

essays in love

Alain de Botton

August 18-21, 2004

The title comes with a disclaimer, - a novel, otherwise one would have been forgiven had one believed it to be autobiographical. Still the disclaimer does not erase the suspicion that it still is, at least in its essentials. Names and chronology and some anecdotes may have been changed and jumbled, but clearly the essence has been personally experienced, because few writers have that kind of transcendent imagination (or even ambition) to pull off an entirely fictional enterprise.

The point of a philosopher is to be both part of the world, participating in it, as well as being above it, reflecting on it. Thus there is, for a writer, the delicious prospect of a text which is its own meta text. Such prospects may be prove fatally seductive to the writer, but less so for the potential reader. The tradition is long, one thinks of 'Tristram Shandy' in the 18th century and Gides 'the counterfeiters' in the early 20th, but it runs the risk of irrevocable degeneration.

Alain de Botton is a philosopher in the down-to-earth everyday garden variety. His concern for philosophy, beyond a sympathetic temperament for reflection, is how to make us happier and more fulfilled human beings. (Maybe the study of philosophy is enough?) He presents to us the course of a standard love-affair of the late 20th century. Its course is tracked under suitable chapter captions, each chapter divided into numbered subsections to emphasize the cold clinical view. Various quirks of a relation are highlighted and lightly illustrated in the ongoing narrative. The author is both a participant and commentator on his own participation; but not in real time, it appears, only in retrospect.

One of the classical dilemmas of the love affair is the gap between desire and consummation, the impossible longing. For the lover those may be seen as problems, but on the other hand, without them there would be very little in a love-affair. In former days sexual involvement was considered almost as a taboo, thus its allure was heightened; nowadays it is considered more as an initiation and almost a duty becoming not an impossible goal but a source of worry and an admonishment to perform, once openness deprives it of its essential private character and lies it open to competition.

So the mystery of mutual attraction, neither willed nor always welcomed, yet in the end irresistible. You know when it has happened, and pathetic indeed is the individual that reads what is not written. You think of destiny and the touching of souls, and transcending the mere desire of the body. But when the body has tired, the soul quickly follows suit; and what before had been seen as understanding and a mixing of identities, very quickly becomes trite and pointless.

Sometimes the end is synchronized, but often it is not. The love lives on, (sometimes far longer than the duration of the affair itself) but only as a phantom and a mirage in a deluded brain, which slowly has to come to an understanding of the inexplicable.

The protagonist of the book may have committed suicide, but the author has not. Maybe the book was the vicarious suicide enabling him to continue. And this is what

suicide is all about, however misinformed the intention turns out to be when clinically succesful.

As usual with de Botton the book is written with a light touch with drops of self-irony liberally sprinkled. The reader identifies himself not with a he-man, but with a man slight of build, with a balding head, and naturally immaculate tastes (with a few charmig exceptions) and a verbal acumen to match, giving him his due to exist.

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