THE BIOLOGICAL POWER OF LOVE

Peter Reason is moved and enlightened by an account of erotic ecology

Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology
Andreas Weber, trans. Rory Bradley
Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017
ISBN: 9781603586979

This is, maybe, the most exciting book I have read since David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*. At its core is one big idea: that being alive is always a practice of love. We touch the world and are touched by it in return. We – all beings and material things – "long to connect with each other … in order to become ourselves. Life, the whole cosmos, is formed through relationship, and through relationship new things are formed." Being in the world is primarily an erotic encounter. But don't think of love as just a private matter or a pleasant feeling. For Eros, the god of love, is a tragic figure, the god of emotional intensity that burns just as hotly when unsatisfied. We misunderstand love if we turn it into a commodity, for love is both an instrument of knowledge and the "practical principle … of creative enlivenment … a fundamental aspect of being alive". This is the essence of "erotic ecology".

The reader is drawn into these ideas in Andreas Weber's preliminary remarks. Then, at the turn of the page, the reader is drawn into story: how two baby swifts are stuck up a chimney; how Weber reaches up through the cinders, grasps their warm little bodies, takes them to the open window and sets them free; how he watches them plunge into the air and disappear. In that moment, Weber realises that he is watching an enactment of love: "The swifts are an element of air, but they are also an element of happiness… The swifts are an element of air's love for itself. To love … means to be fully alive." Through story we are drawn more deeply into Weber's poetic precision.

The following chapter, 'Touch', follows the same pattern. It begins with Weber's encounter with the rivers in Liguria, Italy, how they sweep stones down from the mountains and in doing so change the stones and themselves. He shows how rivers are the way in which mountains perceive gravity, following Aldo Leopold's "thinking like a mountain". Starting at a physical plane, contact forms the scaffolding of reality. The universe itself came together in the Big Bang essentially out nothing but attraction; it has been creatively unfolding ever since as the beings of the world "congregate and bond together into new, more complex, more sophisticated forms". This creative unfolding is the counterpoint to the physicists' entropic death: in the face of ultimate stasis as predicted by the laws of thermodynamics, unprecedented new forms and relationships emerge.

Chapter 3, 'Death', particularly captured my imagination. Again, Weber starts with a story, this time the experience of a sauna in Estonia, reflecting on why the oscillation between being dangerously hot and dangerously cold brings so much physical pleasure. This leads to a reflection on that deepest incompatibility at the heart of existence: how life forms create and maintain their own order and autonomy while being made of matter that is organised according to the laws of cause and effect. Life is precisely the opposite of matter: "The real scandal is that these wilful cells exist at all." Then Weber takes us into a delicate exploration of how life, as a web of desire, always carries death within itself. Weaving in a story of watching a katydid striving for life while being eaten by a wood ant, he shows us that the drive for aliveness holds itself continually in the face of death. "The universe is not purely gentle. It is just as deadly as it is gentle. And it can only be gentle because it is deadly. It can only be gentle insofar as its gentleness constantly puts up a fight against death." Every body is a triumph over the forces of decay that tug against it.

The main body of the book is organised into three major sections: I, You, and We, with chapters that explore Transformation, Embrace, Freedom, Sharing and other ways into the practice of love. The perspective Weber develops will not be unfamiliar to *Resurgence* readers. Links are present throughout the book to Abram, Leopold, Gregory Bateson, Wolfgang von Goethe, Francisco Varela, Gary Snyder, and many others, although perhaps surprisingly not to James Lovelock, Stephan Harding and Gaia theory. I myself see traces of panpsychic philosophy, in particular in one of my other favourite books, Freya Mathews' *For Love of Matter*, which in a parallel way explores an erotic ecology, as she writes how in love we are "permeable … cracked open … inducted into the essence of the life experience".

But while Weber's overall perspective draws on familiar themes, the development of the ideas and their expression are profoundly original. Key to this is his emphasis on imagination and poetry: poetry as a way of conceiving the world, not through explanation, but artistically. Throughout the book, Weber tells a story, draws you into his experience, and then weaves a whole world of new understanding, offered not as dry philosophy (although the philosophy and the science are all there to be found), but through poetic metaphor and poetic precision.

More than this, the paradoxical reality of life means that poetry is the "logic of the organic world". In exploring reality's poetic logic, Weber reaches to Bateson's "syllogism in grass": "Grass dies; / Men die; / Men are grass." As we contemplate this riff on classical logic, we are taken beyond objective truth into a world of images, recalling memories of past encounters with grass, life, death: memories unique to each of us. We are taken into a "subjective objectivity" of the world that is deeper than explanation. The syllogism is a precise and true statement only because it is false – men are not literally grass – thus holding us once again in the paradox of life's continual and essential encounter with death: "the poetry of the living space is thus deeply permeated with paradoxes."

This is what Varela called the "imaginative surplus" at the heart of living beings. And this imagination is reflected in human language, which is not an imposition of order onto the world, as constructionist philosophers would have us believe: it is itself part of this world, "wild", as Snyder puts it. And so we can see that erotic ecology can be understood as a "poetic materialism". The biosphere is material *and* it is meaningful: everything that happens is a "living gesture" that brings "absolute value to the world"; but that meaning is embedded in the body and cannot be extracted without damaging the body.

There is a practical and urgent dimension that runs right through the book: "Only by relearning to understand our existence as a practice of love will we grasp the overwhelming human dilemmas that we face … and find the means to deal with them differently than we have thus far." Weber describes the book as a collection of love stories, "erotic affairs with stones, plants, rivers, animals, people, and words"; for "love is an answer to the lack that lies at the heart of aliveness."

Peter Reason's latest book, *In Search of Grace: An Ecological Pilgrimage*, is published by Earth Books.