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# A Psychological Map of Love. Alain de Botton's Love Stories as Reflections of Sternberg's Theory on Love

## Abstract

This article aims to give a psychological interpretation to Alain de Botton's novels On Love and The Course of Love, doubling the philosophical take on love that runs in the background of the novels. Robert Sternberg's triangular theory of love will be applied to de Botton's two novels, in an attempt to reach an understanding of love by means of psychological deconstruction, following the dynamic of the three components of the love triangle: passion, intimacy and decision \ commitment. References will also be made to Sternberg's complementary theories on love, i.e. the theory that conceptualizes love as a story and the theory of love as a socio-cultural artefact.

Key words: love, psychology, triangular theory, love story, culture

*"Perhaps it is true that we do not really exist until there is someone there to see us existing; that we cannot properly speak until there is someone there who can understand what we are saying; that, in essence, we are not wholly alive until we are loved." (de Botton, On Love 99–100)*

## 1. On Love and The Course of Love. Short Presentation

Alain de Botton's book On Love, presented to the readers as a novel telling the love story of Chloe and the narrator, is a full-circle account that unfolds between two plane flights: on the first flight, from Paris to London, the two future lovers are seated one next to the other, and they meet and fall in love; the reverse flight, from Paris to London, takes the couple back home from a trip and ends with their break-up. The exact punctuation of the beginning and end of the romantic relationship is

symptomatic of the whole structure of the book. The clearly delineated chapters and paragraphs correspond to as many moments in the couple's relationship, thus allowing us to recreate with accuracy the milestones of their love story. The mere story-telling is doubled by the narrator's voice that disassembles every event up to its inner detailed parts and deliversthe thoughts and rationale behind his actions. The reader is not left to guess, but discovers actively, together with the narrator, a keenly performed radiography of love.

Due to its uncommon structure, the novel calls for multiple interpretations; it offers the basic scaffolding to which many theories from different domains may be applied. The writer, a philosopher to the core, searches for philosophical interpretations in most instances, in an attempt to find the ever-elusive meaning of love.

Some years later, Alain de Botton tells another love story – The Course of Love – involving the narrator of On Love, who is now identified as Rabih Khan, and Kirsten. The Course of Love is a more mature, factual, and ideological continuation of On Love. The novel is designed around the love story of Rabih and Kirsten from their first encounter until they reach a stage of emotional and marital balance in their lives. Following the same technique as the one used in On Love, de Botton intertwines the narrative events with philosophical and psychological meditations that fragment the narration, diluting the intensity of the emotionally charged moments. The reader is allowed to pause and think about the meaning of every-day, banal experiences, grasping their commonality, but, at the same time, also their unexpected motivation and consequences.

The Course of Love resulted from a need for closure; On Love ends on a hopeful note, suggesting a new, possibly happier relation for Rabih, but it also leaves a series of questions unanswered, as to the development of long-term, successful relationships, their underlying reasons and dynamic. This time the love story is taken a step further: Rabih meets Kristen, they fall in love, get married, have children, go through some rough patches, but reemerge in a state of mature emotional equilibrium. This does not result from the idyllic, unreasonable fantasies of fatuous love, but is rather an effect of a mature discovery of the meaning of life and love, of the truth that love is mostly a skill, not merely an enthusiastic attitude (de Botton, The Course 200).

## 2. Sternberg's Triangular Theory on Love

Robert Sternberg ("A Triangular Theory" 120) explained the concept of love by using a three-component theory on love that could be displayed graphically under the form of a triangle (therefore triangular theory), each vertex corresponding – arbitrarily – to a component: intimacy, passion, and decision / commitment. The intimacy component comprises the feelings of bondedness and connectedness experienced by a couple and is made manifest by ten signs:

*(1) desiring to promote the welfare of the loved one, (2) experiencing happiness with the loved one, (3) having high regard for the loved one, (4) being able to count on the loved one in times of need, (5) mutual understanding with the loved one, (6) sharing one's self and one's possessions with the loved one, (7) receiving emotional support from the loved one, (8) giving emotional support to the loved one, (9) having intimate communication with the loved one, and (10) valuing the loved one in one's life (Sternberg, "Triangulating Love" 120).*

The passion component refers to physical attraction and sexual drives, but it may also include other needs: "self-esteem, affiliation with others, dominance over others, submission to others, and self-actualization" (Sternberg, "Triangulating Love" 121).

The last of the theory's constituents, the decision / commitment component, entails a short-term and a long-term version. "The short-term one is the decision that one loves someone. The long-term aspect is the commitment to maintain that love" (Sternberg, "Triangulating Love" 121). The two aspects of this component are not necessarily complementary, but in most cases a decision will be made before the commitment.

A mathematical combination of the three components of love will result in eight secondary forms of love: liking, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, compassionate love, fatuous love, consummate love, nonlove (Sternberg, "Triangulating Love" 122–29). The relation between the three components is dynamic; as the impact of each component gradually changes in the romantic relationship, following the normal course of the relationship and also as a result of certain imbalances of the three forces, the triangleis put out of balance, shifting towards one component or another (Sternberg, "Triangulating Love" 132).

A balanced relationship does not rely on only one love triangle; instead, there are oppositions among the various love triangles that need to be resolved before we can talk about a successful

relationship: “real versus ideal triangle” (Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory” 128), denominating the conflict between reality and one’s ideal representation of a love story; “self versus other triangles” (129), expressing the discrepancy between the divergent conceptualizations that two partners involved in a romantic relationship may have of the concept of love; “self-perceived versus other-perceived triangles” (129), speaking of the different perception of the same manifestation of love by the two partners; and “thought versus action triangles” (135), relating to an inability of translating intentions into actions, which results in failure.

## 3. On Love and The Course of Love, as Exemplifications of Sternberg’s Triangular Theory

Our analysis will follow the interactive relation between the three components of love in Sternberg’s triangular theory – intimacy, passion, and decision / commitment – as they manifest themselves in the two love stories, in an attempt to recreate a psychological map of the romantic relationships. The steps in the development of the romantic involvement will be explained by means of Sternberg’s typology of love, ranging from nonlove to consummate love.

The first chapter of de Botton’s novel On Love, entitled “Romantic Fatalism” (3) describes the short amount of time elapsed between the phase of nonlove – characterized by the absence of the three components of love (Stenberg, “A Triangular Theory” 123) – and depicted in the novel as the moment of the brief conversation between Chloe, just a “passenger” (de Botton, On Love 4) at the time, to the phase of infatuated love – or “love at first sight” (Stenberg, “A Triangular Theory” 124) – marked with mathematical precision two pages later: “By the time I had collected my luggage and passed through customs, I had fallen in love with Chloe” (de Botton, On Love 6).

The phase of infatuation is the moment of “passionate arousal” when the other two components of love – intimacy and decision / commitment – are absent. This is a stage in romantic relationships that is easy to detect, mostly because of its somatic manifestations: increased heartbeat, hormonal secretions, etc. (Stenberg, “A Triangular Theory” 124). What is even more important about the passion component that seems to reign in this kind of love lies in its motivational resources that have the capacity to turn infatuation into a romantic relationship. Sternberg calls this component

the “hot” element of the love triangle (119), but he also stresses the fact that other needs, besides the sexual one, are expressions of passion: “self-esteem, succorance, nurturance, affiliation, dominance, submission, and self-actualization” (122). In most cases – and de Botton’s story is such a case – passion and intimacy covary positively: intimacy is stimulated by passion, and passion, in its turn, can be sustained by intimacy (122).The passionate arousal acts as a trigger for de Botton’s characters entering the next phase of their relationship.

After a short while, the couple experiences a new kind of love: the romantic love, “a combination of the intimacy and passion components of love” (Stenberg, “A Triangular Theory” 124). “The passion component is what may draw the individual to the relationship in the first place, but the intimacy component helps sustain closeness in the relationship” (Stenberg, “A Triangular Theory” 122). Physical attraction is accompanied by feelings of emotional closeness and bondedness that characterize the intimacy component, also called the “warm” element of the love triangle, mainly because of the “experience of warmth in a loving relationship” (119). In describing the course of intimacy in the romantic relationship, Sternberg grounds his hypothesis on “Berscheid’s theory of emotions in close relationships” (126), that conceptualizes emotion as a series of interrupted “paired action sequences” (126). Each relationship debuts with many interruptions of these sequences because of the high degree of uncertainty and the lack of knowledge of the other and of his/her actions; however, as pieces of information gather up and the predictability of the lover is higher, the number of interruptions will decrease, bringing along a diminution of the experienced emotion. This does not mean that intimacy no longer exists. On the contrary, as a result of the decrease of experienced intimacy, the bonding element of the relationship will become stronger, but the intimacy may become latent, less observable, less evident (126). Sternberg (“A Triangular Theory”) cautions us on the need to express the three components of the love triangle by actions, as a requirement of the successful relationship, indicating a few ways for expressing intimacy: “(a) communicating inner feelings; (b) promoting the other’s well-being; (c) sharing one’s possessions, time, and self; (d) expressing empathy for the other; and (e) offering emotional and marital support to the other.” (131–32)

Alain de Botton’s characters find simple ways to translate feelings into actions: preparing breakfast for the beloved, spending their free time together, giving thoughtful gifts, using special code words

to express their love (“I took Chloe’s hand and told her that I had something very important to tell her, that I marshmallowed her” [de Botton, On Love 80]), finding new names for one another (“she became known simply as ‘Tidge’,” “I became known, perhaps less mysteriously, as ‘Weltschmerz’” [de Botton, On Love 94]). The mutual support and love detaches the couple from the outside world, they form an isle of isolation amongst the others.

The chapter significantly entitled “Intermittences of the Heart” (de Botton, On Love 110) supplies us with examples of what Sternberg defined as interruptions of the “action sequences” (Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory” 126), disruptions in the rhythm of the interpersonal relations within the couple, that may raise awareness about the investment of each partner in the romantic relationship, or, in the less fortunate cases, that may act as a failed test of love. A weekend trip to Bath, an interruption of the couple’s every-day routine, summed up as, “We had a great couple of days in Bath” (de Botton, On Love 110), inadvertently turns out to be “a more complicated set of events pullulating beneath the surface of the trip” (110) and, in terms of Sternberg’s theory, the assessment of the degree of intimacy that such a vacation could bring, reveals a rather low commitment of the couple. A similar discovery is to be made when the couple is invited to join a female friend for dinner, on a Friday night, and the narrator ends up falling “a little” (112) in love with this friend, this experience leading him to a bitter conclusion about romantic relationships: “However happy we may be with our partner, our love for them necessarily hinders us from pursuing alternatives” (112).

The biggest intimacy test of all takes the form of an anniversary weekend trip to Paris that ends dramatically for this couple, with their break-up. “A perfectly good relationship may be destroyed for lack of knowledge about the nature of intimate involvement in close relationships” (Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory” 126). And indeed, the miscalculation of intimacy turns into the last great romantic test that Chloe and the narrator fail: “By the time Chloe and I had collected our luggage and passed through customs, the relationship was formally over” (de Botton, On Love 154). This romantic relationship will never get to experience another stage in Sternberg’s theory, that of consummate love, a love that gracefully combines all three elements of the love triangle: intimacy, passion, and decision / commitment (“A Triangular Theory” 124).

From the perspective of Sternberg's triangular theory on love, The Course of Love is enriched with a variety of love types that one doesn't find in its predecessor, On Love. Infatuated love is on display for only a brief introductory part of the novel, allowing the reader to plunge smoothly into the romantic love story of Rabih and Kirsten. We find out that after the failure of the relationship with Chloe, and a few other attempts at connecting with various women whom he met on various occasions, Rabih is still hopeful about his romantic future. These failed relationships are all exemplifications of what Sternberg called "unbalanced triangles" ("A Triangular Theory" 128), in which one of the vertices of the triangle is skewed, i.e. subjectively oriented towards one of the elements of the triangle: "A few times he has felt an intellectual connection with a woman but no physical one – or the other way around" (de Botton, The Course 9). Being one of the two elements that insure the proper "geometry of the love triangle" (Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory" 128), i.e. the chance for a long-term relationship, this imbalance of the love triangle in favor of intimacy or passion, also hinders the progress of the other love-decisive factor, the "amount of love" (128), geometrically materialized as the "area of the triangle" (128).

After falling in love, Rabih and Kirsten find themselves experiencing "romantic love" (Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory" 124). It is a stage – we know that from On Love – that Rahib had also lived with his other love, Chloe, and for a while, the two stories unfold similarly: short trips outside of Edinburgh, a weekend visiting Kirsten's mother, playful behavior, gossiping about the others as a form of individualizing their love story, finding names for one another, "Teckle" (de Botton, The Course 23) for Kirsten and "Sfouf" (24) for Rahib. It is not the lack of originality that prompts the writer to draw parallel destinies for his characters; it is more a way of suggesting a development pattern common to almost all love relationships, a way of saying that love is a human constant and its impression of uniqueness is only a matter of perception.

The couple's decision to get married brings them a step closer to the phase of "consummate love" (Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory" 124), a kind of love that harmoniously combines the three elements of the love triangle: passion, intimacy, and commitment. Marriage is the social recognition of the attainment of this long-term, "complete love" (124), but reality makes it evident in many cases that "reaching the goal is often easier than maintaining it" (124), and Sternberg cautions us about the real context-dependent difficulties associated with balancing this kind of love,

which Alain de Botton so beautifully depicts in The Course of Love. It is the love story after the marriage, i.e. consummate love that poses the higher risk for break-ups and requires the most strenuous efforts to revive it every day. And indeed, Rabih and Kirsten need to go through a series of joyful and stressful life events (two children, financial problems, the danger of unemployment, adultery) to discover the real meaning of complete love: “They have been married for thirteen tears and yet only now, a little late, does Rabih feel ready for marriage” (de Botton, The Course 212).

This stage in Rabih and Kirsten’s relationship allows us to better explore the decision / commitment component in Sternberg’s theory, which is said to have an ascendant evolution in most long-term relationships and depends to a large extent on the success of the relationship. The gradual increasing levels of the commitment component is specific to the beginning of the relationship, afterwards it experiences a speeding-up process, heading towards a stage of leveling-off if the relationship evolves over a long period of time. What is important to stress here is that the ups and downs of the relationship will affect the progress of the decision / commitment component, resembling an S-shape (Sternberg, “A Triangular Theory” 127). As such, it is safe to assume that Rabih and Kirsten’s level of commitment accelerates with their decision to get married, flattens out on several occasions when they doubt their decision, but gains its ascent and turns into an S-shaped curve as they reach their emotional maturity. Sternberg’s notion of “consummate love” finds its equivalent in de Botton’s life philosophy, as readiness for marriage, a mature love, which is a synonym for the desire to love, more than to be loved: “Rabih is ready for marriage because he is prepared to love rather than be loved” (de Botton, The Course 215).

This preparedness to love, i.e. to give love more thanto expect love in return, speaks of the highest level of commitment in a romantic relationship and it is prompted by satisfactory levels of the other two components of the love triangle: passion and intimacy. According to Sternberg’s theory, bringing these three components to action turns out to be a difficult, but rewarding task, and Rabih and Kirsten manage to accomplish it successfully, by getting married and, most importantly, by surpassing the hard times and staying married.

In terms of Sternberg’s triangular theory on love, our couple’s success in marriage can be construed as a victory of the “real triangle,” representing the actual relationship of the couple, over the “ideal triangle,” which is the embodiment of all dreams, fantasies and ideal representations that

a person may have of the romantic involvement. The main source of this ideal triangle is formed by the previous relationships (Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory" 128–29), but de Botton also adds a social ingredient to the mixture that results in the ideal triangle: "Rabih is ready for marriage because he is fed up with most love stories and because the versions of love presented in films and novels so seldom match what he now knows from loved experience" (de Botton, The Course 217).

## 4. Other Subtypes of Love in The Course of Love

With the birth of their two children, Esther and William, Rabih and Kirsten enter the land of parenthood and are permitted to experience a new kind of love:

> *Children teach us that love is, in its purest forms, a kind of service. […] They teach us to give without expecting anything in return, simply because they need help badly – and we are in a position to provide it. We are inducted into a love based not on an admiration for strength but on a compassion for weakness, a vulnerability common to every member of the species and one which has been and will eventually again be our own. (de Botton, The Course 110)*

Reading this paragraph in accordance with Sternberg's theory on love, the experience of parenthood is yet another – and a more profound and lasting – manifestation of consummate love, a kind of love that equally blends the three vertices of the love triangle: passion, as an outcome of fulfilling the motivational needs of nurturance, affiliation, self-actualization ("A Triangular Theory" 122), intimacy, expressed as selfish emotional involvement and bondedness between parents and their children (124), and decision / commitment, as firm, absolute commitment that parental love entails (124). The touching episode when Kirsten's mother is in hospital and there is talk of her imminent death reverses the roles: Kirsten, the mother of her children is also the vulnerable daughter, about to experience the collapse of her life: "The world has been upended" (de Botton, The Course 208). These two episodes in de Botton's novel allow us to explore a new dimension of complete love, a more attainable one that in this case, will stimulate the couple's evolution towards their romantic consummate love.

## 5. Metaphors of Love. Conceptualizing Love as a Story

The Yale psychologist Robert Sternberg ("Love as a Story") proposed viewing the concept of love as a personal story that generates a certain mind-set, a lens that may help understand the entire relationship within certain parameters dictated by the story. A distinction should be made between the prospective stories, the ideal stories that one creates before the beginning of a relationship, and even before meeting the beloved, and the stories anchored in the reality of the romantic relationship. The overlapping between the ideal, imagined stories and "real" stories cannot be neglected altogether, for it is the ideal stories that lend substance to the real ones and motivate our actions a number of times. The compatibility between the personal stories of the two lovers contributes to transforming a love story into along-term relationship. The sources of these personal stories are, according to Sternberg ("Love as a Story" 542–43), numerous: personality traits, childhood background, the relations with one's parents, siblings, attachment styles.

The power of one's story is dramatic: it requires consistency in the perception of new events, which, if contrary to the existing mind-set, are adjusted to fit the old story, and it influences our choice of a partner in love and life. Change in general is hard and it proves to be even harder for ideal stories, so that we will first try to confirm our story, leaving the option of amending it as a last resort. Moreover, besides struggling to adapt the outer reality to one's personal imagined story, and fighting the necessity to change the story, one has to understand and assimilate his / her partner's ideal story, as well (Sternberg, "Love as a Story" 544).

The metaphor of "love as a story" is not to be construed restrictively, as it does not replace the existing theories of love; rather, it extends the perspective offered by them to a more detailed and contextualized outlook on love: "Theories of love deal with the nomothetic or shared parts of love, probably more within than between cultures. But the idiographic parts of love – those that give love its richness and uniqueness in each relationship – can be captured only when we understand that love is a story" (Sternberg, "Love as a Story" 545). Sternberg's metaphor assigns individuals an active role in creating their own stories and even changing them, but confesses to the tendency one has to use patterns in romantic relationships, to create and recreate the same love stories (Sternberg, "Love as a Story" 545).

The love story that Alain de Botton creates for his characters is that of “romantic fatalism” (On Love 3), of a love destiny that is plotted in such a way as to bring the two lovers together: “Though neither of us had been superstitious, Chloe and I seized upon a host of details, however trivial, as confirmation of what intuitively we felt: that we had been destined for one another” (6–7). The mythologization of love finds supporting evidence in the smallest coincidental things and events. Starting with the “1 chance in 989.7” (9) that both of them would board the same plane, to the fact that they both had played clarinet and played in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and that they both owned the same copy of Anna Karenina, to the smallest personal details and habits: same freckles, same missing molar, same sneezing.“We mythologized our aircraft encounter into the goddess Aphrodite’s design, Act One, Scene One of that primordial narrative, the love story” (7).

As long as both partners believe this story, their romantic relationship is safe. It is the realization that meeting someone is nothing but a hap-hazardous moment, and that falling in love merely the fulfillment of a need, that brings about the end of the love story. The strength of their story lies in the strength of keeping up the illusion of fatalism. This is perhaps the most common love story to populate Western thinking, one that views love as unpredictable, love meetings as destined, the person of the beloved idealized, and the entire experience of love mythologized. This relates primarily to Sternberg’s idea of love as a cultural artefact.

## 6. Conceptualizing Love as a Cultural Artefact

Continuing his research on the subject of love, the psychologist Robert Sternberg dwelled on the social constructionist paradigm, a movement closely related to French structuralism, due to its assumptions about the active role that humans take in understanding the world and giving it meaning (Beall and Sternberg 420). As such, “cultures provide people with a set of lenses through which they can understand their environment” (419).These lenses act as a mental inclination for the members of a culture and impose a unitary perspective on the main aspects of life, depending on the external factors. It is the exact process by which the moral and ethical values of mankind are established and imposed on personal behavior as norm. The active component of this validation process lies in the very fact that such a perspective is due to change with time. These “cultural lenses” (419) also apply to the way we perceive and understand the fuzzy concept of love.

Culture regulates not only the definition of love and therefore its reception but also such notions as attractiveness in the other person, social desirability, and types of acceptable relations, because of the importance that social acceptance plays for human behavior (422–23). What the past two centuries have in common in regards to the concept of culturally defined love is the fact that love is viewed as “a foundation for marriage” (Rothman; Stearns, quoted in Beall and Sternberg 420).

Gathering multiple information from different social and anthropological theories on love, under the form of a meta-analysis, Sternberg defines love as “a multidimensional construct that includes behaviors, as well as feelings and thoughts” (Beall and Sternberg 424). The construct can be defined by four aspects: “(a) the beloved; (b) the feelings that are believed to accompany love; (c) the thoughts that are believed to accompany love; and (d) the actions or relations between the lover and the beloved” (424).

We find Sternberg’s idea of culturally-embedded love in de Botton’s novel The Course of Love under the concept of Romanticism. The narration of the love story between Rabih and Kirsten is interrupted several times by meditations on Romanticism, a cultural doctrine common to the Western world that generates a certain perception of the beloved, the feelings of love, the thoughts about love and the actions and relations determined by love. It is an idealistic dogma, equating the search for a romantic partner with the search for a meaning in life and finding the romantic partner with the burdening discovery of a soul mate, thus opening the door for the biggest disappointments: “For the Romantic, it is only the briefest of steps from a glimpse of a stranger to the formulation of a majestic and substantial conclusion: that he or she may constitute a comprehensive answer to the unspoken questions of existence” (de Botton, The Course 6).

As the culturally accepted norm, Romanticism credits the beginning of the love story with too much significance for its future: “for the Romantic it (the start) contains in a concentrated form everything significant about love as a whole” (de Botton, The Course 8). “We seem to know far too much about how love starts, and recklessly little about how it might continue” (15).

De Botton recognizes the multi-faces of the concept of love, as defined by the Romanticism of our times, in a manner that translates into Sternberg’s own conceptualization of love (Beall and Sternberg, 424): Finding the beloved – always the right person, leaving very little room for incertitude and second guesses – is the first milestone, expressing the culturally-shared feelings

and thoughts that love brings along, followed by love-driven actions, such as expressing one's feelings and culminating with the relations between the two romantic partners, as a result of a mutual acceptance: "He has, without knowing how, richly succeeded at the three central challenges underpinning the Romantic idea of love: he has found the right person; he has opened his heart to her; and he has been accepted" (de Botton, The Course 16). The presence of all constituent factors in a relationship can lead, according to the Romantic logic in de Botton's novel and to Sternberg's conclusions on the social construction of love, only to marriage, as a final sign of a successful relationship, while any other outcome could be considered "un-Romantic" (de Botton, The Course 37).

Investigating the way in which the idea of love has evolved over the centuries, Sternberg notices that our society has favored an Aristotelian view on love, in the sense of loving and accepting a person as his / her true self, over Plato's view that people love an abstraction, and only enjoy the best qualities in their partners (Beall and Sternberg 425): "Romanticism is clear on this score: true love should involve an acceptance of a partner's whole being" (de Botton, The Course 97), therefore change is to be frowned upon. The rules of Romanticism are blunt and strict and they refer to all aspects of family life: from the utopic depiction of sex, to the requirement of monogamy with its antipode – adultery, as the biggest betrayal – to the belief in the good nature of children, that makes any education rules unnecessary, to the idealized take on a harmonious relationship that excludes any adjustment and any reform, to the expectations of all-present equality in the romantic relationship, leading to a somewhat tragic conclusion:

> *Our romantic lives are fated to be sad and incomplete, because we are creatures driven by two essential desired which point powerfully in entirely opposing directions. Yet what is worse is our utopian refusal to countenance the divergence, our naïve hope that a cost-free synchronization might somehow be found: that the libertine might live for adventure while avoiding loneliness and chaos. Or that the married Romantic might unite sex with tenderness, and passion with routine. (de Botton, The Course 178)*

The success of a relationship seems to depend mostly on the victory of maturity over Romanticism, i.e. of individuality over collectivity: "Maturity means acknowledging that Romantic love might only constitute a narrow and perhaps rather mean-minded aspect of emotional life, one principally

focused on a quest to find love rather than to give it, to be loved rather than to love" (de Botton, The Course 109).

Alain de Botton's novels are just two of his attempts to educate the public taste, to clarify adult dilemmas and to induce a feeling of communion, by discussing common aspects of life in his writings and within his project, The School of Life, an Internet platform for developing emotional intelligence, "a place to step back and think intellectually about central emotional concerns" (The School of Life). The site insures us that we will be safe from dogma, but even if we were to doubt this promise, is it so bad that someone takes upon himself to prompt the others to ask questions about common things – such as love – that we are supposed to master, even though they have never been taught to us? Psychology has demonstrated the power of culture when it comes to dictating taste and appropriateness within interhuman relationships, so perhaps it is time to operate a change on culture.

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