

Foreword

Open *La Tendresse* and you are confronted immediately with Death in the intimate embrace of hand-to-hand fighting with Love. Trapped by this deadly dialectic between Thanatos/Sheol and Eros/Amor, you are compelled to read on through mounting waves of tension punctuated by shocks of catastrophe.

In a small British Army hospital right behind the front line, an unrelenting torrent of casualties pours over one doctor, Alain, and one nurse, Elizabeth. *La Tendresse* assails the reader with graphic images of blasting, shredding, gashing, macerating, pulverizing, shearing; the innumerable variations on the effects of high explosive and jagged shards of white-hot shrapnel on poor, vulnerable human flesh. But Love, in the form of Alain and Elizabeth, fights back, as we get a crash course in First World War battlefield surgery.

In refreshing contrast to that Love which seeks its perpetuation through an alliance with Death in the Liebestod, and to that sado-masochistic counterfeit which tortures, maims and kills, the love of *La Tendresse* almost succeeds in swallowing up Death.

It is somewhat an epistolary novel, with stories within stories. The Impala/Gazelle story is charming, a welcome respite from the stories of carnage and literal corruption. The way it held me shows the author's power to compel what Coleridge called the willing suspension of disbelief.

Karl Menninger observed that mature wholeness requires not

only the capacity to love, but to hate that which is hateful. For we humans are the only species capable of being inhuman. Lyrical and literally poetic in his appreciation of the good and the beautiful, of the simple pleasures, learning, the love of women – our humane humanist author is equally afire with outrage at those of our species who create the Sheol-Gehennas on Earth.

On a personal note, I am rarely affected emotionally by what I read on war and combat. There's an automatic self-protective numbing, reinforced by the conscious awareness that whatever is written or visually depicted is in the past and fairly predictable. Moreover, some situations accumulate literary as well as personal associations; e.g., Alain's killing the German, c.f. the killing of the *poilu* in the shell hole in *All Quiet on the Western Front*; and the Monique episode in *La Tendresse* parallels the end of *Grande Illusion*.

My self-reassuring reminders, that I'm not in the midst of something happening now, but rather on the outside reading about the past, was breached momentarily by the similarity of Elizabeth's account to the circumstances of my own wounding. However, what really blindsided me was Alain's family's auto accident. The battlefield is a killing field where death is expected, survival the surprise. In the midst of the battlefield, the author surprises us with a peacetime tragedy, the loss of Alain's two children, effectively blocking our retreat from wartime suffering into a nostalgic idealization of a pre-War paradise that never was.

La Tendresse is a remarkable achievement.

Eugene H. Kaplan MD
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