

Lettre à mon Juge

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This is if anything a 'roman de noir', excellent material for a movie (and it has indeed been turned into one ¹) It is about the provincial doctor Charles Alavoine, who has done everything to please and conform to conventional expectations. He lives with his widowed mother with whom he formed a strong bond as his much older father, a brutal womanizer, having died when he was a mere child. His mother on the other hand is modest-and self-effacing, but ultimately possessive. He first married a shy young girl, the daughter of a retiring colleague, with whom he has two daughters, and she dies conveniently after her second childbirth. He moves away from a small village to a small town, where he becomes established with a flourishing practice and a big house. Into this house moves a young widow who first takes care of his sick child then takes over the house and the household including the protagonist himself who becomes her husband in this perfect set-up. It is not a marriage out of love, few are, but one of convenience. He submits to it, after all he is a bit lazy, but he feels more and more estranged by his life, is it really his, not just that of his wife and smart society. He feels an emptiness in his life, after all it is just a show, not his really (just as a very polite obituary voicing the familiar niceties, is really an affront to a once living individual), and he talks metaphorically of his having now shadow.

And then during a professional visit to Nantes he just misses the train back to his city, as does a young woman, who plans to go there to take up a secretary position offered to her by the owner, a certain Boquet, of the local department store. They end up on her initiative to store their belongings at the 'consigne' and then hit town together. He is at first a bit appalled by her, he finds her vulgar and with the effervescent charms of a slut. They go to bars and restaurants and start drinking and eventually in the wee hours of the night find themselves sharing a sleazy hotel room. He promises that they will sleep in separate beds, but nevertheless the set-up engenders in him a feeling of intimacy with a woman he has never felt before, and he takes her with a directness bordering to the brutal and feels that he has never before been so carnally connected with a woman. How different from his sexual congress with his wife, which is intermittent and devoid of any carnal desire whatsoever. So he brings her home to his house, or rather the house of his wife, as he cannot bear to have her separated from himself. In fact he dissuades her to have anything to do with Boquet, who is a drunkard and a pick-up predator, and of whom he is jealous because she met him before she met him, himself, and he is ravaged with the kind of intimacies which may have predated his own. The *menage a trois* cannot last, they are caught *en flagrante*, and the doctor decides to move out of the house immediately, and set up a practice in one of the suburbs of Paris, something in which he is aided by his ever

¹ The movie takes great liberties with the novel, in fact distorts it critically by having a happy ending, in which the young woman leaves and in the process reveals what a slut she really is, and the husband returns to his devoted wife.

practical wife.

He find in himself a desire to know everything of his mistress, to possess her totally, ravaged by jealousy. He remembers her initial slutty demeanor, and that he hates, but believes that he has witnessed the recovery of her once beautiful and innocent personality, and it is this he loves and wants to protect. His jealousy lead him intermittently into rages in which he to his shame hits her, and she asking for forgiveness. Is it true that real carnal desire is inextricably bound up with brutality and physical abuse, as there are primordial emotions which allow no other form of expression? If so true love is not necessarily a good and beautiful thing, but in many ways horrible and bestial. He never hit his wives, because he did not love them, and hence they were unable to provoke that furor in him, that some say is the sign of true physical attraction, which of course goes way beyond mere beauty.

The book is written as a confession in the form of a letter, and you know from the start that the writer has committed a horrible crime, most likely murder, but whom did he murder? You may suspect Boquet in a passion of misdirected jealousy, but soon you realize that the secret is much darker and much more painful. In fact the reading of the novel becomes painful, just as the happy life of the two lovers in suburban Paris, is intermingled with fear and suffering. Happiness and suffering do not contradict each other, the protagonist says, and this is something that his proper wife would never have understood. This proper wife who always talked about her house, her daughters, her practice, her friends and how she had given him ten years of her life (but had he not also given her ten years of his life, is there not symmetry to be seen here?).

In the end he strangles his mistress after having had with her the happiest day ever in his life². A senseless murder, as if he had been haunted by phantoms and the fixed idea of having to kill her. Kill her because he loves her so much. What he wanted to kill was the slutty woman, to erase all traces of her, and by the collateral killing of the original version, with whom he felt in love, he preserved her for all eternity. Or so he may have reasoned. But whether rational or not, the letter writer preserves in his conviction that as he is after all a human, all his acts and desires are human, and it is as a human to a human he tries (obviously in vain) to reach another human, and failing so shows the vanity of truly being able to connect with another human through a common humanity.

Now every narrative which is presented in the first person by its very nature invites an identification and hence sympathy. But how far can this go, when the person with whom you are invited to sympathize, is horrible, or at least a perpetrator of horrible acts? Can you always separate the person and his acts?

The novel was written during Simenon's exile in the States, and apparently owes a great deal to his own private life at the time, drifting away from his asexual wife Tigy to his hotter secretary the French Canadian Denyse Quimet, a stormy affair which ended not in divorce but marriage. As testified by her, he used to beat her, even during the writing of the novel, and he later confessed that he wrote it to get rid of the phantoms that plagued the protagonist and ended in the tragedy. It worked of course, and gives a

² They go to the Zoo in Vincennes and are struck by two chimpanzees who cuddle with each other, just like they do, thus showing that their love is indeed 'bestly' and as we will see, hence genuine.

prime example of the prevalent cliché that authors write their autobiographies in order to transcend them.

The book has a lot in common with 'Trois Chambres à Manhattan'³ depicting love beyond reason, thus as an objective fact, willed by neither, and thus in a sense more genuine than something rationally premeditated, which turns out to be more of a social thing than a sexual. Whether to see this as 'true love' or just an aberration is a delicate matter. As noted above, if this is what 'true love' ultimately means, one should be wary of it indeed. But of course such 'amour fou' engages the imagination much more, and holds out the elusive promise, that there is a life beyond social conventions.

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³ Reviewed in the previous volume Book Reviews 15a