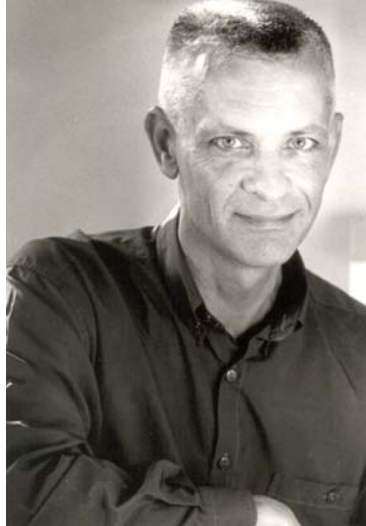


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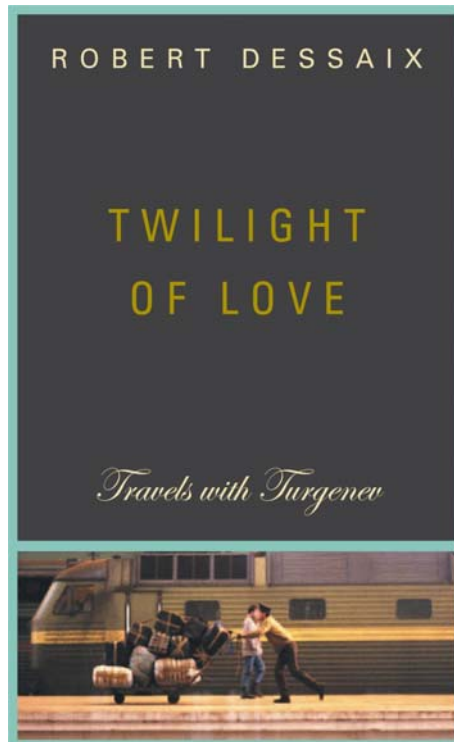
AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Robert Dessaix

TWILIGHT OF LOVE



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Hope, I would say, for a blessing, for an event which would prove that there is a pattern to life after all, that escape (a 'way out') is possible, and that our lives need not be small, as meaningless as a mollusc's.' (p 52)

What did Turgenev mean by the word 'love'? What do any of us mean by it? How has our concept of love changed since the 'golden age' of the Russian novel in which Turgenev was one of the three great figures, together with Tolstoy and Dostoevsky? This memoir reflects on the question of love by viewing it through the prism of Robert Dessaix's lifelong love affair with Turgenev the classic nineteenth century Russian writer and his work. This is at its heart, though, Dessaix's meditation on his own life and on the nature of love, as much as it's about Turgenev's. He seeks to discover how we live our lives whilst knowing that when we say *'I love you, yet we must die.'* (p 167)

Turgenev's obsession with the French opera singer Pauline Viardot is a relationship which is central to Dessaix's literary pilgrimage. *'I want to know what it felt like to love someone like that. I want to find the words.'* (p 28) Turgenev's lifelong attachment to the diva, despite her marriage to Louis who was also Turgenev's friend, seemed not to have been a sexual love although that may have come into it at times. It was an affair which intrigues Dessaix who says that *'a love such as this is only possible between two points in a triangle. Otherwise there will be thunder and lightning and what links the two lovers will eventually break asunder. The third point may be a husband or wife or it may be something else entirely.'* (p 27) He also overturns what might be a popular reaction to the affair by writing that *'A man who can love a woman steadfastly for a whole lifetime'* in this fashion *'may be a fool, but he is not weak.'* (p 101) And finally he suggests that for Turgenev she *'was a breach - a prosvet - in the wall of time.'* (p 259)

This memoir is not only about Turgenev's literary triumphs and decline into old age as he lived out this love, but also reflects the author's awareness of his own arrival at the point of middle age. As a sixty year old man he feels the poignancy of Turgenev's dilemma. For the first time he realises that the PHD which he wrote about Turgenev (and which was published as *Turgenev: the Quest for Faith*) when he was a young man, were coloured by his immaturity and that Turgenev's central theme was not the society he lived in (although he inevitably dealt with that), but was in fact, love. Even those who would

say they are 'happy' know that the moments in which we achieve a state of 'blissfulness' are few and far between and become fewer as we age. Even those in supposedly happy partnerships learn that *'being loved without reservation or respite can become humdrum, like blinking or breathing'* (p 141) and that the first flush of infatuation generally gives way to *'that element of fatigue and fettered toil which every great love... inevitably seems to entail.'* (p 160) How do we live with this knowledge?

Another theme central to Dessaix's journey is the investigation of 19th century attitudes to the concept of romantic love and the decline of that love. *'Poetry, however, like flirtation, is not something we have much time for nowadays. We seem only to have time for seduction, for reading the signposts to fulfilment.'* (p 23) He queries whether a contemporary young reader would comprehend what Turgenev meant by betrayal (p 19) or duty (p 21) and acknowledges that today's society is far less driven by moral codes. *'If we could all agree on the rules, then breaking them might not be the confusing business it is these days. It's like cheating at poker: first you have to admit you're playing poker.'* (p 21) The work also reveals the other social changes which have occurred in the interim - the habit of promenading on the boulevards for example, and the gentle art of conversation (p 9) - suggesting that such pastimes offered time for the sort of reflection which is absent in the frantic café latte drinking, sms text messaging and nightclubbing which characterises communication today. He wonders if young people are even aware of their shared human malaise, and jokes that they would probably put their barely articulated sense of disquiet down to a fear of *'terrorism'* (p 81) rather than to a recognition of what he calls *'the evaporation of the soul'* (p 81) which he says has beset humankind for over a century.

The memoir also interrogates the notion of historical truth and in particular, what we can possibly make of a literary heritage which is often recorded in museums or memorials which can offer only a tenuous connection with the person they attempt to commemorate. As Dessaix visits the places associated with Turgenev's peripatetic life in Germany, France and Russia he muses that places can be curiously devoid of the romantic significance we endeavour to attach to them as tourists. *'What are we supposed to do with the bed some Portuguese king died in centuries ago? ... We want signs of life. We know what the guide means, but in some very real sense it is not here that the king died at all. Place evaporates with time.'* (pp 4-5) Later he refers to Turgenev's home as *'an empty stage. All the scenery was in place, but the actors had long since gone home.'* (p 61) And of the Parisian propensity to memorialise everything he writes: *'What we are supposed to do with the information these plaques impart is anybody's guess.'* (p 75) Finally he says when he visits Turgenev's estate at Spasskoye that it *'was theatre, a tableau we could take part in, rather than a sacred site.'* (p 220)

This is also a literary analysis in which Dessaix compares Turgenev to his contemporaries by referring to music and to his own emotional reactions to their work. For example, he compares Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to Turgenev (pp 11-12) and suggests that the latter is more appealing to a more mature mind, whilst the former pair appeal to youthful desires for 'flashier' entertainment. *'You want vast, powerful whirlpools you can plunge into, even at the risk of drowning - not a pond.'* (p 11) This is a cleverly, often acerbic, exposé of literary rivalries as well. Turgenev was privileged and talented which attracted the jealousy particularly of Dostoevsky, but was to see his preeminence usurped in his own lifetime by the precocious talents of these two 'upstarts' (pp 35-8) who have arguably continued to upstage him ever since.

Dessaix is also interested in exploring the nature of Russia, his relationship or love affair with the country, and in reflecting on how it's changed since Turgenev's time and since the 1960s when he first visited it. When he made a chance decision to purchase a Russian dictionary at the age of 11 or 12, he says 'the whole course of my life changed ... It's true that I've remained irredeemably un-Russian - everything about me comes from somewhere else - but that may be the secret of my lifelong obsession with all things Russian.' He describes Turgenev's uncomfortable residence in France *'living out of the spotlight, uprooted, far from the land he drew his inspiration from'* (p 86) and his awareness that wherever he traveled despite his considerable intellectual skills, *'he was just highly conscious of belonging to a tribe the French, including the Viardots, regarded as barbarian.'* (p 86) This sense of inferiority made him and his fellow Russians extremely lively in their antipathy towards the French. *'A kind of servile detestation of all things Parisian was almost de rigueur amongst members of the Russian intelligentsia (not unlike the servile detestation of all things American amongst Australian intellectuals today)'* (p 87). His description of Russian architecture (pp 129-130) offers another fascinating insight into the character of this country of 'nomads', as is his description of it as a phantom land obscured by *'myth and burnished lies'* (p 189). Most of all he impresses on the reader the notion that post-USSR Russia is just as it was, although utterly changed. Dostoevsky predicted what would become of it a century earlier. The fall of first the Tsars and then of the USSR have had predictable results (pp 193-7) because *'despite a freer marketplace and more freedom of speech, the Grand Inquisitor still ruled.'* (p 200)

The search for a home is another theme. Turgenev maintained that home (despite his ability to return to his country estate Spasskoye at any time), was where love resided, and perhaps his removal from place to place suggested an underlying need for that love. Dessaix confesses that his own search for a European home did not satisfy his hunger and that it left him simply *'globalised.'* (p 40) He also reveals his ambivalent love for Australia, which he obviously chooses as his home, but whose society popularly rejects the artist or intellectual in favour of the sportsman or the civilised barbarian. *'Our most famous cultural export to Great Britain is almost certainly Barry Humphries, the civilised*

barbarian who became a superstar by aping barbarians aping the civilised.' (p 130) He reflects on his youthful opinion that Australia was a barbaric country lacking in culture and how that view has changed. (pp 43-4) And he realises that his affinity with Turgenev has resulted in a search which is satisfied when he finally reaches Turgenev's family estate at Spasskoye. *'So it was a little like coming home.'* (p 229) For a writer, part of this search is a quest for civilisation which is largely a barren pursuit because *'In the end, civilisation always turns out to be Greek.'* (p 129) The rivalries between countries such as Russia and France are about which is the most civilised and which the most barbaric. Similarly, Australians often feel that they need to visit Europe in order to experience 'culture'. Dessaix, like many Australians, discovered that his true home was in fact the land of his birth. Moreover he also suggests that *'Perhaps the best writing is always a kind of 'coming home to silence' and the breaking of it. Perhaps clear-eyed homecoming is what good writing is.'* (p 233) He and Turgenev were united in this as well - the attempt to convey this sense of homecoming in everything they write.

Another thing which Dessaix shares with his subject is freedom, or the desire for it. Turgenev resented attempts to pigeon hole him as a writer about Russia or about anything else. *'He was a free Russian, asserting his right to play whatever melodies he chose on his Russian violin.'* (p 42) Dessaix has asserted publicly that one of his most treasured possessions and one which makes him decidedly un-Russian is the freedom granted him by his parents and his country. Dessaix queries his friend Irina's loyalty to Russia despite the lack of freedom there: *'loyal. To what, exactly? ... To something, I suppose, which hardly exists in a country like Australia. Not to a leader, a regime, an ideology or a religion... As a result there's a rootedness to her existence which I can only envy.'* (p 205) But in truth he enjoys the freedom of Australian life and says that whereas Moscow *'was built to crush you. ... the gardens, squares, streetscapes and houses' in Hobart are 'built to delight and amuse, and occasionally to impress ... but never to crush.'* (p 208)

'Happiness is not something you deserve or earn ..., but something that alights upon you. What Turgenev wagered was his immense capacity for love' (p 53). Dessaix questions the American tendency *'to pursue 'Happiness' as if it were a brace of snipe'* (p 99) in a view which also challenges doctrinal teachings that goodness results in happiness, as does the reality of every day life. Dessaix describes *'the two great happiness narratives, which still fill our screens and the pages of our books: a loving twosome on the one hand, endless debauchery on the other'* (p 98) but suggests that people come to accept, as Turgenev did, all kinds of different narratives. *'It's more a matter of simply recognising that the web of loving relationships you have presently come to rest in will probably constitute the core of your happiness for the rest of your life.'* (p 98)

The title of this work is a double-edged sword. On one hand it refers to the concept of a dying notion of romantic love, for Dessaix believes that it has become almost impossible to uphold in today's society. But it also relates personally to the author's own life. With

maturity our youthful passions for places, ideas, philosophies, feelings and with each other take on a sombre resonance when we realise how quickly life passes and how difficult it is to maintain such zeal. And at its core this is the question Dessaix asks. How should we live in order to retain a passion for life whilst conscious of imminent decay and eventual death? How do ordinary lives transcend their ordinariness in order to remain hopeful? How do we retain that sense of being able to ask, *'what if' which ' is just about all you have to keep expectation alive.'* (p 250) He is concerned with the search for the 'blissful' in each moment, whilst fully aware that many moments are quite the opposite. Turgenev searched for the 'blissful' in life too (just as we all do), but he once wrote:

" 'nothing is terrifying ... Once you realise this, once you have tasted this wormwood, no honey will seem sweet to you.' Not even, love." (p 65) *Twilight of Love* interrogates Turgenev's sense of inner desolation (pp 64-8) even when he lived a happy and prosperous life, and suggests that the author too is grappling with such feelings - with the taste of wormwood in his mouth:

'All of us, except for the schoolchildren, looked vaguely tired of ourselves, as if we'd run out of ideas about how to be different from who we were.'

Still, sooner or later, we'd all have to go back to a room or a flat somewhere, close the door behind us and set about reinventing love and happiness, pleasure and plot, according to our lights. It would not be easy.' (p 102)

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. This work is written in a mixture of genres - memoir, literary biography and travel writing. What elements of each of these genres did you particularly notice or appreciate? Compare the work to another work in one of these genres. Discuss.
2. Structured in three parts - 1. Baden Baden, 2. France. 3 Russia - the action in the memoir shifts in time with Dessaix remembering incidents and then returning to the core narrative. What effect does this structuring of the story have on your reading? The work also includes an opening quote, a note entitled 'Background' and another 'Note' describing Dessaix's spelling of Russian names. A chronology at the back locates Turgenev's life within the events of his time. Dessaix's works always consist of variant intersecting texts written in a range of modes. Quotes are also used liberally to reflect the author's meaning. Choose one of these texts (eg the quote from Gogol's *Dead Souls* p 185) and discuss its relationship to this memoir.
3. On each of his journeys, Dessaix is accompanied by a companion - Ilse in Baden Baden, Daniel in France and Irina and Kolya in Russia - and the manner in which Dessaix met each of them is described carefully. (pp 14-5, 112, 204-5, 221) What impression do we glean of them from Dessaix's descriptions? What role do each of these people play in the memoir? To what extent are they artful literary devices, like the 'confidants' or companions who appear in famous literary works such as the squire Sancho Panza in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Henry James called such a character a 'ficelle' - French for the strings by which the puppeteer manages the puppets. The 'companion' allows the author to speak to the reader via the conversations with these minor characters. Discuss.
4. Dessaix's work can be said to be metafictional, in that he always invites his readers to enter into the narrative with him and to observe the writer behind the narrative, in a number of ways —
 - At one point he observes of Turgenev's house in Baden Baden. '*I was surprised he'd never mentioned looking down from his window around ten one summer's morning and seeing me hovering in the street below*' (p 33) making himself (as a ghostly visitant), a character in Turgenev's life.
 - He constantly refers to Turgenev's novels and plays as explanations for Turgenev's feelings and as a way of exploring his life, but also as symbols of some of the memoir's central concerns. eg *A Month in the Country* is discussed in relationship to Turgenev's love for Pauline Viardot (p 59) which is in itself used to explore the nature of love. *Virgin Soil* is used as an example of a belief which Dessaix obviously shares when he says that the novel's '*about what it's possible to believe in, given death, if you've had an education. And the answer is: nothing at all, unless you were born with a believing nature. That's what the novel's about.*' (p 170)
 - He quotes a wide range of other writers in order to explore his themes. How did these techniques work in creating a 'bond' between you and the writer?
5. Dessaix's sense of humour is often acerbic and relentlessly incisive. eg '*Why does feeling at one with nature entail a desire to wipe it out?*' (p 117) Or '*His letters to her... to look after.*' (p 143) Discuss some of your favourite witticisms.

6. Dessaix's work reflects a view expressed by Turgenev: " *'I pay attention to politics, ... only in so far as a writer called upon to depict contemporary life must.'* " (p 168) Just as Turgenev's works were considered ground-breaking in their considerations of the plight of serfs (p 165) despite their underlying universal themes, Dessaix also comments on today's events throughout this work, but only where they inform his central literary themes. His comments on government, on youth, on sex, on world events are a sub-text to the main narrative. Discuss.

THE AUTHOR

Robert Dessaix (1944-) is known as a leading broadcaster, and was from 1985-1995 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 Aspects* (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; *Speaking Their Minds* (1998); a book of short fiction, essays and journalism entitled *(and so forth)* (1998). 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, Tasmania and has travelled widely.

Note: Dessaix has offered a brief explanation of this work in the 'Background' note at its beginning.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. This work is as much about Dessaix as it is about Turgenev. Discuss.
2. Dessaix retraces his steps after forty years, by re-visiting Russia where he studied as a youth. What are his feelings about the country today? Discuss.
3. *'In the absence of moral codes we take refuge in laws.'* (p 22) Discuss this quote in reference to the current relationship between Australian citizens and their government.
4. *'Knowing all these words, the 'salmon-pinks', the 'fuchsias', the 'garnets' and the 'carmines', allows us to ponder choices not open to somebody who just knows red... it allows us to exercise our will over what is given. More importantly, it allows us to turn the ordinariness of our everyday lives into something, if not extraordinary, then at least poetic.'* (p 23) Is the lexicon we each possess such a powerful tool? Discuss.
5. Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) is the subject of this work. Read some of Turgenev's novels after or before you've read this work, and discuss them in context.
6. *'It's odd how catastrophe can make you seek comfort in the smaller, more ordinary things ... In the end it's probably the small things, not the big ones, like seismic shifts in history or life-changing epiphanies, which keep us afloat.'* (p 31) Have small things offered you such comfort?
7. Dessaix says of his love for Russia that 'it's more a love-affair than a friendship, and to love like that with any lasting pleasure it's sometimes best to be aware of your fundamental unlikeness.' Do you agree with him about love?
8. *'It's true that we are now a distant satrapy of another great empire on the rampage, but this time around far fewer of us seem willing to be slaves.'* (p 44) Is Dessaix correct about Australia in your opinion?
9. *'In paradise you always wake up one morning to the particular kind of spiritual desolation that lurks there and nowhere else. It has a quality all its own.'* (p 64) Are we all plagued by such dark thoughts in the moments of our greatest contentment? Discuss.
10. Dessaix refers to the 'delightful horror' felt when confronted by a magnificent panorama. *'You are at once God and nothing. Simultaneously you are the sky and a grain of sand.'* (p 69) Have you ever responded to nature's vistas in this way?

11. Dessaix reflects on his own place (pp 76-7) in a passage which suggests that our personal landscapes harbour secrets which are not always readily accessible unless we search for or stumble across them by accident. Have you had a reaction to your place that you could discuss in this context?

12. *'Since the middle of the nineteenth century, when the soul was put on notice, it's been extraordinarily difficult to love.'* (p 82) This is one of Dessaix's major themes here. Do you agree with him?

13. This memoir is in one sense a literary history as well as a biography, in that it traces some of the major literary highlights and figures of the time. For example, he refers to other Russian writers, and to Henry James's meetings with Turgenev (p 84). Compare this work to Colm Toibin's recent literary fictional exploration of James's life in *The Master*. You might also read Janet Malcolm's *Reading Chekhov* which is written in a similar vein to *Twilight of Love*.

14. Turgenev's romantic impulses stemmed not from a desire to marry but from a simple desire for love (p 92) although later in life he did search for *'a nest'* (p 93). He determined to live *'as good a life as he could in the unplotted space between family happiness at the one extreme and unbridled licentiousness at the other.'* (p 100) Dessaix also suggests that he has lived in such a space. (p 109) Do most of us reside in such unplotted spaces? Or are artists more inclined to live like this?

15. Turgenev held that *" 'Gratitude is a debt you owe, ... but love isn't money.' "* (p 97) Is it possible to love those who have saved us from something? Discuss.

16. Dessaix reflects on the prevalence of overt sexuality in our society (pp 104-7 and p 201). Is the erotic becoming impossible to create or even imagine in such a sexually saturated environment? *'Our word-bound imagination failing us, we settle for lust mixed with sentimental attachment. And - the last throw of the dice in the losing game of time - children.'* (p 255) Is Dessaix unduly dismissive of today's sexual attitudes?

17. This work can be read in relation to each of Dessaix's other works, which all contain elements of memoir and the theme of searching for a home. Dessaix discussed in his autobiography his childhood creation of an imaginary 'Pure Land' (*A Mother's Disgrace*, p 26) and recently suggested that perhaps that search has stayed with him, and that by inference this newest work's themes are reflected in that search as is the fact that he has found his home in a beautiful 'pure land' called Hobart. Discuss.

18. Dessaix reflects on how Turgenev, when he arrived at Courtavenel, 'must have felt both that *he had come home at last, yet at the same time belonged not here, but somewhere else.*' (p 126) Dessaix perhaps felt similarly about Russia. And perhaps too, all Anglo-Australians, driven to see England for the first time, share something of these feelings. Discuss.

19. " 'I am happy,' she said, 'that I saw events which cannot be equalled.' " (p 192) Human nature's propensity to crave even tragic experiences of great import has been the subject of many works of art. (David Hare's play and film *Plenty*, for example, showed how a character disintegrated in the wake of her extraordinary war time experiences, under the 'weight' of ordinary life.) Many Australians have felt the same when they've returned from military conflicts. Are we only truly alive in such heightened moments? Dessaix is exploring here how we survive when such 'adrenalin rushes' are only momentary. Discuss.

20. What other forms of happiness exist? How is Dessaix distinguishing between bliss and happiness? Discuss.

TWILIGHT OF LOVE: TRAVELS WITH TURGENEV

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Picador Australia

ISBN: 0330364995

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Pan Macmillan Australia
Level 18, St Martin's Tower
31 Market Street,
Sydney NSW 2000

www.panmacmillan.com.au

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