RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Adultery & Other Diversions

Tim Parks

Contents

About the Author

Tim Parks's novels include *Tongues of Flame,* which won the Somerset Maugham and Betty Trask Awards, *Loving Roger*, which won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, *Cara Massimina* and *Mimi's Ghost*. His non-fiction work includes the bestselling *Italian Neighbours* and *An Italian Education.* His ninth novel *Europa* was shortlisted for the 1997 Booker Prize. Tim Parks lives in Italy.

ALSO BY TIM PARKS

Fiction

Home Thoughts
Loving Roger
Family Planning
Goodness
Shear
Cara Massimina
Tongues of Flame
Mimi's Ghost
Europa

Non-Fiction

Italian Neighbours
An Italian Education

Adultery & Other Diversions

Tim Parks

Author's Note

In the course of some desultory reading over the last year or so, and that is since completing the pieces that make up this collection, I think I can safely say that I have come across every idea here expressed, and more often than not in the writings of two centuries, or even two millennia ago. So the reader can rest assured that he will not have to tackle anything new in these pages. But novelty is an ambition one long since learned to set aside. No, my hope when I began work on these odd hybrids was rather to dramatize an intimate relation between reflections that are timeless and the ongoing stories of our lives. Schopenhauer was not alone in remarking that rather than developing concepts in response to direct experience, we are taught them abstractly in youth so that there is often 'little correspondence between our ideas, which have been fixed by mere words, and the real knowledge we have acquired through perception'. For most of us many years must pass before those two areas of consciousness can be anything more than casual acquaintances, our greatest illuminations often coming when finally we have the experience – a love, a death, a moment with our children – that fits the concept, or at last the concept is seen from the angle that matches our experience. It is then, with a sense of exhilaration and sometimes horror, that we come into full possession of what we now discover we only thought we knew. In their attempt to evade the distinction between narrative and essay, or to have the one form call constantly to the other, these pieces grope towards such illuminations.

Adultery

A COUPLE OF years ago I found myself listening to a lecture on the somewhat abstruse theme: ‘Marriage Bedroom Tapestries in the Works of Shakespeare: *Othello, The Winter’s Tale, Cymbeline*’. It’s not the kind of thing I would generally move heaven and earth to get to, but I was stuck in a conference centre outside Milan, it was raining heavily, there was nothing else to do. As it turned out, I was spellbound. With extraordinary vivacity, the speaker, a fine-looking woman in her fifties, used slides and video clips to illustrate the profound ambiguities of a series of images woven onto the upholstered bedsteads of the Elizabethan aristocracy. Particularly fascinating was the collision of sacred and profane, the scenes of domestic bliss undermined by evident allusions to more disturbing emotions: serpents and harpies warning rapturous newly-weds of obscure calamities to come. Then the speaker began to explain how Shakespeare had drawn on this material in his plays, but what she really ended up giving us was a whole history of marriage, from its dynastic origins when the family was everything and sentiments relegated to extramarital adventures, to the crisis sparked off by the tradition of courtly love when husbands and wives began to leave their partners to follow their lovers, and finally the search for a solution in the novel idea that marriage be founded on love rather than family. This last adventure, the speaker claimed, was the subject of the three plays she had selected for consideration, this the underlying theme of the allegories featured in the bedroom tapestries: the huge gamble of placing love at the heart of marriage, the sad

discovery, fearfully embodied in *Othello*, that love is even more fragile than dynasty. All it took was an unexplained handkerchief, a jealous temperament, and, as Shakespeare so timelessly put it, ‘Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content . . .’

After the lecture, chatting to two elderly professors, I couldn’t help but praise the marvellous dispatch of the woman’s delivery, the energy and passion and relevance of her analysis of marriage. ‘A brilliant lecture,’ I insisted. ‘No mystery about that,’ remarked one of the two. His smile was at once sad and wry. ‘Her husband just left her for a twenty-two-year-old.’

Love and dynasty, passion and family. It was around his time that Alistair’s story got into full swing. I was his confidant. We played squash together twice a week, then over beers afterwards he told me all about it. We were best friends. As he spoke, he was full of laughter and his face burned with excitement. ‘You’ve blown your marriage,’ I warned him. He laughed out loud and used sports terminology. Playing away. Scoring in extra time. Next week’s game plan. The logistics can be so complicated, he chuckled. He even giggled. And you could see what an enormous sense of release he must have felt in this first affair after eight or nine years of marriage. Alistair was a very sober, a very solid, a very reliable man, but now the great dam of vows and virtue, the conventional vision of life he had grown up with, was crumbling beneath a tidal wave of Dionysiac excitement.

We worked together at the university and in the corridor I remember showing him a passage from a book I was translating, Calasso’s *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*: ‘Dionysus,’ it said, ‘is not a useful god who helps weave or knot things together, but a god who loosens and unties. The weavers are his enemies. Yet there comes a moment when the weavers will abandon their looms to dash off after him into the mountains. Dionysus is the river we

hear flowing by in the distance, an incessant booming from far away; then one day it rises and floods everything, as if the normal above-water state of things, the sober delimitation of our existence, were but a brief parenthesis overwhelmed in an instant.'

'You're possessed,' I told him. Alistair nodded and laughed. He had been a weaver for so long. He had woven together family-house-career-car. But the following evening, after squash again, he was describing how in that family car his girlfriend (though he always called her his 'mistress' – he liked that word) had pulled up her skirt – they were on the *autostrada* between Bergamo and Brescia – and started masturbating, then rubbed her scented hand across his face, pushed her fingers in his mouth. Since we live in Italy, and have both lived here a long time, he occasionally broke into Italian. '*Evviva le puttanelle*!' he laughed. 'Long live the little whores!' He was in love with her. For those of us looking on, those of us still safely within wedlock's everyday limits, it's hard not to feel a mixture of trepidation and envy on seeing a friend in this state. Clearly it is very exciting when you start destroying everything.

Alistair referred to his wife as 'The Queen of Unreason' or 'She Who Must Be Obeyed'. His wife was still a weaver. They had two young children. With the way feminism has changed everything and nothing, it was she who was in charge at home, she who felt primarily responsible for the children. Men of course now help in the home and, being a reasonable and generous man, Alistair helped a great deal. But he was not in charge. Her conscientiousness and maternal anxiety, heightened no doubt by her decision to stay at work despite the kids, must frequently have looked like bossiness to him. Their arguments were entirely trivial: whose turn it was to do this or that. He felt himself the butt of her imperatives, his behaviour constantly under observation. It's difficult to make love in these circumstances. Or perhaps it was simply that with

everything now achieved it was time for something else to happen. All of us have so much potential that will never be realized within the confines necessary to weave anything together. Job and marriage are our two greatest prisons. When he asked her what was wrong, how could he understand if she didn't tell, she said if only he spared her a moment's attention he would understand without being told. Every intimacy is a potential hell. Alistair referred to sex with his wife as 'duty-fucking'.

The affair began. Chiara was a young widow, thirty-three, with a ten-year-old girl and an excellent job in education administration that took her to the same conferences Alistair attended. Rather than a decision, it was a question of opportunity coinciding with impulse, no, with a day when he felt he *deserved* this escape. Sex was new again. They made love in Rome, Naples, Geneva, Marseilles. They made love in cars, trains, boats. They made love in every possible way. No erotic stone was left unturned. Anal sex, water sports, mutual masturbation, I had to listen to it all. Then all the complicated logistics of their encounters, which seemed to be at least half the thrill. Advantages and disadvantages of mobile phones, the dangers of credit cards. They adored each other's bodies, inside and out. Alistair was in love with Chiara. She was so intelligent. Her black hair too! Wasn't she beautiful? Between love-making they had such intelligent conversations: philosophy, psychology, politics, their lives. They gave books to each other. They swapped stories. They experienced the delirium of all that information flowing back and forth, your own life retold, another life discovered. There is always something to talk about when one is falling in love. As so often there is not in the long-haul mechanics of marriage.

But how could Alistair leave his children? He loved his children, though his wife was becoming more and more difficult. Every now and then he would interrupt his long descriptions of carefully timed meetings and frantic sex with

some self-justifying story of his wife's unreasonableness. Why did she always object to the way he did even the most trivial things, the way he hung a picture, the way he left his toothbrush – get this – turned outward from the toothglass, so it dripped on the floor, instead of inward so it didn't? Can you imagine! he protested. Not to mention the fact that she never gave him blowjobs. But Alistair admitted that he couldn't be sure any more whether his arguments with his wife were purely between themselves, or had to do with his mistress in some way. Perhaps he was deliberately stirring up these petty conflicts in order to justify his eventual departure. Perhaps they weren't arguing about a toothbrush at all. Things were getting mixed up. Out of nostalgia, or guilt, or perhaps just to see what it felt like, Alistair would try to be romantic with his wife. He would bring flowers. When the children were safely asleep he would persuade her to make love. And immediately he realized he didn't really want to make love to her. He felt no vigour, no zest. He wanted to be with his mistress. 'I told her I'd heard the baby coughing,' he laughed. But sadly.

Passion, family. Was it time for Alistair to leave home? I thought yes. He said when he and his wife sat together of an evening playing with the children or catching a movie on TV they were perfectly happy. Not to mention all the economic considerations. And perhaps the thing he had with Chiara couldn't be turned into long-term cohabitation. He lived in the frenzy of the choice unmade, the divided mind. Convinced he was trying to come to a decision, he relentlessly applied the kind of logic that was so effective in his research, as if this were a technical problem that could simply be solved. It's the kind of Cartesian inheritance that has filled the bookstores with self-help manuals: life a problem to solve if only you knew how. I was equally glib. 'You've just got to work out which means most to you,' I told him. 'Perhaps it's only sex with Chiara.' 'You must never put the word "only" in front of "sex",' he objected. 'Or not the

kind we have. It’s an absolute.’ ‘So, you’re only staying at home for the children,’ I tried. ‘You should leave.’ But now he said that you couldn’t put the word ‘only’ in front of ‘children’ either. Passion and children were both absolutes. You couldn’t weigh them against each other. In the end, Alistair managed to prolong a state of doubt and potential, of anything-can-happen precariousness, for nigh on eighteen months. Later he would appreciate it had been the happiest time of his life.

But Chiara was cooling now. There are limits to this feverish kind of equilibrium. Finally it was decided that Alistair and his wife would take separate holidays. The months of July and August would be spent apart. ‘Are you sure you mean it?’ I asked him. He had begun to phone me regularly, this time to tell me he had told Chiara he was leaving his wife. ‘After all, that’s not strictly true,’ I said. ‘You only decided on separate holidays.’ He said he thought he meant it. Anyway the point was *he felt he had to make something happen.* It was an expression that stayed in my mind, an expression that gnawed. Perhaps because it was unusually honest. For thinking back now on the many friends I have who have divorced, or separated, or left each other and got back together again, or divorced and married someone else, it occurs to me that while most of them talk earnestly, sincerely, of their search for happiness, their dream of the perfect relationship, what really drives them is a thirst for intensity, for some kind of destiny, which so often means disaster, the desire to push things to the limit, to savour crisis, in ecstasy before, in tears and tranquillizers after. It’s the same endearing perversity that found paradise so tedious that one way or another that apple just had to be eaten. Man was never innocent. Marriage was never safe. ‘I have to make something happen,’ Alistair said. In this finely managed, career-structured world we’ve worked so hard to build, with its automatic gates and hissing lawns, its comprehensive insurance policies, divorce remains one of

the few catastrophes we can reasonably expect to provoke. It calls to us like a siren, offering a truly spectacular shipwreck. Oh to do some really serious damage at last!

But Chiara said no. Chiara said she didn't want to live with Alistair. She didn't want to risk the happy routine she had built up with her daughter after her husband's death. She didn't want to marry again, and in particular she didn't want, she said, to be responsible for ruining Alistair's marriage. They must stop seeing each other completely.

Alistair collapsed. The gods abandoned him. Intoxication was gone. He couldn't live without it. He couldn't live without joy, he said. He crumpled. His smoking shot up to sixty a day. He drank heavily. His wife was alarmed, became excessively kind. This infuriated him. He could barely speak to her. He could barely speak to the children. He could barely *see* his children. Unable to sleep, he dozed all day. His work went to pieces. And now he tortured himself with the reflection that if only he had asked sooner, Chiara would have said yes. He had tried to negotiate, to manage things. His procrastination had destroyed her passion. He should have trusted his instincts. Finally I managed to persuade him to see an analyst.

As I said, we live in Italy. It's a country where people divorce significantly less than in the Anglo-Saxon world, but perhaps have more affairs. It's a country which perhaps never believed that romance should be the lifeblood of marriage, or not after the children have arrived, a country where a friend of mine told me that at his wedding his grandmother advised him to try to be faithful for at least the first year. In short it's a place where people expect a little less of each other, and of marriage. Above all they don't expect the privilege of unmixed feelings. Hence a country where analysts give different advice.

The analyst told Alistair that only the wildest optimist would divorce in order to remarry, presuming that things would be better next time round. Why should they be? Was

there anything intrinsically unsuitable about his wife, anything intrinsically right about his mistress? His problems sprang from his puritan English upbringing, from the fact that he'd never been unfaithful before. This had led him to attach undue importance to the sentimental side of this new relationship in order to justify the betrayal of values – monogamy, integrity – that would not bear examination. He had 'mythicized' it. What he must do now was take a few mild tranquillizers, settle down, and have another affair at the first opportunity, to which he should be careful to attach no more sentimental importance than an affair was worth: some, but not much. And keep it brief. Meantime he might remember that he had an ongoing project with his wife. They had been through a lot together. They were old campaigners. Think of the practical side. Think of your professional life. He told Alistair that every family was also a business, or *hacienda* as the Spanish say, a family estate, a place where people share the jobs that have to be done.

Is such advice merely cynical? Or in a very profound way romantic? Old campaigners. Talking it over after Alistair had put in a decidedly lacklustre performance on the squash court, I felt it wise to agree with the analyst, at least about the ingenuousness of imagining things would be better next time. And I told him that during the Italian referendum on divorce in 1974 one of the arguments against divorce put forward by some intellectuals was that it would change the nature of affairs. I tried to make him laugh. You'd never know if your mistress didn't want to prise you away from your wife!

But visions of such consummate convenience leave little scope for myth and misery. Alistair had been *in love* with Chiara. He had *given his heart*. Such clichés do count for something, whatever an analyst says. Trying and failing one evening to have sex with his wife, unable to feel any stimulus at all, Alistair suddenly found himself telling her the truth. He didn't decide to tell her, as indeed he had decided

nothing in this whole adventure. Everything had been done, usually after enormous resistance, under an overwhelming sense of compulsion. Perhaps this is the way with anything important. He told her the whole truth, and got his catastrophe.

Or so it seemed. The wife was destroyed. He had spared no details. She insisted he left. He did, discovering in the process what a large space home and children had occupied in his life. Most of this he struggled to fill with whisky and Camel Lights in a lugubriously furnished apartment in a cheaper area of town. Legal proceedings had just begun when Chiara came back to him. At this point there is a brief hiatus, since Alistair no longer felt the need to be in touch with me. He was so happy. So I heard later. He had won his dream. The hell with the analyst. The hell with squash. The wife, whom I had always liked myself, was more than generous with access to the children, Alistair was more than generous with money. He bled himself dry. All was well. Indeed perfect. It was about three months before I got another call . . .

I suppose what fascinates me about divorce is how tied up it is with our loss, our intelligent loss, of any sense of direction, of any supposed system of values that might be worth more than our own immediate apprehension of whether we are happy or not. We are not ignorant enough to live well, too arrogant to let old conventions decide things for us. Put it another way: for many, and especially for men, I think, who do not bear children and do not breast-feed them afterwards, the only thing that is immediately felt to be sacred, the only meaningful intensity, or the last illusion, is passion. D.H. Lawrence puts this very simply in *Women in Love*. Birkin says:

‘“The old ideals are dead as nails – nothing there. It seems to me there remains only this perfect union with a woman – sort of ultimate marriage – and there isn’t anything else.”