
Paul Gifford. *Love, Desire and Transcendence in French Literature: Deciphering Eros*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. 345p.

CATHERINE MARACHI
SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA

Paul Gifford's book is a momentous reflection on the elusive and powerful nature of Eros, and on its crucial place at the heart of the Platonic-Judeo-Christian matrix of Western tradition. The author follows the evolution of Eros through French literature, and identifies the successive "shifts" in its decipherment, which eventually led to the European cultural crisis of the twentieth century: the void left by the loss of love and transcendence, and the ensuing question of identity in modern French literary and theoretical writings.

Gifford chooses three classical texts as points of reference for his discussion: Plato's *Symposium*, the Song of Songs, and the Book of Genesis. The first work exposes Plato's original and holistic definition of Eros as a triangular figure that unites love, desire and transcendence: "Erotic love always participates in a finality which transcends itself; it is a trans-rational and trans-human mediation, a way towards wholeness, truth and being" (16). The Song of Songs similarly presents a dynamic, vertical dimension of Eros, since desire is always sublimated by love and renewed by it. Genesis, on the other hand, while reproducing the triangular figure—man, woman, and God as "the ultimate other"—also introduces the idea of shame and sin: "Eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil signifies, immediately, knowing the shadow-side of human Eros, in both its sexual and its spiritual reaches" (49).

Professor Gifford prefaces his analysis of the French love tradition through the 19th century by drawing an important distinction between Desire and Agape as two respectively "self-centered" and "other-centered" forces present in Eros. He asserts that the concept of courtly love, *amour-passion*, and even early Renaissance poetry and 17th century *galanterie* were attempts to reconcile the two forces of Eros and find some kind of transcendence in a world of "loveless feudal marriages sanctified by the medieval Church" (75). The author also blames the Romantic failure at idealizing love, the growing materialism of the late 1800s, the narcissism of Freudian theories of libidinal forces, and above all Nietzsche's proclamation of the "death of God" for precipitating the crisis of the following century: "There is grievous trauma in being amputated from the 'other world' posited and desired by human Eros; such that cosmos itself is put out of joint—and it is Night" (100).

While Paul Gifford borrows from the fields of philosophy and anthropology in the first part of his book, his approach becomes hermeneutic as he enters what he

calls “the landscape of twentieth-century desiring and loving” (100). In this section he provides a brilliant analysis of the attempts to “decipher Eros” by ten major French writers of the century just ended: Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Paul Claudel, André Breton, Georges Bataille, Marguerite Duras, Roland Barthes, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Emmanuel, and Julia Kristeva.

From these separate studies emerge both a common pessimism about human love and the total eradication of vertical transcendence. Of the original triad, only sexual love—or eroticism in Bataille’s case—is left. The triangular figure previously mentioned by Gifford is still present in most of the works considered, often in the shape of subject-object-third party—a rival or a confidant for Duras and Barthes—or inverted towards an “ecstasy *par le bas*” (197) in Bataille’s work. Another theme appears for all these authors which already surfaced in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*: the loss of identity of the object of desire, and the need to “subvert the love-partner, transforming her or him into a partial metonymic actualization” (324). Yet, we witness a transcendence of the real through art in Proust and Valéry, and a “Christian redemption of Eros” (154) in Claudel. Furthermore, the works of the post-modern writers studied at the end of the book—Irigaray, Emmanuel, and Kristeva—allow Gifford to end on a note of optimism and to formulate the hope “of recovering some form of lost transcendence ‘from below’, and with it, of a refund consistency and viability for love” (323).

Love, Desire and Transcendence in French Literature is a thought-provoking book written in a clear and engaging manner. It will be of interest to all those interested in French or in cultural studies. ✱