

“Love doesn’t end...”

A Bultmannian study of love in *The End of the Affair*

Matthew Burgess

REL 854

Prof. M. Villano

3/4/08

At the time of its initial release in 1999, promotional materials for Neil Jordan's adaptation of *The End of the Affair* bore the provocative slogan, "The end was just the beginning." Ostensibly, of course, the phrase refers to the film's unconventional narrative structure; like the celebrated Graham Greene novel upon which it is based, its opening scenes indicate that the passionate carnal liaison mentioned in its title has already come to a close. Thus a number of extended flashbacks are employed so that the viewer may enter the convoluted world of narcissistic novelist Maurice Bendix (Ralph Fiennes), lovesick beauty Sarah Miles (Julianne Moore), and cuckolded civil servant Henry Miles (Stephen Rea) *in medias res*. A more sensitive examination of the film's content, however, reveals that these words possess a largely unexpected yet poignantly potent multivalence. The critical narrative sequence—which, with exceptionally diligent adherence to Syd Field's traditional three-act paradigm,¹ occurs very near the precise durational midpoint—links Sarah's abrupt decision to end her lengthy assignation with Maurice to the immediate aftermath of a devastating German rocket attack upon his home. Although Maurice is initially ignorant of the circumstances surrounding this decision and is therefore predictably bitter towards Sarah, his eventual emotional and spiritual transformation at the hands of her deep and abiding love stands as a testimony to the latter quality's remarkable richness and purity. This transformation is neither irresistibly positive nor wholly conventional, but it is clear that the personal revelations following the affair, and subsequently the end of Sarah's life, mark new beginnings. Interestingly, the full scope of the film's contemplation of the nature and power of love may be fruitfully explored in light of the writings and teachings of legendary New Testament scholar and theologian Rudolf Bultmann, with their emphasis upon divine love as the simultaneous instigator of and compulsory petition for its human counterpart.

¹ A helpful diagram of Field's three-act paradigm may be viewed online at <http://www.cod.edu/people/faculty/pruter/film/threeact.htm>.

For Bultmann, the incarnation of Christ represents a radical imposition of divine love which, if accepted by its recipients, initiates the manifestation of human love. He notes, “The occurrence that takes place in Christ, then, is the love of God, which frees us from ourselves for ourselves by freeing us for a life of submission in faith and love.”² Moreover, the receipt of such divine love is absolutely essential for the human manufacture of a reciprocal sentiment; “Christian faith is faith in Christ because it is faith in the revealed love of God. Only those *who are already loved* are able to love...”³ The paradigm of perfect, agentive love and its emancipating effects is well represented in the evolutions of Maurice and Henry through their respective relationships with Sarah. Just before his initial tryst with Sarah, Maurice purposefully places his hand over hers and brazenly informs her, “I’m in love, you know.” Gazing back at him, she replies simply, “Me too.” Maurice’s preemptive avowal, given before his partner is able to inform him that he is already loved, hints at his incomplete and inaccurate understanding of love at this point. Subsequent scenes make this quite clear. Maurice’s feelings for Sarah are unabashedly fervent and seemingly genuine, but they are frequently marred by crippling bouts of selfishness, pettiness, and destructive behavior. He either ignores or remains unconvinced by her repeated earnest assurances of abiding affection, or by her heartfelt and virtually nuptial oath that she will never again make love with another man—an oath which even encompasses her legally recognized husband. The startling range of his jealousy, which extends beyond perceived competitors such as her husband and other potential lovers to the very shoes upon her feet (“because they take you away from me”), becomes a darkly recurring theme. Later, reflecting upon his behavior with a faint air of embarrassment and regret, he memorably states that he measured his love by

² Rudolf Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology & Other Basic Writings* (trans. Schubert M. Ogden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 31.

³ *Ibid.* The italics are mine.

his jealousy, and as the latter sentiment was infinite, he assumed the former to be infinite as well. Unexpectedly reunited with Sarah after a span of two years, he treats her with resentment and contempt in an attempt to egocentrically assuage his own inner pain over her earlier departure. The contrast between Maurice's concern for himself and Sarah's concern for him is another critical link with Bultmann, who saw Jesus' emphasis upon love as a demonstration of obedience to a greater power, rather than an act designed for personal gain, as an innovation. Unlike the Stoics, who linked the love of one's enemies with self-mastery, "The basis of Jesus' demand for love is entirely different—not the conception of strength of character and character and personal worth, but the concept of obedience, of renunciation of one's own claim."⁴ All of the negative activity of Maurice is complemented by the equally negative inactivity of Henry, Sarah's absentmindedly boorish husband. Primarily devoted to his career as a bureaucratic minion, he utterly ignores his wife's deeper physical and emotional needs—so much so, in fact, that years pass before he suspects that his actions may have caused her to seek solace elsewhere. Neither Maurice nor Henry has fully comprehended or appreciated the higher love inherently present in Sarah's being, and thus they both remain unable to love properly.

Much of the film's third act, as partitioned according to Field's paradigm, is devoted to the final epiphanies of the men in Sarah's life. Suspecting that she may have a new paramour, Maurice's enduring jealousy leads him to engage a team of private investigators assigned to procure evidence of her new affair. The supposed "evidence," however, ultimately exonerates Sarah and forces Maurice to reevaluate his understanding of their relationship. "Poor Sarah," he finally laments. "She was guilty of nothing but love." In

⁴ Idem, *Jesus and the Word* (trans. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 112.

particular, he reads her diary's account of the fateful afternoon of the rocket attack upon his flat, in which she reveals that she found him amidst the wreckage of the staircase, bleeding and unresponsive. Believing him to be dead, she immediately knelt and promised God that she would never see him again if he proved to be alive—and, at the conclusion of this spontaneous prayer, heard him calling her name outside the bedroom. She immediately recognizes the terrible personal import of the fulfillment of her prayer; “but if he was alive, now I was dead...” Nevertheless, driven by the absolute submission to the higher power reflected in Bultmann's understanding of Jesus' teachings on love, she sacrifices her own happiness in an attempt to fulfill her promise. As she leaves him for what she fears will be the last time, her wan shape eerily lit by the spectral smoke of the smoldering rubble, she imploringly asserts that it is possible to love without physical proximity or coexistence; “love doesn't end just because we don't see each other... people go on loving God, don't they, all their lives, without seeing him?”

Initially Maurice, still firmly in the grip of his profoundly self-serving understanding of the subject, scoffs at such a suggestion. But after reading the diary and speaking with Sarah herself—both of which confirm her continued feelings for him despite their separation—he realizes it to be true. Now that he has finally accepted the gift of Sarah's greater love, he can begin to love unselfishly as well. This change is particularly apparent in his reconciliation with Henry, who, having undergone a kind of epiphany of his own, asks him to assist with Sarah's care as she expires from a prolonged battle with pneumonia. Earlier, Maurice castigated Henry and hated him for his sole possession of a portion of Sarah's life, however small or insignificant; now the two men serve as a comfort to one another in a difficult time. Both have been radically changed: Henry, who once scrupulously

avoided physical intimacy, sits at his wife's bedside with her hand gently clasped in his, while Maurice performs a previously unthinkable act of tenderness and brings milk and cookies to the bedside of his exhausted former rival. A final particularly explicit example of Sarah's power appears in the film's final moments, when a boy bearing a birthmark upon his face is healed after receiving a kiss from her. The excessively cynical Maurice closes his story with a roughly hewn prayer, in which he asks God to look after both Sarah and Henry. While this dramatic reversal may not be as profound as that found in other films—Maurice accepts the *existence* of God, but apparently does not come to *love* God—his acceptance of the pure love represented by Sarah has clearly wrought significant (and hopefully lasting) changes.

The role of love in the narrative structure of *The End of the Affair* may not be among the film's most overtly religious elements, but an examination of its impact with regards to the work of Bultmann reveals striking affinities. Much like Bultmann's vision of the enabling love of God manifested in Christ, and Christ's mandate of love as submission to a greater power rather than an attempt for personal betterment or gain, the love of Sarah allows those upon whom it is bestowed to love, and love well.

