

## Love's 'Schema and Correction': A Queer Twist on a General Principle

Lynne Pearce

Published online: July 2016

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

**Abstract:** In a development of my previous work on romance and repetition (see *JPRS* 2.1 and Ganteau and Onega 2013), this article engages W.H. Gombrich's theory of artistic production as a process of 'schema and correction' in order to hypothesise why some lovers find it hard, if not impossible, to 'live and love again' when their relationships end. Through a close reading of Annie Proulx's 'Brokeback Mountain' (1999), I explore the perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that initiate and sustain the twenty-year relationship between Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist focusing, in particular, on the ways in which the effort required to twist normative schemas of love and desire into a shape (*gestalt*) that accommodates homosexual attraction renders the beloved seemingly unique and irreplaceable.

**About the Author:** Lynne Pearce is Professor of Literary Theory and Women's Writing at the University of Lancaster. She has published widely in the field of literary and cultural theory, with particular interests in: feminist reader-theory (*Woman/Image/Text* (1991), *Reading Dialogics* (1994), *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (1997), *The Rhetorics of Feminism* (2004)); romance theory (*Romance Revisited* (co-edited 1995), *Fatal Attractions* (co-edited 1997), *Romance Writing* 2007)); and mobilities research (*Devolving Identities* (ed. 2000), *Postcolonial Manchester* (co-authored 2013), *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness* (2016)). She is currently Director for the Humanities at the Centre for Mobilities Research [CeMoRe], Lancaster.

**Keywords:** Annie Proulx, gestalt, repetition, romance, schema and correction, W.H. Gombrich

They had stood that way for a long time in front of the fire, its burning tossing ruddy chunks of light, the shadow of their bodies a single column against the rock . . . Stars bit through the wavy heat layers above the fire. Ennis's breath came slow and quiet, he hummed, rocked a little in the sparklight and Jack leaned against the steady heartbeat . . . fell into sleep that was not sleep but something else drowsy and tranced until Ennis, dredging

up a rusty by still useable phrase from the childhood before his mother died said, "Time to hit the hay, cowboy. I got a go. Come on, you're sleeping on your feet like a horse" . . . Later, that dozy embrace solidified in his [Jack Twist's] memory as the single moment of artless, charmed happiness in their separate and difficult lives. Nothing marred it. (Proulx 310-11)

In a previous article for *JPRS* (2.1)– subsequently revised and expanded for a chapter in Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega's edited collection, *Trauma and Romance* (2013)– I explored the issue of repetition in love-relationships: in particular, the tension that exists between the genre of popular romance (where love, for both heroines and authors, would appear to be infinitely repeatable) and the emphatically non-repeatable, typically tragic, endgames that characterize a good deal of literary romance from the fourteenth century to the present.

However, the unanswered question this investigation left hanging in the air is why and how certain love-relationships present themselves as so definitive as to be non-repeatable in the first place? Although, in the previous article, I acknowledged that it was attachments which demonstrated Agapic qualities (i.e., they were sudden, involuntary and non-negotiable)[1] that were most likely to resist substitution/repetition, I stopped short of offering an explanation for why this should be the case. The discussion that follows provides a speculative answer to this question through recourse to a psychological model that, to the best of my knowledge, has never been used in connection with romantic love before: namely, the art historian E.H. Gombrich's modelling of perception and consciousness (what we see and what we know) as a process of 'schema and correction'. [2] Following Gombrich's work, I put forward my own general principle of how the cognitive processes involved in an individual's first attraction to his or her beloved helps explain why some attachments are more stubbornly enduring than others, before adding the further queer twist of how this may be of particular significance in (certain) homosexual [3] relationships. In addition, the discussion carries with it a political subtext that calls upon us to reconsider the value of amorous attachments so seemingly unique and irreproducible that their spell cannot be broken. While my first objective here is to offer a psychological explanation for why this is so, I also find it interesting to reflect upon the ways in which attachments that contemporary Western culture would typically regard as obsessive and perverse (in the sense that they persist without hope of resolution) may be legitimated. The gauntlet that such a stance throws down to the 'self-help' discourses of 'letting go' and 'moving on' is something that I foregrounded in the conclusion to my chapter in *Trauma and Romance* (2012:86-87), but this was before I had brought the conceit of romantic attraction as a process of schema and correction into the equation.

Now provided with a model which is, at very least, one way of explaining how some passionate attachments persist while others fade, it is, I believe, possible to call upon society to better respect and understand what is so easily dismissed as unhealthy obsession. From a wider societal perspective it is, of course, good that not everyone's experience of falling in love is as non-reproducible as the phenomenon I explore here; however, it is arguably equally important not to put unwanted moral and psychological pressure upon those enthralled by a particular relationship to seek out a new one when they have no need to. On this point, careful historicization of the discourses concerned also serve to remind us that, in the nineteenth century and early-twentieth century (as in many

non-Western cultures today), life-long mourning and/or melancholia[4] for a lost loved-one was, and is, fully permissible. This, then, is the wider political and ethical debate to which this article speaks and which will, I hope, bring to mind textual plots and subplots from a broad cross-section of literature where bereaved or abandoned lovers refuse recuperation and trouble the text's happy ending. Often the discordant function of such figures is passed over, but s/he may well work as an exemplar of the general, yet queer, principle I seek to explore here with the help of Annie Proulx's short story 'Brokeback Mountain' (2002 [1999]) and Ang Lee's award-winning film based on the text (2005). With respect to the latter, it is indeed worth remembering that many viewers and reviewers enjoyed the film but were critical of its (and, of course, Proulx's) ending on account of Ennis del Mar's perceived refusal to 'move on': a point to which I shall return.

The article is divided into three sections: first, an exploration of the theory that has informed my thinking; second, a section which I have entitled 'Love's Beginning' which draws upon Gombrich's model of schema and correction to demonstrate, with the help of Proulx's story, how some love-objects impact upon our consciousness in such an explosive way; and third, a section entitled 'Love's Sustainance' which turns its attention to how such enchantments remain fresh and vital in a long-term relationship like that of Jack and Ennis. For while all these mechanisms may be seen to apply to heterosexual as well as homosexual relationships, it is arguable that they are more visible in the latter on account of the extra work non-heteronormative subjects have had to do (at least, historically) both in matching their desires to pre-existing schema and then adapting them – often across genders – for their own use: the (im)perceptible 'queer twist'.

## Rethinking *Ravissement*

As readers of this journal will be aware, theories of love and romance, both ancient and modern, abound with evocative and poetic descriptions of falling in love – many of them figuring it as a singular moment in time (Cupid's arrow) or, indeed, the 'ambush' of Barthes's *ravissement* (1990 [1977]):

Love at first sight is an hypnosis: I am fascinated by an image: at first shaken, electrified, stunned, "paralyzed" as Menon was by Socrates . . . subsequently ensnared, held fast, immobilized, nose stuck to the image (the mirror). (189)

Yet such is the stupefying intensity of the event that accounts of how such an improbable and instantaneous 'hypnosis' might be explained are harder to come by. Barthes himself, a little later in the same entry, nevertheless provides the beginnings of a theory for how we can appear to fall helplessly in love with someone we have only just met:

In the animal world, the release-switch of the sexual mechanism is not a specific individual but only a form, a bright-colored fetish (which is how the Image-repertoire starts up). In the fascinating image, what impresses me (like a sensitized paper) is not the accumulation of its details but this or that inflection. What suddenly manages to touch me (ravish me) in the other is

the voice, the line of the shoulders, the slenderness of the silhouette, the warmth of the hand, the curve of a smile, etc. Whereupon, what does the aesthetic of the image matter? *Something accommodates itself exactly to my desire* (about which I know nothing) . . . Sometimes it is the other's conformity to a great cultural model which enthralls [*sic*] me (I imagine I see the other painted by an artist in the past); sometimes, on the contrary, it is a certain insolence of the apparition that will open the wound: I can fall in love with a slightly vulgar attitude . . . a brief (but excessive) way of parting the fingers, of spreading the legs, of moving the fleshy parts of the lips in eating, of going about some very prosaic occupation, of making one's body utterly idiotic for an instant . . . (190-1) [my italics]

For Barthes, then, it is the lover's *Image-repertoire* (his or her cache of stock images/qualities and emotional catalysts) that is responsible for pre-programming us to respond to certain visual cues[5], attitudes and behaviours. The implication is that we will chance upon, in certain individuals, a critical mass of features that somehow "accommodate [themselves] to our desire" (191) (as determined by our Image-repertoire) no matter how idiosyncratic or un-aesthetic these may be.

Philosophers in the analytic tradition (such as Soble (1990) cited in note 1) struggling to account for the phenomenon of 'love at first sight' have come to a similar conclusion;[6] namely, that our seemingly instantaneous attraction to a particular individual must, in truth, be triggered by pre-existing values and/or practices, be this the manner of one's loving (our love of God is extended spontaneously to other objects) or in the way in which the special qualities discovered in certain individuals resonate with properties we already esteem (see note 1). Such a verdict not only asks serious questions about whether an attraction which is, in effect, a response to a pre-existing schema can really qualify as 'love at first sight', but also whether Agapically-inclined romantic love (the sudden outpouring of desire and solicitude that characterizes Barthes's *ravissement*) is really any more unpremeditated than Erosic love (typically seen as a considered response to attractive qualities in a certain individual). As the previous sentence hints, the inclination to lavish affection on unfamiliar individuals or objects is arguably as dependent upon pre-existing patterns of *behaviour* (our unconditional love of God spills into our love for our neighbours and prospective partners) as 'property-based love' is on pre-existing schemas.

Taken together, then, both Barthes and the analytic philosophers make a strong case for all romantic love – even when seemingly instant and involuntary – being, in effect, a *response* to something that is already there. As we shall see, this is a conclusion perfectly in line with what Gombrich (and the Gestalt psychologists he drew upon) believed about the workings of perception and consciousness more generally (i.e., 'there is no seeing without knowing').[7] Whether or not we subscribe to this thesis, it is clearly crucial not to confuse its implications, in a romantic-love context, with a devaluing of what we may previously have thought of as love at first sight. Just because there is an element of response or reflex involved does not render the ontological experience any less immediate and profound for the subject(s) concerned. Indeed, by turning now to Gombrich's account of all that is involved in the process of 'matching' a new object to a pre-existing schema, I can, I hope, demonstrate why falling in love – whether 'at first sight' or by means of a 'slow burn' – can

have such a powerful and long-lasting impact upon our consciousness. To anticipate, this is because it is not simply something in the love-object that “accommodates itself exactly to [our pre-existing] desire” (Barthes 191) but rather that we have to work to make the ‘match’ happen. Indeed, it is now my belief that it is this cognitive labour, rather than *ravissement* or ‘love at first sight’ *per se* – that is the key as to why some expressions of romantic love prove both so searing and so enduring.

As acknowledged above and in note 2, E.H. Gombrich’s interest in the work of the philosopher Karl Popper, psychologist J.J. Gibson’s work on visual perception and the Gestalt School arose from his attempt to theorize the history of (Western) art (see Gombrich 21-25 for a full discussion of these antecedents): namely, how the styles and conventions of pictorial representation change and evolve. It was the way in which each new generation or school of artists developed a style which was similar to, yet different from, that which preceded them which fascinated him (Gombrich 55-78) and whose conundrum was ultimately resolved through the practice he described as schema and correction. According to Gombrich, in order to “even describe the visible world . . . we need a developed system of schemata” (76), but when we triangulate this schemata with both the representations of our predecessors and what we see with our own eyes (i.e., the ‘correction’) a wholly new schema emerges.

In these speculations on how the process of schema and correction operates in painting and draughtsmanship, Gombrich describes a circuit of cognitive activity that can, I believe, be usefully compared to the work the subject is compelled to do when presented with a prospective love-object (or romantic scenario) that matches, but not quite, the visual ‘semes’[8] and affective qualities cached in his or her Image-repertoire:

My point here is that such matching will always be a step-by-step process – how long it takes and how hard it is will depend on the choice of the initial schema to be adapted to the task of serving as a portrait . . . He [the draughtsman] begins not with his visual impression but with his idea or concept . . . Having selected such a schema to fit the form approximately, he will proceed to adjust it . . . Copying, we learn from these experiments, proceeds from the rhythms of schema and correction. The ‘schema’ is not the product of a process of ‘abstraction’ or a tendency to ‘simplify’; it represents the first approximate, loose category which is gradually tightened to fit the form it is to reproduce. (63-4)

Gombrich’s draughtsman, then, is compelled to repeatedly reconfigure what he knows in the light of what he sees even though without his initial schema as a point of reference, he would have been unable to even begin his task. “Matching might come before making” (Gombrich 99), for sure, but the lasting achievement of the artist is in wresting a new and fresh perception from the disjuncture of the percept and its schema. In the process, moreover, the draughtsman or woman – and his/her correlate, the lover – will have effectively manufactured a new schema against which all future variants will be compared.

Such acknowledgement not only of the importance of the correction relative to the schema but also of the intense labour involved in aligning the two, suggests to me a possible explanation for why those lovers who have worked hardest at the matching of their schema – their ‘ideal object’, however conceptualized[9] – with the percept will find it

hardest to replace the relationship with another when, for whatever reason, it ends: having toiled so hard on refining their outline – which is now at once ideal and idiosyncratic – where should they expect to find its likeness again? Moreover, the work, though exhausting, is not necessarily exhausted. Each and every time the lover chances unexpectedly upon his or her love object, the same instance of double-vision has the potential to recur: s/he sees the ideal outline (the *gestalt*), but also the dissonant halo – until the two, with a quick blink of the eye, are skewed back together into an Image-repertoire that is, for the subject concerned, seemingly unique.

A further benefit of utilizing Gombrich's notion of the schema (a tool in a purely cognitive process) in contrast to psychoanalytic concepts such as Freud's 'ego-ideal' or Lacan's 'objet petit à' (see note 9) is that it enables us to explore the role played by the *a priori* objects of romantic love relations without recourse to heteronormative models of Oedipal subject development. In other words (and as discussed in notes 5, 8 and 9), the lover's schema is not necessarily traceable to any one conceit, image or bond, but is more typically a composite of multiple qualities that s/he has encountered up to that point. This is especially helpful when we contemplate the nature and function of the schema in gay, lesbian and/or queer relationships (see note 3) where neither psychoanalytic nor ideological figures (e.g., the parent of the opposite sex or the prince and princesses of fairytale) may be expected to function as a generic ideal – at least, not in a straightforward way. Indeed, freed from the logic of Oedipus, it surely makes sense to propose that subjects who are aware of the heterodox nature of their affective and sexual preferences will discover their schemata in a dispersed range of sources rather than the abstract (yet gendered) parental objects of psychoanalysis. Further, the love-schema, like Gombrich's visual-art schema, may be as far removed from its Ur-source as is imaginable and yet still be a schema. In the same way that – for Gombrich – the history of Western art may be traced through the evolution of its aesthetic schema (each new School, or movement, revises and adapts the schema of its immediate predecessor), so might non-heterosexual lovers today be expected to respond to schemas that are already queerly twisted before embarking upon their own practice of correction.

By corollary, and in anticipation of the discussion of 'Brokeback Mountain' that follows, we may also speculate that lovers who have previously identified as heterosexual will have to work especially hard to bring their love-schemas in line with a potential love object of the same sex. For if an individual has never had cause to question his or her sexuality before it is quite possible that the assemblage of semes (see note 8) that comprise his/her ideal schemata have become so associated with a person of the opposite sex that they are unrecognisable in a person of the same sex (in contrast to openly bisexual- or queer-identified subjects for whom such semes transfer easily across the sexes). In this regard, indeed, one could argue that it is the distance travelled between a schema and its correction that constitutes the truly queer and volatile space of a love-relationship even if, once his/her personal 'correction' has been effected, the subject concerned loses sight of how wide the gap once yawned.

## Love's Beginning

Readers familiar with 'Brokeback Mountain' (the story rather than the film, though the latter is a very faithful reproduction of the former in many ways) may recall that it opens with an italicized postscript, at the heart of which sits Ennis del Mar's dream of his dead lover Jack Twist:

*Ennis del Mar wakes up before five, wind rocking the trailer, hissing in around the aluminum door and window frames. The shirts on a nail shudder slightly in the draft . . . It could be bad on the highway with the horse trailer. He has to be packed and away from the place that morning . . . He might have to stay with his married daughter until he picks up another job, yet he is suffused with a sense of pleasure because Jack Twist was in his dream.*

*The stale coffee is boiling up but he catches it before it goes over the side, pours it into a stained cup and blows on the black liquid, lets a panel of the dream slide forward. If he does not force his attention on it, it might stoke the day, rewarm that old, cold time on the mountain when they owned the world and nothing seemed wrong. The wind strikes the trailer like a load of dirt coming off a dump truck, eases, dies, leaves a temporary silence. (Proulx 283)*

Although it is now already several years since Jack's death, Ennis still has the pleasure and consolation of dreaming about him; indeed, each night brings with it the promise of a new *coup de foudre*. Just as it was at their beginning, so might Jack Twist stride into his life again – unbidden. Indeed, it is the involuntary nature of the dream, the very fact that Ennis must not “force his attention on it”, that links it so neatly with the genesis of the love-affair and positions it at the Agapic pole of romantic love (see note 1).

Yet the unbidden question the persistence of these dreams raises is clearly ‘how’? How is it possible for certain love-affairs to live on in the unconscious in this way, and with this tenacity, when others see the tabula wiped clean overnight? Is it simply a matter of the individual psyche (i.e., evidence that some of us are more susceptible to lingering attachments than others)? Or of the qualitative strength of one attachment over the next: where we love deeply and meaningfully, we love longest?[10] Or is it, as I'm proposing here, somehow bound up with the nature of love's inception: the way in which some encounters are marked by a process so charged – and challenging – as to defy the evacuating processes of memory?

There are, of course, other theoretical models available to explain why certain attachments persist and certain memories refuse to die: most notably, Freud's diagnosis of mourning and melancholia (see note 4) and the trauma theorists' accounts of how distressing incidents can be lodged in the unconscious indefinitely (Caruth, Felman and Laub). *Vis-à-vis* the special circumstances of romantic love, however, Roland Barthes has perhaps come closest to giving the moment and manner of the encounter the attention it deserves. For no matter how convincing we might find Freud's proposition that mourning cannot be completed until each and every incident associated with the beloved has been revisited (253), this still fails to explain why some relationships accrue more memories –

or, rather, the raw-materials from which memories are manufactured – than others. And this is where Gombrich’s model of cognition as a process of schema and correction as outlined above can, perhaps, help us: namely, the more slippages that are encountered between a pre-existing schema and its queer or quirky ‘other’ during the period of *ravissement*, the harder the lover has to work in aligning the two; even, in some cases, years down the line and/or after the beloved has been lost. Put simply: the more unlikely the love-object, the more persistent the attachment.[11]

I turn now to Annie Proulx’s ‘Brokeback Mountain’ in order to explore these propositions further and, on that point, should clarify that my objective in so doing is to refine and illustrate my theory rather than provide a ‘reading’ of the text *per se* (fascinating though it undoubtedly is).

Although ‘Brokeback Mountain’ is a text which keeps character-focalization to a minimum (and then almost exclusively through the eyes/consciousness of Ennis del Mar), there are one or two episodes near the start of the story which may, I think, be read as indicative of the extremely challenging schema and correction work both men (but especially Ennis) are compelled to engage in before the other was even recognizable as an object of love and desire. Starting with the occasion of the men’s first encounter – in the “choky little trailer office” of the Farm and Ranch Employment Agency (285) – the text offers portraits of Jack and Ennis that reveal the extent to which both men, in their person, combine the idiosyncratic with the conventional and hence thwart classification according to idealized and or ready-made schemas:

At first sight Jack seemed fair enough with his curly hair and a quick laugh, but for a small man he carried some weight in the haunch and his smile disclosed buck teeth, not pronounced enough to let him eat popcorn out of the neck of the jug, but noticeable. (286)

Ennis, high-arched nose and narrow face, was scruffy and a little cave-chested, balanced a small torso on long caliper [sic] legs, [but] possessed a muscular and supple body made for the horse and for fighting. His reflexes were uncommonly quick and he was farsighted enough to dislike reading anything except Hamley’s saddle catalog. (286)

We see that while Jack at first sight conforms to the conventional/heteronormative schema of a good-looking man there is, nevertheless, something odd about him: even at twenty, he is slightly over-weight and has protruding teeth; Ennis, by contrast (and, in this case the idiosyncrasies or ‘flaws’ are listed first) is skinny and imperfectly proportioned but otherwise fits a conventional heroic ideal by being quick and powerful. While Proulx may not route this description through the focalization her characters, these physical characteristics – both ideal and idiosyncratic – are threaded through the narrative that ensues. When Ennis remembers or dreams about Jack, for example, the latter’s buck teeth feature; while it is Ennis’s physique that enables him to pack a punch, both literally and symbolically, on Jack’s heart. In terms of their semantic profiles, then, it may be seen that both men conform to and yet deviate from heteronormative cowboy stereotypes in ways that are guaranteed to intrigue and provoke as they size one another up and, in Gombrich’s terms, begin the arduous process of ‘matching and making’.

Significantly, the first time the text shows the men appraising one another, it is from the ultra-de-familiarizing distance of their respective camps on Brokeback Mountain:

During the day Ennis looked across a great gulf and sometimes saw Jack, a small dot moving across a high meadow as an insect moves across a tablecloth; Jack, in his dark camp, saw Ennis as night fire, a red spark on the huge black mass of mountain. (287)

This must be read as a somewhat hyperbolic demonstration of schema-correction inasmuch as huge cognitive effort is required to match the two semantic fields: a black dot in Jack's case, a red one in Ennis's. And yet it may also be read as paradigmatic of the sort of making and matching (bizarre, unfamiliar, difficult to make out) that lives longest in the memory banks and when focused on a potential love object – serves to fuel the life and after-life of romance.

The difficulty Jack and Ennis have in figuring each other out is registered in the text – at the level of the plot – in the length of time it takes before their mutual attraction is recognized. Love at first sight this is not; and yet, when they do finally come together it is with all the suddenness of a *coup de foudre*, as though – after long months of schema-adjustment (we remember Gombrich's description of the draughtsman at work) they see each other as an object of desire for the first time:

Ennis woke in the red dawn with his pants around his knees, a top-grade headache, and Jack butted against him; without saying anything about it both knew how it would go for the rest of the summer, sheep be damned.

As it did go. They never talked about the sex, let it happen, at first only in the tent at night, then in the full daylight with the hot sun striking down, and at evening in the fire glow, quick, rough, laughing and snorting, no lack of noises, but saying not a goddam word except once Ennis said, "I'm not no queer," and Jack jumped in with "Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours." There were only the two of them on the mountain flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on the hawk's back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended from ordinary affairs and distant from tame ranch dogs barking in the dark hours. (291)

For Ennis, consumed with homophobic anxiety, it is an alignment and realization that, at a conscious level, he can never come to terms with or completely understand; while in Jack's case, as will be discussed below, it is only latterly (when he remembers the time that Ennis held him in a maternal embrace: see epigraph at head of article) that he is seen to glimpse one of the sources of his schemata.

## Love's Sustenance: Reification

I move now to the representation of the phase of Jack and Ennis's relationship that Barthes, in his teleology of romance, designates 'the sequel' (197-8). In so doing I am not,

however, leaving 'the beginning' behind since the hypothesis of enduring love that I am testing here is crucially dependent upon the dynamic exchange between ideal and variant, schema and correction, established during the period of protracted *ravissement*. Further, the telescopic nature of Proulx's plotting means that a good deal of information about the moment of first encounter is revealed retrospectively through the vehicle of the two men's memories and dreams.

As readers familiar with either the short story or the film will be aware, the plot of 'Brokeback Mountain', subsequent to Jack and Ennis's first summer on the mountain, is structured around a series of contrapuntal episodes focusing on the men's domestic lives when apart and their annual or biennial 'fishing trips' together. The articulation of the two is handled extremely deftly in Ang Lee's film which makes rather more of the domestic interludes and the (painful) passage of time this represents.

From their first trip away together, some four years after the summer on Brokeback Mountain, Jack and Ennis's reunions take on a supercharged intensity. Although such passion can, of course, be explained simply as a response to abstinence (both sexual and emotional), there are several instances in the text where we can, I think, see the dynamics of the initial schema and correction process repeating themselves. Take, for example, this description of when Jack first lands on Ennis's doorstep:

Late in the afternoon, thunder growling, that same old green pickup rolled in and he saw Jack get out of the truck, beat-up Resitol tilted back. A hot jolt scalded Ennis and he was out on the landing pulling the door closed behind him. Jack took the stairs two and two . . . then, and as easily as the right key turns the lock tumblers, their mouths came together and hard, Jack's big teeth bringing blood . . . and Ennis, not big on endearments, said what he said to his horses and daughters, little darlin. (295)

What Proulx's account of the reunion emphasizes is, once again, the ideal and idiosyncratic nature of this relationship, both in terms of the men's physical appearances – note the mention of Jack's defining feature, his buckteeth – and what, following Barthes, we may describe as the 'scene' (192).[12] Although the doorstep is the prototypical site of romantic union from traditional folk songs to military homecomings, this is undoubtedly a queer one.

Dirt-poor, Ennis and Alma (Ennis's wife) are, at this time, living in a small apartment above a laundry and, during the interlude of the embrace, Alma breaks onto the scene twice: the open door-frame symbolic, if you like, of Ennis's heteronormative responsibilities and constraints. What is most interesting from the point of view of my hypothesis, however, is that this dissonance between the ideal and the actual serves only to magnify the specificity, and hence the intensity, of the romantic encounter. Indeed, it could be said that the text positions us, as readers, to share the 'hot jolt' that scalds Ennis as an explosion of incongruous visual and discursive cues converge in a split-second of time. Like Ennis, we scramble our schema to make sense of the scene before us and, in the gap between what we see and what we know, register once again the seeming uniqueness of this love-relationship.

The image of the 'hot jolt' that Proulx invokes here may, of course, also be read as indicative of the fact that – for lovers, as for the population at large – lightning can, indeed, strike twice. The chances of it striking more than twice would, however, seem slim – and

yet this is precisely how the reunions between Jack and Ennis continue to be characterized. Even within the context of the Hail Strew River trip (305-310), which Ang Lee's film figures as the crisis point and nadir of the relationship, the same electrical imagery is invoked: "One thing never changed: the brilliant charge of their infrequent couplings was darkened by the same sense of time flying, never enough time, never enough" (307). And while, once again, it is possible to make a banal reading of this (the sex was good because it was so infrequent), it may – for the purposes of my hypothesis – also be read as evidence of the way in which the *a priori* moment of schema and correction continues to repeat itself. Each time the lovers meet the same 'jolt' of mis/recognition occurs. To re-iterate Barthes: "I cannot get over having had this good fortune: to meet what matches my desire" (194). And yet the 'match', as we've already established, is far from perfect; so it is rather a case of having always to tweak the schema to accommodate the desire.

Meanwhile, the way in which such repeated corrections may over time lead to a permanent expansion and alteration of the schema is recognized in Gestalt psychology through the concept of reification (the generative aspect of perception which causes the percept to appear to the beholder with more information – visual, sensory, conceptual – than the eye actually beholds).[13] This appears to usefully account for the way in which an expanded, intensified schema may eventually over-determine the act of perception to such an extent that we readily supplement the information provided in a perceptual prompt with data stored in the improvised schema. To invoke another school of cognitive psychology, perception thus becomes apperception[14] and, onto the figure of the beloved and all that has become associated with him or her, is projected the effort of all our past 'making and matching'.

Read as an analogy for the dynamics that come to characterize a long-term love-affair like that of Ennis and Jack, it therefore also becomes possible to suggest that although the 'jolt' of schema versus correction has the capacity to continue *ad infinitum*, the repeatedly-adjusted schema will gradually come to subsume the original to such an extent that it will acquire a life or substance of its own – something in the manner of Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum (Baudrillard 1981). Inasmuch as this revised schema will over time accommodate many of the beloved's notionally undesirable features as well as his or her more endearing ones, it may also be seen to play an important role in protecting the relationship from 'spoiling': what Barthes figured as a "speck of corruption" on the Image-repertoire (25). Once brought within the figure of the new outline or schema, whose difference from the bland original is precisely what makes our attachment so compelling and unique, aesthetic flaws, bad behavior, and even everyday irritations – the death-knell of more Erosically-defined relationships (see note one)– are accommodated and forgotten.

As it happens, Proulx's story features a metaphor which speaks to the benefits of the reification of the schema in a long-term love-relationship very well. Having been dealt a symbolic killer-blow in his fight with Jack at Hail Strew River (when Jack spells out to him the great life they might have had together were it not for Ennis's homophobia), Ennis drops to the ground as if "heart-shot"(309). A minute or two later, however:

Ennis was back on his feet and somehow, as a coat hanger is straightened to open a locked door and then bent again to its original shape, they torqued things back almost to where they had been before, for what they'd said was no news. Nothing ended, nothing begun, nothing resolved. (310)

Although this likening of the relationship to a *gestalt* or shape is, of course, entirely coincidental, the conceit of a coat-hanger being “torqued back into shape” also serves well as a trope for the redemptive power of the oft-corrected and now reified schema. For while everything in the circumstances in which Jack and Ennis find themselves militates against the survival of their special relationship (Jack’s infidelity, Ennis’s conservatism and homophobia, the spoiling of their no-longer-young bodies), it does survive; largely, I would suggest, because these uncomfortable particulars have already been incorporated into an outline that, according to the first principles of *gestalt*, is always already more than the sum of its parts (see note 7).

## Conclusion

As the title of this article indicates, my likening of the process of falling in love to E.H. Gombrich’s account of the role of schema and correction in the stylistic evolution of Western art presents itself as a general principle rather than one that is in any way exclusive to homosexual relationships. Indeed, as far as Gombrich and the theory that informed his work is concerned (Gestalt, Popper), the maxim that ‘matching comes before making’ is seen to be foundational to all acts of cognition. By implication, the application of the principle to the perception-cognition of lovers must necessarily include all lovers: each one of us will fall in love in response to our personal schemata regardless of where this – and, indeed, the gender of our potential love object – positions us on the spectrum of sexualities available to us.

On this point, I am aware that my description of Jack and Ennis’s relationship as ‘homosexual’ throughout the course of this article may seem rather dated in a special issue dedicated to the exploration of specifically *queer* romance. However, as outlined in note 3, this is because Proulx’s story is set – with much historical fidelity – in an era and culture when there were only two options (one normative, one deviant) as far as sexuality was concerned. In addition, picking up on my opening comments in the introduction, it is arguably the aggressively heteronormative context in which Proulx’s characters operate that makes visible the struggle they have in connecting their schemata to their apprehension of each other. And this, in turn, is what makes both the schemas and their corrections perceptible to us as readers; considering that Jack’s ideal love object may be sourced to his mother (see epigraph at head of article), and Ennis’s experience of affection is limited to his children and his horses (see extract in section one (Proulx 295)), it is no surprise that they have to work as hard as they do to make the match, effect the correction.

The fact that Jack and Ennis’s love-schemas appear to originate in the conservative and stereotypical semantics of the family is also unremarkable: in rural mid-West America in the early 1960s there was presumably little in the way of gay/lesbian iconography and the more complex sexual identifications of the queer movement had yet to be imagined (see note 3). Given the enormity of the gulf between ideal (and permissible) love-objects and their displacement onto a lover of the same sex it is also not surprising that the process of schema correction should take some time. In terms of Proulx’s narrative, indeed, it is not until the crisis of the Hail Strew River trip that Jack is seen to make the connection (even

now unconscious) between Ennis's protective embrace and a mother's love, while Ennis remains blind to his desire to perform that role (as Jack's partner) until after Jack's death. (Having created a shrine out of his and Jack's entwined shirts and a postcard of Brokeback Mountain, Ennis belatedly utters the marriage vow – "Jack, I swear-"(317)). What Proulx's text reveals to us so effectively, then, is just how hard her two protagonists have to work to bring their love in line with a schema they recognize and value. Jack, we know, has had a good many male lovers apart from Ennis, but whatever sexual pleasure or relief they provided, it failed to match the type/typology of love he yearned for. Understanding this also, of course, suggests why love so hard-won is also not easily forgotten. Jack and Ennis keep coming back to each other, year after year, precisely because – in Barthes's words – each matches the other's desire (194) without them knowing exactly what that desire is. The slippage becomes, in effect, a mystery that needs to be solved and, hence, a compulsion.

As noted above, the logic of the psychology on which both Gombrich's model of schema and correction and my application of it to a romantic love context dictates that the processes I have explored here *vis-à-vis* fictional homosexual relationships should apply to all love relationships regardless of the sexual orientation of the subjects concerned. Although the practice of schema and correction may be more visible in homosexual relationships located in a history or culture where the non-normative is hidden from view, it follows that all of us discover and identify our love objects by a similar process; the qualitative difference, it would seem, is the comparative ease with which a heterosexual subject – or, indeed, a contemporary gay-/queer-identified subject – is able to match their schema to a prospective partner. In any relationship where the gap between our schema and our love-object is wide, however, the love itself is liable to be deep and long-lasting; it is the fascination of something that fits, or matches, almost but not exactly that has the power to bind us to him or her forever.

Finally, by way of conclusion, I return to the political subtext introduced at the start of this article. Although Proulx's story was penned fairly recently (1999) and focuses on a relationship that spanned the latter-half of the twentieth-century (1963-83), for many readers and viewers it will be seen as a compelling but in every respect archaic account of how 'modern love' (whatever the sexuality) should be lived. Yet in line with my discussion in 'Romance and Repetition' (2010; 2012), I am personally rather less inclined to read the end of 'Brokeback Mountain' as 'depressing' or, indeed, to characterize those whose affections exceed the 'normal' period of time typically allocated for mourning unhealthy or obsessed. As I observed at the beginning of the article, time was – and less than a century ago – when widowhood (and its non-marital equivalents) was a socially acceptable affective state, and contemporary society's pressure to 'move on' and love again as part of a life-project centred on the meeting of needs and the enjoyment of entitlements would have been unrecognizable.

The literary history of tragic romance, meanwhile, has typically preferred to draw the veil on any such extended mourning by contriving an ending that involves both parties. Proulx's text, by contrast, which ends with the memorable but cryptic pronouncement "If you can't fix it, you've got to stand it" (318), may indeed be read as a positive break with the tradition in this regard. For while we may regard the text's repetition of Ennis's catchphrase as the final, ironic comment on the cruel price he's been forced to pay for his failure of nerve all those years ago, who is to say that Ennis del Mar, now, would be better off 'moving on'? Instead – and notwithstanding the cold light of dawn in a lonely trailer – there

is surely also a case to be made for living with the thing that one has worked on so inexhaustibly and, in the process, defined one's life no matter how queer this might seem to others.

---

[1] 'Agapic love': my use of this term to describe romantic love relationships has been questioned by scholars who understand it to refer to 'the love of God' and hence existing in singular contrast to the love that characterizes our interpersonal relationships. It should, however, be noted that I refer here to the 'Agapic *qualities*' present in certain expressions of romantic love, which is not the same as declaring the love *Agapic per se*. In this I am following the work of Alan Soble (1990) who proposed that the discourse of romantic love is inscribed by both Erosic and Agapic elements: "But romantic love may also exhibit features of the second [Agapic] view: it arises (and disappears) mysteriously, incomprehensibly; the lover is not always expected to have reasons for his or her passion; and the lover is only under an illusion that the beloved has attractive qualities" (15-16). See also Anders Nygren's classic *Eros and Agape* (1983 [1936]).

[2] E.H. Gombrich (1909-2001) was a world-renowned art-historian whose theories of how the visual arts (principally painting) have evolved over the centuries drew upon the work of the philosopher Karl Popper and Gestalt psychology (which originated in Germany in the early twentieth century through the work of Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka) (see Gombrich 21-23). Both Popper and the Gestalt school proposed radically new ways of understanding perception, arguing that our ability to 'see' objects depends entirely upon a pre-existing 'schema' or concept for the object concerned. It is also important to acknowledge that the principles of Gestalt had already been linked to the visual arts in Rudolf von Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1954). Gombrich's debt to these theorists is visible in his *Story of Art* (first published in 1950) but becomes explicit in *Art and Illusion* (first published in 1960). A useful article comparing Popper and Gombrich was published by Norbert Schneider in 2009.

[3] As discussed at the end of the article, I recognize that my use of the term 'homosexual' as a descriptor assumes a binaristic conception of sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) which the Queer movement has done much to undermine. However, for the purposes of this article, which centres on a fictional text set in the early 1960s, I have used the term advisedly since I feel it to be the most historically/culturally appropriate (although Ennis del Mar proclaims "I ain't no queer" we know that the connotations of the term are not what they are today). In other parts of the discussion I use the terms 'gay'/'lesbian' and 'queer' as I consider appropriate according, again, to the cultural/historical context. Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) solicited a good deal of media and online discussion about whether the protagonists were gay, bisexual or rather 'heterosexual men who, by chance, entered into a homosexual relationship'. The fact that, today, Facebook and other social media sites provide users with an expansive list of sexual/gender identifications indicates how far Western culture has embraced the theoretical implications of Queer theory (even while it is important to recognize that this by is by no means the case in many other regions of the world). See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/10637968/Facebook-sex-changes-which-one-of-50-genders-are-you.html> (accessed 14/02/14).

[4] 'Mourning and Melancholia': the distinction between these two terms, *à propos* Freud, is well-rehearsed and widely commented upon. Broadly speaking, mourning is seen

to represent a 'healthy' processing of loss which, while it may take a very long time, finally resolves in the mourner being able to 'let go' of the loved-object which is seen to be separate from him or herself, while melancholia is understood as an introjection of the lost loved-object in order to keep him or her permanently alive. In his essay, Freud links the tendency to melancholia to narcissistic personalities who depend upon their lovers to verify their own sense of identity and hence cannot bear to do without them when they disappear or die. See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1991 [1915]) and Pearce (2007: 83-109).

[5] The specifically visual dimension of romantic love has been explored by Troy Jollimore in the widely-acclaimed philosophical study *Love's Vision* (2011). While the love-schemas I refer to here may owe a great deal to specifically visual prompts, they are (following Barthes, note 8) probably best understood as a composite of visual, affective, and cognitive 'semes'.

[6] Other philosophers who have explored the concept of 'love at first sight' include Simon May (2012) and most recently Christian Maurer (2014).

[7] *Gestalt* translates from the German as the "essence or shape of an entity's complete form". Philosophical interest in the concept can be traced back to David Hulme, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Immanuel Kant and David Hartley among others, but it was only in the early twentieth century that Max Wertheimer recognized its significance for our understanding of human perception. The key principle that underpins the theory as it was developed by the so-called Gestalt school is that the eye sees objects in their entirety before identifying their individual parts, hence Kurt Koffka's maxim "the whole is other than the sum of its parts" (see D. Brett King and Michael Wertheimer's *Max Wertheimer and Gestalt Theory* 2007).

[8] 'Sememes': a term which derives from semiology (or 'the science of signs') and refers to the individual components of a larger semantic whole or 'sign-system'. Roland Barthes made radical use of semiology in *S/Z*, his legendary analysis of Balzac's short story "Sarrasine" (Barthes 1991[1970]). Of particular interest to my discussion here is his proposition that textual characters are no more than 'a collection of sememes' rather than representations of subjects who are in any way integrated wholes. My suggestion here is that a lover's Image-repertoire is constructed of a diverse 'collection of sememes' in a similar way.

[9] 'Ideal object': Psychoanalytic theory has, of course, furnished us with several compelling accounts of how such 'others' form a crucial point of reference in our adult sexual relationships (e.g., Freud's 'ego-ideal' and Lacan's 'objet petit à': see Coleman 2009 240, Wright 175), their limitations (also well-recorded) being that they function in a specifically familial and heterosexual economy and the fact (discussed further below) that they fail to account for the idiosyncrasy of our attractions. In this regard, Barthes's characterization of the human (textual) subject as a collection of 'sememes' (see note 8 above) is a helpful counter to the notion of an abstract and holistic 'ideal object': as Barthes's himself acknowledged in the entry on *Ravissement* (188-94) we can fall in love with a gesture as well as a person.

[10] Christian Maurer (University of Fribourg) cited in note 6 is now working on the significance of profundity in love relationships.

[11] With thanks to my colleague at Lancaster University, Professor Hilary Hinds, who helped me crystallize the implications of this point.

[12] Roland Barthes on 'the scene': "The first thing we love is a scene. For love at first sight requires the very sign of its suddenness (what makes me irresponsible, subject to fatality, swept away, ravished): and of all the arrangements of objects, it is the scene which seems to be seen best for the first time . . . what is immediate stands for what is fulfilled: I am initiated: the scene consecrates the object I am going to love. . . (192)".

[13] 'Reification': to 'reify' , in psychology refers to the mechanism by which an abstract concept is rendered concrete (Coleman 648), but in studies of perception has been extended to refer to the ways in which we project additional meaning onto an outline that does not, in itself, contain that information (see 'apperception', note 14 following). See also Kurt Koffka, *Perception: an Introduction to Gestalt Theory* (2014 [1922]).

[14] 'Apperception': "the process by which new experience is assimilated to and transformed by the residuum of past experience of an individual to form a new whole" (Coleman 50).

## Works Cited

- Brokeback Mountain*. Dir. Ang Lee. Universal Pictures, 2005. Film.
- Arnheim, Rudolf von. *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004 [1954]. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1991 [1970]. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Lover's Discourse*. Trans. Richard Howard. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1978]. Print.
- Brett King, D. and Michael Wertheimer. *Max Wertheimer and Gestalt Theory*. Rutgers: Transaction Publishers, 2007. Print.
- Coleman, Andrew M. *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia [1915]." *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. James Strachey. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984. 245-268. Print.
- Gibson, James J. *The Perception of the Visual World*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950. Print.
- Gombrich, E.H. *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Second Impression. London: Phaidon, 1980 [1960]. Print.
- Jollimore, Troy. *Love's Vision*. Princeton: Harvard University, 2011. Print.
- Koffka, Kurt. *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (The International Library of Psychology). London and New York: Routledge. 2014. Print.
- Köhler, W. *Dynamics in Psychology: Vital Applications of Gestalt Psychology*. New York: Grove Press, 1960 [1940]. Print.
- May, Simon. *Love: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. Print.
- Maurer, Christian. "On Love at First Sight". *Love and its Objects: What Can We Care For?* Eds. Christian Maurer and Tony Milligan. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 160-176. Print.
- Nygren, Anders. *Eros and Agape*. London: SPCK, 1983 [1936]. Print.
- Pearce, Lynne. *Romance Writing*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Romance and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love". *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2.1 (2011). Web.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Romance, Trauma and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love". *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*. Eds. Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 71-89. Print.
- Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Third Edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2011 [1957]. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report". *British Society in the Mid-Century*. Ed. Cecil A. Mace. London and New York: Routledge, 2010 [1957]. Print.

- Proulx, Annie. *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and Other Stories*. London: Harper Perennial, 2006 [1999]. Print.
- Schneider, Norbert. "Form of Thought and Presentational Gesture in Karl Popper and E.H. Gombrich." *Human Affairs* 19.3 (2009): 251-258. Print.
- Soble, Alan. *The Structure of Love*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990. Print.
- Wright, Elizabeth, ed. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Print.