resisted the standard fantasy and we’re on our way to becoming true friends now.

Thanks for sharing.

Hi, I'm Rick, a Sex Addict.

Hi Rick!

I am not able to honor my bottom line, I relapse ... These are not good days for me. I typically start my day with porn and a plan for how to pick up a guy by the end of the afternoon, and everything else is a lesser priority. When I satisfy the craving and have sex with a stranger, I feel worthless and swear that I will never do it again. The next day, though, will be pretty much a repeat.

Thanks for sharing.

The voices that I hear most at meetings are the veteran ones, with their adopted SLAA vocabulary: sobriety, bottom line, patterns, fear of intimacy, establishing healthy boundaries. As a newcomer to the program, I am left in peace and don't have to contribute a word. Newcomers are usually advised to attend six meetings in a condensed period of time before deciding whether they are going to commit to the program. There is something strangely comforting about listening to other people's pains and embarrassments in love, and I indeed come back.

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Perhaps being in love means getting a reprieve from the awareness of how precarious any idea of home is. There are migrants like myself who find reterritorialization based on ethnic or religious belonging philosophically and politically suspect, but still are not willing to give up the idea of a home. What better territory to adopt than your beloved's body?

It's also worthwhile to speculate whether the madness of love belongs to the irreligious mindset's yearning for secular re-enchantments of the world. Among the discernible SLAA assumptions is that 'love addiction' substitutes worship of a false idol for the Real Deal. Even SLAA agnostics talk about trying to focus on Something Much Larger than the minutiae which feed obsession. Kierkegaard opens the *Seducer's Diary* of *Either/Or* with an epigraph that asks whether "Passions, then, are pagans of the soul? Reason alone baptized?" For us, the godless ones, there is no universal reader of the narration of our lives—no general consciousness we narrate ourselves to. A person loved, however, has gained an observer. What is more natural than to desire this compensation?

My friend who suggested SLAA to me—and also happens to be a Protestant minister—insists that love is a choice, and not something you get overcome by. There is considerable tension between the universal and the unique in Christian love: do we love somebody the way we would love any neighbor, out of the categorical imperative of Christianity, or do we love her because of her unique qualities—because there is nobody else in the world like her? That particular love starts and stops with that particular person, which means loving others differently or less intensely. The late historian Alan Bray addressed this issue with unmatched seriousness in his book *The Friend*, a history of love and friendship. "If you press me to say why I loved him, I can say no more than because he was he, and I was I"—Montaigne is one of many for whom to love is precisely to

remove yourself and your beloved from the plane of equivalence, even the one of the highest ethical order. What Stoppard's Henry calls "the sensation that the universe is dispensable minus one lady" is what SLAA is trying to get us to unlearn, and they are likely to find quite a few allies in the history of Christendom.

It's also the case that the secularization and commercialization that have permeated all spheres of intimacy can rhyme well with the moderate, 'healthy' love of the SLAA ideal. SLAA is adamantly against turning love into mysticism, or self-abnegation. In sober loving, for x number of gifts, or y units of time and care, an approximate number of the same should be expected back. We are urged to re-signify love to include notions of justice—reciprocity, balance—to which love usually doesn't lend itself. Think of Simone Weil, a perfect illustration of extreme love, unconcerned with what is possible to the point of self-annihilation—and therefore of no use to anybody. There's some of Simone Weil madness in every love. Being in love means having a reason to get out of bed, when there are fewer and fewer such reasons to be found; it's one of the last inroads of mystery into our irrevocably laic lives. If there *is* calculation in lovers' thinking, the benefits are of a different metaphysical order. We reap great profits in otherworldly ways.

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The "wake-up calls" described by SLAA members usually involve some sort of conflict with the law, neglect of conjugal or familial duties, or public disclosure that puts one's reputation, career, or entire family into disrepute. A clergyman hiring a male prostitute; an employee accidentally revealing his porn addiction at work; injury by suffocation during a sex game; prominent figures disclosed as members of an orgy club; stalking, voyeurism, flashers: if your amorous practices cannot withstand public scrutiny, in other words, if you have to keep them secret, they are likely harmful to you, and you might want to consider the addiction framework. The basic SLAA literature, as well as the handbooks by 12-step therapists like Patrick Carnes or Anne Wilson Schaef, contain case histories in which seeing a squad car pull into your driveway in the middle of the day, or sapping your bank account to support your addiction, figure as the ultimate horror scenarios. People in helping professions—teachers, church ministers, physicians—who lead "double lives" and either secretly "act out" their desires by night or let their daily duties be affected by their addictions always feature prominently. Addictive love, unlike "healthy" love, destabilizes the pillars of propriety: marriage, employment, assets.

Avital Ronell in *Crack Wars* reads *Emma Bovary* as one of the earliest novels on addiction, and I returned to Flaubert's book frequently as I was trying to give shape to the SLAA world. Emma Bovary would be the patron saint of all possible SLAAers; she is a sex and romance junkie who lives beyond her means, binges on literature and fantasy, and is repulsed by mothering. What the 12-step self-help books fail to address are the motives of characters like Emma Bovary, or the Consul from Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*—why might one's addictions seem more appealing than the status quo? Why the eagerness to shed the respectable, natural, and normal with such violence?

To talk about horrors of addiction without talking about the horror *vacui* of living is to miss addiction's fundamentally reactive nature. At one of my first meetings, a woman shared that an hour of fantasy about somebody she barely knows but is becoming unreasonably attached to helps her "go through the workday," and we've heard several times from married men who *wanted* to be caught picking up boys because they suspected the façade of their families' love and togetherness would not withstand that kind of blow. Loves are conditional, work meaningless, and it is no surprise that addicts answer the hidden wish to show exactly how contingent everything is by hammering directly at the seams and faultlines.

My argument is not that addictions should be celebrated as some sort of anti-bourgeois philosophy—that would be as naïve as claiming some special connection between artistic genius and a psychiatric diagnosis. Nor am I arguing that the concept of addiction is a socio-historical construct that we might dismantle at will. "Inventing people," to use Ian Hacking's phrase—in this case, naming addicts and creating a treatment—can help to ease pain. But I have reservations about applying the system of addiction and its paraphernalia to unmanageable love and sexuality. The vocabulary is reductive, the scripts too simple—it seems akin to passing a dieting manual to help St. Teresa deal with her ecstasies. Addictions, including love and sex addictions, are not by definition anti-bourgeois, but SLAA's ways of managing them often seem to take the form of middle-class propriety.

Emma Bovary had to die—as did the Consul, and Anna Karenina—for the same reasons that the heroines of the lesbian pulp fiction from the fifties had to die or become straight: such is the requirement of the genre. Women in excessive and inappropriate love have but a few narrative roads at hand, whether they find themselves in the Western literary canon, 1990s self-help handbooks, or 1950s Harlequins. Although some SLAA case histories allow for addicts who manage to combine a daytime career with bars and one-night stands, such people are bound to receive a wake-up call in the form of health scares or physical attacks. There is irresistible logic to what happens to Theresa of *Looking for Mr Goodbar*: multiple lovers and anonymous sex are simply *not good for you*, but since we have moved away from the religious worldview that places chastity at the center of woman's capacity for virtue, we talk instead about promiscuity as a cause of physical harm for women. It comes as no surprise that one of the strangers that Theresa brings home at night will be her killer.

Although the 12-step therapists do show awareness of the double standard for sexual morality, I have yet to find a book by an SLAA therapist that puts the awareness of gender front and center. Women's sexual normativity has had a completely different trajectory and circumscription than men's, and to speak of "healthy sexuality," "harmful sexual practices," and sexual addiction in general would be to miss a crucial point. For a woman to walk the street unaccompanied was considered a harmful sexual practice in many Western geographies until a century ago, and not wearing a headscarf is still seen as seductive behavior in quite a few places and situations. The onus remains on the woman not to seduce and distract, rather than on the man to cease sexualizing and mind his own business. Straight men who feel that there is something wrong with their desire

for women, lots of women, even outside of the legitimacy conferred by the coupledness—I found such men to be very rare at SLAA meetings. I’ve met a great number of gay men and queer and straight women among my fellow SLAAers, all of us very eager to look critically upon our sexual practices. Perhaps this is because we’re already weighted down with guilt-ridden centuries of doing nothing but?

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During one Monday session—and Monday night is the one most frequented by gay men, with a smattering of newcomers and women—members were instructed to include in their introduction their “bottom line” and how long they had managed not to cross it. A few men talked about compulsive masturbation and daily porn consumption; some mentioned anonymous and bath-house sex; but a large number also described “sex outside a meaningful relationship” as their bottom line. At a later, smaller meeting with the Love Addicts group, the woman next to me shared how she, together with her sponsor, is trying to deal with the fact that six months into her marriage she is ever so slightly beginning to fantasize about a married co-worker and trying to predict his daily subway schedules.

Another part of the SLAA ideal was becoming obvious: commitment to coupledness trumps every other form of desire. Developing an interest in somebody who already belongs to this primary social form is unhealthy; craving from within the couple for somebody outside is suspect. I expected SLAA to be at least agnostic on the question of whether monogamy is the most comfortable, “healthy,” and “joyous” arrangement of love, but by implication if not by explicit prescription, permanent monogamous relationships are regarded as the least problematic ensemble. In addition, much of the rhetoric on marriage and long-term coupling remains tied to heterosexuality, and the specific dynamics of queer relationships are underexamined. Addiction is addiction, the thinking goes, and gender and preferences are not so important as to warrant a separate look.

I also wondered what kind of rapport the SLAA norms have with the spirit of capitalism. Would the ideal form of loving be the one that does not endanger our inner *homo economicus*? Would the best kind of love be the love that leaves one productive, mindful of one’s career and mortgage, able to *prioritize* and *multitask*, and to *work well independently* and *within a team*? Does the notion of autonomous and independent loving in any way coincide with the notion of the autonomous and independent capitalist subject? Activities that foster capitalist culture are all too often addictions themselves, yet there is no comparable sense of urgency for their elimination or management. True, there is Workaholics Anonymous, but it’s something of a cultural oddity, and this type of “addiction” is not considered the most alarming of the day. Since we have no Men-Who-Won’t-Do-Any-Carework Anonymous, Car Dependents Anonymous, or TV-and-

Spectacle-Addicts Anonymous, it seems that we understand Love and Sex as more damaging addictions. And there is a very clear ideology in such a position.¹

Yet the idea that there are better and worse ways to love is so many centuries after Plato broached the topic, still an important one. When writing about sex addictions, the 12-step therapists like to find causes of transgressive sexual behavior in the trauma of childhood abuse. However, we need not go beyond basic Freud when approaching—and immediately giving up, if we’re wise—the issue of how to differentiate normal from out-of-the-ordinary sexual behavior. Whatever the history and future of psychoanalysis, one of its most beneficent insights is that sexual identities are never complete and proper. Their work-in-progress nature and disorderliness cannot be explained away or cured, but there are certainly different ways of living in such circumstances. SLAA practices are at their best when they remain agnostic regarding norms and causation, and offer themselves as a practical system of care of the self through moderation and heightened awareness.

In a world according to SLAA, the possibility of a person with strong libido and multiple lovers who is also happy and fulfilled seems to be nil. However, *there are* happy Don Juans, both literary and actual, who enjoy seductions as a work of art. I would be particularly interested in seeing whether women, who have rarely achieved such degree of liberty, can use the Don Giovanni myth in any useful way (to see whether men can get busy working on the Penelope myth would probably be a tad overoptimistic). Can turning the fuckees into the fuckers (to use MacKinnon’s immortal categories) revolutionize relations between the sexes? I am curious as to why there are no female Edmund Whites and Alan Hollinghursts, and only such figures can eliminate the Angel in the House. We *must* leave room to ask these questions; but the SLAA’s universal monogamist focus does not allow it.

¹ Some of the love addiction literature brought to mind Arlie Russell Hochschild’s analysis of self-help books for women from the eighties and nineties. As part of her investigation into growing commercialization of tasks of intimacy and care, Hochschild examines the changing norms behind women’s advice books. The decline of single (male) breadwinner model families and the entering of women into the workforce were not followed by reciprocal numbers of men willing to share in the work of care of other family members and the domestic work. What stay-at-home women used to do as a matter of ‘natural’ course now had to be contracted out lest it remain undone. Simultaneously, and thanks both to the Second feminist Wave and harsher economic conditions that required full time employment of both parents, new ideals of women’s autonomy began to gain prominence, and the change in tone of popular advice books illustrates this shift. Books like the *Cinderella Complex* and the many varieties of the “Women Who Love Too Much and the Men Who Hate Them” propose a new, less caring woman very alert to the pitfalls of love and attachment that brought nothing but enslavement for an entire gender for such a long time. However, with no signs of the other gender getting more involved in the work of care, and no correspondent transvaluation of care on the society level, what we are left with, Hochschild argues, is the contracted out model of being-together, where not only childcare, eldercare and domestic work are being professionalized and hired, but even the duties that are traditionally part of friendship or coupledness will have to be paid for. A “better-adjusted” female subject unencumbered by family care, friends, partners, other distracting activities and interests will certainly be a boon to capitalist economies. And then, conversely, were we going to SLAA just so we could become more calculating lovers?

Nor is the overactive libido always a hotbed of deceptions and betrayals waiting to happen. In the SLAA exegesis, sexual addictions lead to secrecy, which leads to deceit, then betrayal of trust, double lives, and so down the spiral. It's not active desiring that causes deceitfulness and betrayals: it's character habits and traits that harbor them. There is nothing about sexuality that automatically weakens the capacity for virtue and pushes us into production of all manner of vice. One *can* be ethical and highly sexual.

Nor do multiple partners necessarily lead to frustration and feeling of emptiness, as SLAA cautionary tales suggest. There are records of couples who chose to have other relationships *and* preserve the fundamental bond of coupledness, and their day-to-day ethical choices deserve to be studied closely: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson, Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks.

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What is ahead of me, though? I am guessing some sort of recovery, even if I am not going to become an SLAA regular, even if I see the recovery model as woefully inadequate. *Così fan tutte* will replace all other operas. There's a distinction in SLAA parlance between "being dry" and "being sober," and I pride myself on the ability to be dry only. I will vent against the sober and disenchanting world, but I am probably on my way there. The forgetting of love usually happens in myriad small steps, like growing a new skin or adopting a new language. Right now there are parts of the city thick with memories that I must wade through if I accidentally happen upon them. Eventually, however, the layers of meaning will be stripped away like an old façade. I will be able to take in with indifference Queen West, College and Shaw, and Ossington at night. The recovery will bring me to a quiet contemplative place of the sort that sheltered Winston Smith at the end of *1984*. We need to betray our love in order to survive.

Stoppard's Henry tells Annie that the only way his love for her can cease is if it turns into its opposite, and I can see how hatred is much nobler, more faithful to a love that took place, than forgetting. To stop loving is to become unable to remember what the fuss was all about. It is a point when we say, along with Swann, "To think that I have wasted years of my life, that I have longed for death, that the greatest love that I have ever known has been for a woman who did not please me, who was not my type!" There is insistence upon this transition to tranquility—sobriety?—even in Iris Murdoch's novels, which I've usually relied on as the most accurate and sympathetic accounts of love as madness. Bradley has the truth of his love undermined by the other 'witnesses' at the end of the *Black Prince*, and unless you've read Murdoch's interviews in which she discusses the novel, you finish the book not quite being able to take Bradley at his word. *The Sea, the Sea* concludes with resignation, remorse, and the acceptance that love must be a form of friendship. *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* shows us how we use love and relationships to put other people through hell.

Nobody can ever remember the precise moment when one realizes that love stopped, when one "got over it." So I do know that the time for useful misremembering, reducing, recrafting, and falsifying is ahead of me. There will be days when it won't be clear to me

why I tried to attend the SLAA, a program with which I have a whole slew of philosophical disagreements. This time, this other consciousness, is not yet. The only thing I am sure about is that whenever it comes, it will be too soon.

—*Lydia Perovic*