

Chapter 2. Three Passions

Before we continue this biography the reader should be given some reference points set down by Grothendieck himself. He often wrote that his life was determined by three major passions, namely mathematics, *la quête de la femme*, or, as he also puts it, the search for a partner, and meditation. Strictly speaking this is only true for the third phase of his life (1970-1991), the phase that is examined in this book. Before then, he had not yet discovered meditation, and after his withdrawal into self-imposed solitude neither the first nor the second of these passions played any significant role in his life.

The description of these three passions - perhaps one could also say "driving forces" - sets the author a difficult and unusual task, the more so because Grothendieck sees all three as manifestations of the same creative impulse. Concerning mathematics and sexuality, "*la pulsion du sexe*" ["sexual drive"] he even writes expressly:

I did not experience the presence of these two passions within me as a conflict, not in the beginning and not later on. I must have dimly sensed the profound identity of the two, which became clear to me only much later, when the third entered my life.

Undoubtedly most readers will consider the postulated close relationship between sexuality and mathematics as surprising, even incomprehensible and bizarre. In fact, Grothendieck wrote at least ten times in *Récoltes et Semailles*: "*Faire les maths est comme faire l'amour*". In order to shed some light on this we shall straight away state another fundamental principle of Grothendieck's view of humanity. He divides human creativity and knowledge into three levels, the physical-sexual, the intellectual-artistic and the spiritual. He emphasizes that the two first levels are intrinsically related and that human destiny is to find true spirituality. In this sense *la quête de la femme*, mathematics and meditation are expressions of human creativity and creative activity on these three levels.

This is a foretaste of what Grothendieck explains at great length in his meditation *Récoltes et Semailles*, in particular in the section titled "*Mes Passions*", and in *La Clef des Songes* (his book of dreams - literally "The Key of Dreams"). These excerpts belong to the most suggestive and significant of his philosophical reflections, and their substance can only be understood with an exact knowledge of the multifaceted background information. A deeper examination of these texts at the beginning of the

biography is therefore impossible, even if we do quote a little from them at present. The main objective at this point is to illustrate Grothendieck's own view of his life.

With regard to sexuality ("*la pulsion du sexe*") everyone who knew Grothendieck agrees that he had many relationships with women and that he did not show much consideration, for instance for his own wife, or discretion, for instance with regard to the partners of his acquaintances. There is likewise unanimous agreement that his sexuality and his erotic relationships revealed something profoundly troubled: something was "not right". Many creative personalities, in particular artists, have an intense sexual life; examples are so numerous and well-known that there is no need to name any. Mathematicians or natural scientists tend rather to lead conventional, bourgeois lives, so that a person like Grothendieck breaks the mold, and his way of living is frequently met with silent or openly expressed disapproval.

Although in his meditations Grothendieck writes that *la quête de la femme* is one of the great driving forces of his life, he does not say much more about it: he names no names, does not describe any experiences, writes neither of love nor of disappointment, nor of meetings, nor of separations. Even in his letters he writes almost nothing on the subject, at most a sentence like: "then came a strange time of flaming love". One has the impression that he saw this aspect of his life as his private sphere, and in this regard he was as tight-lipped as he was communicative in general. This biography will respect this.

To conclude our introduction we will quote from the section "*Mes Passions*" from *Récoltes et Semailles*, where a hint of something "not right" and even disquieting shows through.

Three great passions have dominated my life as an adult, alongside other forces of a different nature. In the end I recognized in these passions three expressions of the same deep drives; three paths which that drive for knowledge followed within me, among the infinity of paths that our infinite world has to offer.

The first to manifest itself in my life was my passion for mathematics, at the age of seventeen, when leaving the lyceum [...] I "knew" mathematics long before I first knew a woman (apart from the one that I knew from my birth), and today in the age of maturity I can ascertain that it [this passion for mathematics] has never been consumed. [...]

The second passion in my life was the search for woman. This passion

often presented itself to me under the guise of a search for a companion. I could not distinguish the one from the other until around the time when it ceased, when I knew that that which I sought could not be found anywhere, or also: that I carried it within myself. My passion for woman could not really take wings until the death of my mother (five years after my first amorous relationship, from which a son was born). Only then, at the age of twenty-nine, did I found a family, from which sprang three other children. My attachment to my children was at the origin an indissoluble part of my attachment to the mother, a part of this power emanating from woman that attracted me in her.

When Grothendieck wrote these lines, his thought was already determined by religious, mystical and esoteric concepts. When he uses the word passion, the echo of the religious significance of this word as a "tale of suffering" resonates unmistakably. He may well have been thinking of the "Passion of Christ". Indeed, Grothendieck's own life is a tale of suffering. None of the three passions gave him happiness. He emphasizes in his meditations and letters that his passion for mathematics never subsided, but he also described it as a "journey through the desert", and said that after the "great turning point" he only engaged in mathematics "when his life was going through a low point". He had undertaken mathematics out of a thirst for knowledge and also out of a great sense of responsibility, but almost never says that the study of mathematics brought him joy.

It is much the same with *la quête de la femme* or *la pulsion du sexe*. His relationships with the three mothers of his children ended in emotional disaster. As for more superficial relationships, apparently he frequently terminated them from one day to the next. On the other hand, he was also involved in more stable relationships, probably because these had evolved from erotic relationships into "friendships". There was for instance a (married) Vietnamese woman T. in his life. He had already met her in Paris, and several visitors to his house met her there. As late as 1985 Grothendieck said that she was regularly telephoning and corresponding with him. (There were several East-Asian women amongst Grothendieck's acquaintances, who were extremely discreet and retiring, so that visitors were usually not sure whom they had actually encountered at Grothendieck's home.)

The conclusion that nevertheless this passion did not bring Grothendieck happiness cannot be avoided. The simple sentence, "I was happy with her", would never have crossed Grothendieck's lips. Ultimately his meditations, which comprise thousands of pages, communicate the impression of a self-tormenting introspection rather than the contemplations of a man who is in harmony with himself.