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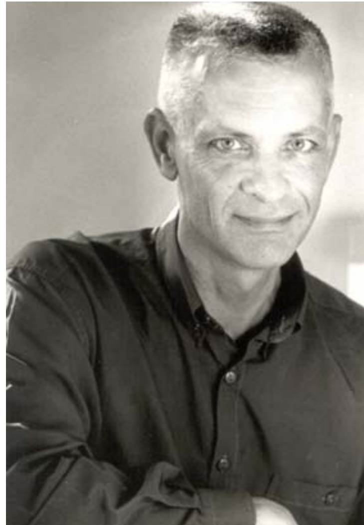
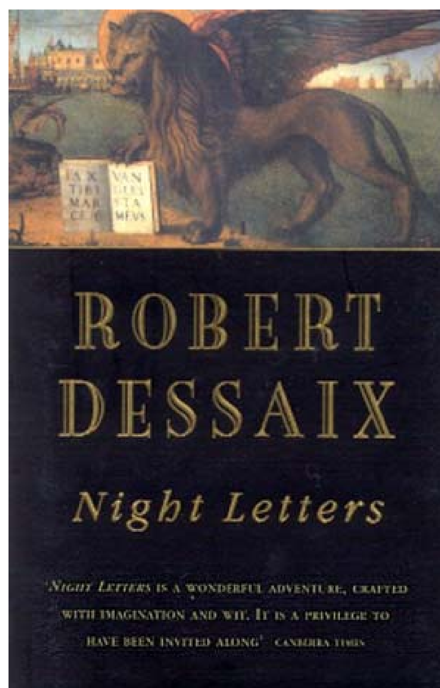
NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Robert Dessaix

NIGHT LETTERS

A journey through Switzerland and Italy edited and annotated by Igor Miazmov



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Should I explain? Perhaps I should, because of all the things I want to tell you, why I'm now astride a leopard is, to me at least, the most important.' (p. 1)

Dessaix makes of a witty reverie on life, mortality, death and desire an immensely rich and wisely entertaining narrative. It is at the most desperate or absurd junctures of our lives that we are forced to confront the question 'how should one live?' And it is possible, he says, to find in this search for an answer, the sheer, ebullient joy of living. To paraphrase this novel, though, is to deny its rich complexity. The letter writer admits that he is, '*… arming myself against the coming of the night, as is writing these letters.'* (p. 30) He affirms that instead of fleeing from, or submitting to the beast, he wants to ride it, gleefully. How he travels is at least as important as his purpose in making the journey.

The narrator is driven to write from a position which might create a sense of complete despair. He has received an 'annunciation' from his Chinese doctor (dubbed the 'Archangel Gabriel'), that he has 'it' and is going to die, sooner, rather than later. He tells his lover, Peter, fearing that *'I was about to make him sad forever.'* (p. 10) What follows is a fascinating foray into the innermost self - a journey framed in a sort of travelogue in which 'R' travels to Italy and Switzerland, and writes letters home to a 'friend', of what and who he finds there. Journeying is the structure of the book, in which the narrator writes about his travels from a hotel room in Venice. These are neatly divided into three sections related to experiences he's had in Locarno, Vicenza and Padua. These sections (we discover as we read on) mirror Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso (or Hell, Purgatory and Paradise), though in the 'wrong' order. For Locarno is Purgatory, Vicenza is Hell and Padua is in the author's words 'a rather unsatisfactory glimpse of Paradise.' Over twenty nights 'R' writes to his 'reader' in Australia, and muses on mortality, seduction and the pursuit of eternal bliss. As he circumnavigates these centres he meets and hears stories from a range of characters which depict the tragi-comedy of life. In the process of the telling, and of his journeys, he questions the *'seize the day'* mentality (p. 197) and the idea of *'ticking things off'* (p. 210) simply to make life seem worth living. Instead he concludes that the joy of living is the pure enjoyment of the moment. *'Urgency , in fact, was the first thing to drop away.'* (p. 124) To ride on the back of the leopard, not in order to either flee from a potential captor, nor to defeat an adversary, but purely to feel the wind blowing in one's hair, is to experience the exhilaration of the here and now. *'It's the subtlety of your vision which casts a spell on time, not the number of things you see.'* (p. 197)

Each day described encompasses incidents and encounters with people who tell other stories. Characters in each of these stories provide subjects for moral consideration, eg: St Anthony (p. 229), Marco Polo (p. 246), Casanova (pp. 244 & 250). The actual time-frame is suspect, too, for when writing about Padua he will (for example) recall another incident which took place elsewhere. Such playing with time gradually cements the idea being intellectually explored that time is relative. The seeming urgency of impending death is denied by the 'here and nowness' of existence. The trick *'is neither to hope nor to despair, but to be alive to good now.'* (p. 267) The narrator marvels at people who insist on believing in the forward progression of life: *'What struck me was that they all thought they were going somewhere…'* (p. 10) What he discovers instead is that time *'has to do with an awkward concept: good.'* (p. 124) He must make the most of now, rather than to look towards the completion of a series of tasks or experiences.

Each step of the journey gives him pause to dwell on life's meaning. Locarno, for example, and the view of the lake below, is taunting in that *'beauty on this scale can cause a kind of angst or ache ... reminds you that your everyday expectations of life have been too narrow, too colourless.'* (p. 34) What we desire may be too much bounded by what we know of life, rather than of what we suspect life is capable of yielding to us. The novel also dwells on questions of moral responsibility. With the word *'undertow'* (p. 27) he describes how easily a human being might be enticed into crime or retribution; how we can 'drift' through life and into unplanned acts. When the narrator goes to meet Patricia Highsmith, he is reminded that her novels are about *'the struggle, the argument with oneself.'* (p. 27) She *'is interested in guilt, not death'* (p. 29) and how people allow themselves to do dreadful things.

He also examines his own pretensions, by reflecting on words like solitude, *'I've been growing suspicious of the word "solitude". It's such an elegant word, so Latinate, it sounds somehow so elevated, but it seems to me to require a certain amount of economic independence and social status to work.'* (p. 31) In his conversations with others he is forced to observe that the concepts we hold dear are often due to having privilege or access to a certain lifestyle, rather than to their real importance. For example, the Professor ponders on *'the notion of happiness'* which *'your society and mine are, of course, still devoted to. The younger generation, … even feels affronted when happiness eludes it - it thinks it has a right to it, for some curious reason, it thinks happiness can be legislated for.'* (p. 62) He points out that nothing in life is achieved by expectations. One must learn to appreciate the living of 'the now' with satisfaction.

Sexuality is another focus in the book. Dessaix questions the very concept of 'norms' by examining a variety of sexual preferences - the adulterous affairs of some of his 'fairy tale' characters, homosexuality, transexuality and cross dressing, and such 'unusual' sexuality as Professor Eschenbaum's taste for bondage. The scene on the Vicenza platform is one of surreal pageantry; of *'A fleshy whore (who) was lolling almost naked … casting sluttish glances rather fruitlessly at a group of men in leather-jackets.'* (p. 186) There are *'young men with shaven bullet-heads, … murmuring sugary things, fig-sweet things, figs and bananas through candied lips.'* (p. 184) The novel thus ponders on both the differences and the similarities between this scene, and so-called *'civilised behaviours'* (p. 187), querying whether sexual instinct is not a more complex emotion than the desire for copulation would suggest. Sensuality may be the mere *'fetishization'* (p. 187) of a more fundamental emotion which we all share, to be loved.

Writing is as much subject as device in this book, which is full of a bewildering array of narrative styles and pastiches. The title echoes that of Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, a book which is referred to in the narrative. Europe's rich literary history is there for the Antipodean traveller who acts as a sponge, imbibing these narratives and extruding goodness or wisdom from them. The pertinence of his being a 'stranger' in this landscape is his capacity to act as a sort of screen on which these images are projected. Or, as he suggests of Rachel Berg, *'you are a kind of blank to other people, … and so of little interest until they have written on you … So Rachel began to write on me.'* (p 46) The narrator is as much audience as he is teller of these tales.

There is an immense playfulness in the narration which moves with lightning speed deploying this range of styles to cover many intellectual topics. The writer is at pains to question even his own authority and uses a range of techniques to sew the seeds of doubt, and a spirit of enquiry in his reader's mind. The book, for instance, is ostensibly edited by the pedantic Igor Miazmov, a scholar who frequently expresses his opinion that the writer's scholarship is dubious. As David Marr has pointed out in reviewing the book, Miazmov comes from the Russian, miazma, the breath of death. This is one of many erudite jokes lying beneath the surface of the narrative, as sub-text undermining and enhancing ideas. Stories are woven together sensuously in a tapestry of tales which both echo traditional tales, and are also totally original. The tale of the Disappearing Courtesan for instance is an allegory about women's place in society and also a magical realist tale of clever invention. It is reminiscent of the great European storytellers such as Chaucer, Dante and Boccaccio. And yet it has an ironic immediacy in its style which carries with it a twentieth-century sensibility. Similarly Rachel Berg's tale of the Golden Amulet has a fabulous quality to it and yet empathetically documents several human tragedies in its telling. Perhaps the

amulet is simply a reminder that despite the immediate importance of human sufferings, there is an absurdity to the intervention of chance in our lives which should encourage us not to take ourselves too seriously.

There is a marvellous and hilarious theatricality to the telling, too, which relates not only to fables, but also to the narrator's own travel tales. His bizarre experiences on the Vicenza platform read like a scene or 'danse macabre' from Dante's 'Inferno', or from a painting by Bosch. And his 'endless night' on the train, on the day he left Locarno, conveys the hysterical humour occasioned by a series of circumstances which are so impossibly awful that one can only laugh. There is a pathos to the image of him toting his broken suitcase around the deserted cities seeking lodging for the night which is quite delicious. The high camp satire of the men gathering in the hospital therapy rooms back home, listening to the music of the Village People is also indicative of a mind alert to the comic side of even the most dire circumstances.

These essays might quite properly be entitled musings on death, sexuality and despair. They might equally be entitled love letters to hope, redemption and the concept of earthly paradise. This is very much a 'fin de siecle' narrative, about concerns immediate to the 'post-modernist' of the late twentieth century. It dwells on questions of morality in a world unhinged by the decline of religiosity and the rise of secularism. It queries whether hope is possible when unteneted by beliefs in either a Godlike presence or a life hereafter. *'I'm on the way'* (p. 273) are the closing words and an affirmation of this theme. No end in sight, he is as if suspended, on the back of his *'gaudy leopard, cape billowing behind….'* (p. 1) The end and the beginning come together in 'now' time, alive and vital with the knowledge of 'good' now.

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Dessaix weaves together a range of narrative styles and genres with a virtuosity informed by a breadth of reading and acute intellectual insight. He never makes the narrative ponderous though, a fact which is yet another evidence of his skill in writing. A text littered with references to Dante, Jung, Sterne, Byron, Freud, Bosch, nevertheless is also chatty and imbued with wit informed by its immediate social context, eg: the songs, such as YMCA (pp. 193-4), played at the music therapy classes is ironic, and humorous to a reader today, where it would mean little to a reader fifty years ago. Discuss.

2. The letters are written ostensibly to a person in Melbourne - they are the 'framing' genre in which the novel is written. The structure consists of a complex mixture within these 'framing narratives', of various 'shifts' in narrator, in an elaborate tapestry of intersecting stories. Journals are another frame of reference in the work; the narrator continually refers to journal or diary writers such as Sterne and Marco Polo. What views does he express on these diarists?

3. *'Tristram Shandy… a novel posing as autobiography.'* (p. 96) The visit to Patricia Highsmith hints at the writer/narrator's intervention as a 'real' person in the novel, for Dessaix is a literary interviewer in reality. Is this an autobiographical fiction; or a fictionalisation of a life?

4. Many of the stories told are fables or allegories. What sets them aside or distinguishes them as a genre?

5. Witty asides constantly undercut the serious import of the narrative ironicising the action, and forcing the reader into a complicit empathy with the writer. Playful enjoyment of nuances of language are common eg *'I felt what used to be called disconsolate.'* (p. 227)

6. Academic footnotes ostensibly written by Igor Miazmov provide another ironic sub-text which undercuts the narrator's voice. Such an alternative view of the action prevents the voice from assuming a too-arch assurance. The range of voices in the book cast doubt upon the authority of the narrator, and therefore make the issues being considered all the more approachable. The narrator ponders but does not deliver a 'sermon from the mount'. He engages the reader in a process of enquiry.

THE AUTHOR

Robert Dessaix is known as a leading broadcaster, for many years the producer and presenter of the ABC's Books and Writing program. He left his twenty-year academic career as a lecturer in Russian language and literature at the University of New South Wales, and the Australian National University, to work in theatre and for the ABC. He is an essayist, critic and translator. Adopted as a baby, in 1994 he published *A Mother's Disgrace*, an autobiographical account of his experience of adoption, and also edited *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing: an Anthology* for OUP. Other books include *Turgenev: The Quest for Faith* (1980); ***Picador New Writing*** (1993, edited with Helen Daniel); *A Practical Handbook of Russian Aspect* (1994); ***Night Letters*** (1996) which was his first novel, and was shortlisted for a number of awards including the Miles Franklin; ***Secrets*** (1997, with Amanda Lohrey and Drusilla Modjeska); and *Speaking Their Minds* (1998); a book of short fiction, essays and journalism entitled ***(and so forth)***. He also worked on *Great Travellers* a ten-part series for ABC Radio. His most recent publication is ***Corfu: a Novel*** (2001). He lives in Hobart and has travelled widely.

He says of this novel that: 'The theme of desire in the book is not emphasised, but it's there - it's about desire to be being better than the desire to have. The two 'fables' are an expression of this theme. They illustrate two kinds of desire: In 'Purgatory'(Locarno) I wanted a story to give another dimension to my ideas about ordinary desires to possess things (not terribly sinful in Dante's terms - you only go to Purgatory). So it's a story about how simple desires to have things chain us to further desires, enslaving us in a banal way, and even killing us or part of us (the soul, perhaps).

The courtesan story partly reflects my obsession with disappearing - I love disappearance stories and myths - especially as a way of survival. Desire in this story is more dangerous (more sinful in Dante's terms, too - the punishment is Hell) because it's about the desire to possess people, which (for the purposes of this story) kills you or them. The courtesan, archetype of the possessed person, must disappear to survive - become zero for the others in the story. Paradise is more difficult to come up with a fable for because basically nothing happens in Paradise, where time no longer exists. So there is no fable, although I enjoy having a go at St. Anthony.'

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Terminal illness is the topic, but the book manages to deal with it in an uplifting way. How does the writer achieve this?

2. Hope is a quality which must be found by each individual in his or her own way. Discuss.

3. *'Going to Europe is always like visiting the grandparents … you know they really haven't the faintest idea about, let alone respect for, the things that move you and they're never going to change.'* (p. 270) Do you agree with the writer's view on the differences between Europe and Australia?

4. Padua/Locarno/Vicenza are the three 'locations'. Are there distinct themes in these three sections of the book?

5. The book is full of religious/spiritual metaphors eg he calls the doctor's announcement of his illness an annunciation. Locate others and discuss.

6. The professor is very scathing of the narrator's need to '*whore after mystical moments*' (p. 217). Do you think he's correct in his analysis of the narrator?

7. Casanova's frenetic pursuit of sexual experience is described by the Professor as an attempt to '*blur these timeless points into continuous, amorphous rapture.*' (p. 254) Is the Professor being fanciful here?

8. The treatment of illness is said to be a theatricalisation of mortality, an '*elaborate danse macabre*' (p. 196) which is simply a way of warding of death with ritual. What do you think of this theory?

9. The plight of women such as the Baroness De St Leger and Camilla is tragic. Are they victims of their time and circumstance, or are the choices they have available to them fairly typical in any age?

10. Travel versus tourism (pp. 214 and 242-3) is another intriguing theme. Is it possible to be both tourist and traveller?

11. The fable of Rachel Berg's Gold Amulet fits the tradition of the 'fantastic' story, as told in classics such as tales of the Arabian Nights, though it is far more circuitous … is Dessaix extemporising on literary traditions or parodying them?

12. What will be the narrator's approach to life when he returns home?

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Robert Dessaix
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