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Laurence Plazenet – France

L'amour seul (2005)

Love Alone

Publishing House **Albin Michel**

Biography

Laurence Plazenet was born in Paris in 1968. At five-years-old, she was already a passionate reader, quickly developing her desire to write. A former student at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, she is a Classic Literature 'agrégée' and holds a Literature PhD. She started her career as a Sorbonne professor, and studied at Princeton in 1994. However, for a long time she was convinced that she didn't have anything to say that was worth being printed. She then worked for ten years on academic papers, feeling she was, at least, useful to literature. She broke the silence in 2005 with *L'amour seul*, published by Albin Michel, then with *La Blessure et la soif* in 2009 and *Disproportion de l'homme*, both published by Gallimard.

A lecturer of French Literature at Paris-Sorbonne, a member of the French National Centre for Scientific Research and the Institut Universitaire de France, and a vice-chair of the Société des Amis de Port-Royal, Plazenet is also currently writing her fourth novel.

Synopsis

Mlle Louise Catherine d'Albrecht is only fifteen-years-old when she meets love. She lost her mother and her father brought her up sternly, with no physical display of affection, while anonymously spoiling her with presents.

Monsieur de Ramon, her tutor, arouses her first physical flutters and becomes her secret lover. At first, Louise is tormented by her feelings but she ends up giving herself, body and soul, to the man who seduced her. When her father forces her to leave the city to return back to the country, Louise is looked after by her young aunt, the austere Mlle d'Ambricourt.

Later, back in Paris, she hopes her lover will find her again, but he fails to return. Full of anxiety and piety, she dedicates her life to her studies and writes her first book. Thanks to this book and her words, Monsieur de Ramon comes back to her. They give their love to each other, an absolute love, until Monsieur de Ramon, feeling old and not worthy of his lover's brightness, decides to leave her while she is pregnant. Later, tragedy strikes when she loses her six-year old daughter, and she sinks into a lonely life, full of memories of her lover and haunting desires. She has a one-way correspondence with her lover, finishing her life in asceticism, sharpened by the ghost of desire and hastening her end by curing victims of an epidemic.

L'amour seul

Laurence Plazenet

1.

Elle avait quinze ans. Elle en paraissait moins.

Elle vivait à l'écart.

2.

Quand sa femme était morte, Monsieur d'Albrecht avait refusé de s'écarter du corps qu'elle avait déserté. Il était resté agenouillé, ses mains jointes à celles de son épouse. Il n'écou-
tait pas les prières des prêtres ni les objurgations de ses domes-
tiques. Il regardait les paupières closes de Madame d'Albrecht. En esprit, il les baisait ; dans la nuit de leur chambre, il cares-
sait ses seins. C'était troquer une obscurité pour une autre.

Deux grands cierges disposés de chaque côté du lit met-
taient à peine une lueur sur ce dernier conciliabule.

Son fils vint parler à Monsieur d'Albrecht. Le jeune homme ne se sentait guère le droit de prononcer les remontrances qu'on lui avait dites. Il se tenait gauchement, les yeux rivés sur le cadavre de sa mère. Le veuf l'ignora. Le garçon attendit un moment, puis il sortit.

La nuit passa.

Au matin, on mena sa petite fille à Monsieur d'Albrecht. Elle marchait à peine. Ses joues étaient roses. Elle ne le diver-
tit pas. Il se leva d'abord avec un mouvement de colère. Puis, il s'immobilisa et il demeura glacé devant l'enfant. Il trouvait qu'elle ressemblait à Madame d'Albrecht d'une façon qui le

saisissait. Elle entrouvrait les lèvres de la même manière. Ses cils battaient à la même vitesse. L'intensité noire des pupilles qu'ils abritaient était identique. La fillette avait éclaté en sanglots. Il avait ordonné, dans un souffle, la bouche sèche, qu'on l'ôtât de sa vue.

Monsieur d'Albrecht était un homme plein de morgue, très instruit, taciturne. Il fuit sa fille. Il commanda qu'elle habitât un corps de logis éloigné de celui où il se tenait lui-même et qu'elle ne parût nulle part. Il restait des semaines, des mois parfois, sans la rencontrer. Un jour d'été, dix ans plus tard, il raccompagnait des hôtes jusqu'à la première cour de sa maison, il entendit à sa gauche, venant d'une galerie suspendue, une voix dont l'intonation était la même qui, toutes les nuits, résonnait encore à ses oreilles. Son ciel se voila. Il fut secoué d'un tremblement. Il gémit. Il fit venir la coupable devant lui. Il la surplombait entièrement. Il voyait la piqûre au sommet de sa coiffe. Il ne trouvait pas ses mots. Les autres le dévisageaient. Il se reprit. Sa colère était immense. Il eût voulu battre celle dont les lèvres avaient laissé échapper ce son, ravivant jusqu'à l'extase le tourment qu'il croyait dissimuler au monde.

En cachette, il la comblait.

Il lui faisait tailler des robes de brocart ; au lobe de ses oreilles, il suspendait des perles que la Reine avait désirées. Il lui donna un livre rempli d'annotations de la main de Pétrarque. Elle fut malade et les médecins désespérèrent de la sauver. Il ne la visita point. Quand on lui dit qu'elle avait réchappé, il lui porta des mules brodées qui venaient de Chine et où étaient cousus des diamants. Elle dormait. Il déposa les souliers sans la réveiller sur une chaise basse au pied de son lit.

Mademoiselle d'Albrecht grandit entre sa nourrice, des domestiques qu'elle intimidait et le prêtre qui l'entendait en confession. Dans cette solitude, à peine bougeait-elle, ses jupes bruissaient comme un vol d'oiseau ; la honte la transperçait.

Son bonheur était dans les livres.

Toutes les filles de sa famille étaient bien élevées. Elles étaient si belles qu'il leur fallait beaucoup d'esprit pour se garder d'être vaines et sensibles aux hommes. Louise-Catherine savait le latin, le grec, l'hébreu, l'araméen. Elle avait aussi appris l'italien, l'espagnol et le portugais, qui sont des langues de poètes. Elle déchiffrait l'arabe. Elle aimait les écritures étrangères, les proses rudes et difficiles. Elle regrettait de n'avoir jamais été rompue aux mathématiques, aux astres, à toutes les sciences qui requièrent une application que l'apprentissage des langues et des textes n'exigeait pas d'elle. Dans ce dialogue avec l'inconnu, elle s'éprouvait. Il lui arrivait d'entendre, en lisant, une rumeur qui montait d'elle, bien qu'elle fût incapable d'y repérer un discours intelligible et qu'elle soupçonnât que ce pouvait n'être qu'une simple respiration. Elle était attentive, cependant, à son retour. Elle concevait à ce moment une espèce de joie, vive, brûlante, pareille à un surenchérissement de route sa personne.

Le goût qu'elle avait de la musique, des voix quand elles délaissent la parole pour le chant, frôlait la passion.

Elle allait aux messes basses.

Elle redoutait d'aimer Dieu impurement.

Elle méditait les histoires des saints. On leur coupait les mains. On tranchait leurs langues. Leurs pudeurs étaient déchirées, leurs attachements violés. Ils provoquaient encore leurs bourreaux. L'insolence était dans leur bouche jusqu'aux chagrins, le grand repli des mortifications. D'autres partaient

se taire entre des montagnes de sable. Ils se nichaient sur des colonnes. Ils pleuraient après Dieu. Tant de désordre pour du recueillement la fascinait.

Elle s'ennuyait. Elle avait le vertige de tout ce qu'elle ignorait et qu'elle imaginait qu'elle était vouée à ignorer.

Violente, elle haïssait la violence.

Elle tenait en honneur la chasteté et la tolérance.

3.

Ce fut un éblouissement.

Il s'exprimait avec des inflexions étrangères dont la gravité faisait ressortir, soudain, la suspension du débit, l'allègement du ton, la concentration du sens dans les mots qu'il employait. Son front était haut, la figure allongée, la barbe sombre et fournie. Une raie séparait ses cheveux en deux massifs qui retombaient de chaque côté de la tête, belle, intelligente. Les lèvres, fines, avaient un air de sévérité. Il donnait un sentiment de réserve et de force. La jeune fille nota les plis horizontaux au-dessus des sourcils, ceux qui coupaient le visage entre les ailes du nez et les commissures de la bouche. Les yeux étaient clairs, leur expression pénétrante. Il l'observait.

Il se tenait près de son père ; tous les deux lui faisaient face. Elle s'inclina, le buste raide. Le contre-jour accentua l'ovale des traits, l'étroitesse du corps et des mains.

Elle s'interrogea sur ce qu'elle voyait dans son regard : de la moquerie, de la convoitise, une connaissance d'elle absolue.

Ils furent un long moment sans détourner leurs yeux, presque sans ciller.

Il la désira dans l'instant. Parce qu'elle était interdite et qu'il était improbable qu'elle s'intéressât à lui, parce qu'elle était vierge et qu'elle rougirait quand il la mettrait nue. Elle pleurerait peut-être lorsqu'il la toucherait. Ce spectacle serait le plus beau des plaisirs.

Aguscin Ramôn y Cordoba salua son élève.

4.

Elle connut le visage de son amour.

Love Alone

Laurence Plazenet

Translated from the French by Jessica Alexander

1.

She was fifteen years old. She seemed younger. She lived detached from the rest.

2.

After his wife died, Monsieur d'Albrecht had refused to relinquish the body she had abandoned. He had remained kneeling, his wife's hands in his own. He ignored both the priests' prayers and the rebukes of his servants. He watched Madame d'Albrecht's closed eyelids. In spirit, he kissed them; in the twilight of their room, he caressed her bosom. It was the substitution of one obscurity for another. Two large candles burning on either side of the bed faintly illumined this final tryst.

Monsieur d'Albrecht's son came to speak with him. The young man felt in no position to utter the reprimands he was to convey. He stood gracelessly, his eyes riveted on his mother's corpse. The widower ignored him. The boy waited a moment, then withdrew.

The night passed.

In the morning, Monsieur d'Albrecht's daughter was brought to see him. She was hardly walking. Her cheeks were pink. She did not entertain him. First he rose angrily. Then he froze and remained immobile before the child. He was struck

by the resemblance she bore to Madame d'Albrecht. She parted her lips in the same way. Her lashes blinked at the same speed. The intense black of the eyes they sheltered was identical. The little girl had burst into tears. In one breath, his mouth dry, he had commanded that she be removed from his sight.

Monsieur d'Albrecht was a man full of hubris, well-educated, taciturn. He fled his daughter. He insisted that she reside in quarters far from those he inhabited himself and that she appear nowhere. He went weeks, sometimes even months, without seeing her. One summer day ten years later, while walking guests back to the first courtyard of his residence, he heard, on his left and coming from a hanging veranda, a voice whose contours echoed those that still rang in his ears night after night. A fog descended. A shiver ran through him. He shuddered. He ordered the culprit brought before him. He towered above her. He could see the hollow at the top of her coiffure. He was unable to find words. The others stared at him. He pulled himself together. His fury was incalculable. He would have liked to strike she whose lips had spilt this sound and revived, nearly to the point of ecstasy, the torment he believed hidden from the world.

In secret, he pampered her.

He had brocade dresses fashioned for her; from her earlobes he hung pearls the Queen had coveted. He gave her a book whose margins were crowded with notes written in Petrarch's own hand. She fell ill and the doctors lost hope of saving her. He did not come to see her, not once. When he was told that she was recovering, he brought her embroidered scuffs that came from China and were stitched with diamonds. She was sleeping. Without waking her, he left the slippers on an ottoman at the foot of her bed.

Mademoiselle d'Albrecht grew up in the spaces between her nursemaid, the servants she intimidated, and the priest who heard her confessions. In this solitude, with her slightest movement, her skirts would rustle like the flight of a bird; she was transfixed by shame.

Her happiness lived in books.

All the women in her family were well-mannered. Their beauty required sharp wits to prevent them from growing conceited and susceptible to men's charms. Louise-Catherine knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. She had also learned Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese – the tongues of poets. She could puzzle out Arabic. She loved foreign scripts, the difficult and rugged prose. She regretted having never been well-versed in mathematics, the stars, and all the sciences which demanded an assiduity that the acquisition of languages and texts had not required of her. In this dialogue with the unknown, she tested herself. Sometimes, when reading, she would hear a murmur rising from within, although she was incapable of identifying anything intelligible in it and suspected it might be nothing more than her own breath. Nevertheless, she listened attentively for its return. In this moment she experienced a kind of joy – acute, ardent, comparable to an eclipsing of her entire person.

Her taste for music, voices abandoning word for song, was akin to passion.

She went to low mass.

She feared her love for God was impure.

She contemplated the histories of the saints. Their hands were severed. Their tongues were cut out. Their honor was shredded and their attachments ravaged. Still they provoked

those who tortured them. Their mouths were filled with insolence until they were lost to penitence, those deep folds rendered with self-privation. Others left, fell silent among oceans of sand. They nestled atop pillars. They begged for God. So much disorder on which to meditate fascinated her.

She lost interest. All that she did not know and imagined she was fated to never know made her dizzy.

Violent herself, she hated violence.

She prized virtue and tolerance.

3.

It was pure bedazzlement.

He spoke with a foreign inflection whose gravitas would educe, suddenly, a break in the stream of speech, a softening of his tone, a concentrating of sense in his words. His forehead was long, his face elliptical, his beard dark and thick. A part separated his hair into two massifs that settled on either side of his face, itself beautiful and intelligent. His lips, delicate, wore an air of seriousness. His mien suggested reticence and intensity. The young girl took in the horizontal creases above his eyebrows and those that divided his countenance between the sides of his nose and the corners of his mouth. His eyes were clear, their gaze penetrating. He watched her.

He stood near her father; the two men faced her. She bowed with a stiff chest. The light shining from behind accentuated the oval of her features, the straight line of her body and hands.

She asked herself what she was seeing in his gaze: mockery, lust, absolute knowledge of herself.

For a long moment, neither turned away, hardly blinked.

He desired her instantly. Because she was forbidden and because it was unlikely that she was interested in him, because she was chaste and would blush when he stripped her nude. She might cry when he touched her. This sight would be the utmost of pleasures.

Agustín Ramón y Cordoba greeted his student.

4.

She saw the face of her love.



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