

Literary Fiction from the Perspective of Romance Scholarship: André Aciman's *Room on the Sea*

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This Note reads André Aciman's *Room on the Sea* (2025) in light of Gillian Beer's *The Romance* (1970), a short treatise on the literary form from its origins to the modern era.[1] The protagonists of Aciman's novella, a man and a woman in their sixties, casually meet while waiting to be possibly selected to serve as jurors on a hot summer's day in New York. The book chronicles their first encounter and the beginning of their relationship. Paul and Catherine, a lawyer and a psychologist, mature and accomplished, with spouses, children and grandchildren, connect on the basis of genuine curiosity towards each other and a shared desire to communicate.

Giving each other permission to be themselves, they soon begin to share personal information with each other: intimate thoughts, regrets, and youthful dreams. For instance, they recognise that in order to live comfortably, they have given up on their essential passions, history and art respectively, losing along the way several meaningful pieces of themselves. As they get to know each other, they find pleasure in evoking other places and possibilities, bringing back, for themselves as well as for each other, long-neglected memories and desires.

In her treatise on romance, Gillian Beer observes that: "all fiction contains two primary impulses: the impulse to imitate daily life and the impulse to transcend it. It would be hard to think of any satisfying work of literature which totally excludes either" (1970: 10). Aciman's novel elaborates on this principle in a very specific, personal way. It illustrates the here and now, the lived reality of two mature individuals, by magnifying their lives not as they are, but as they could have been, Paul and Catherine's longing for and coming to terms with the road not taken. Aciman does so by giving this alternate dimension the name of Italy—Naples—a space on the sea open to other 'elsewheres'; a projected dream that acquires substance as the story progresses.

Hence the novel obliquely responds to another observation by Beer on the romance: "the novel is more preoccupied with representing and interpreting a known world, the romance with making apparent the hidden dreams of that world" (12). On a reduced scale,

it could be argued that Aciman introduces the characters' reality (the known world) to then focus on its projections (the hidden dreams). What has become of Paul and Catherine's aspirations? Their encounter awakens the desire and fear to evoke them, and the possibility—perhaps the last one—to reconnect with their deeper selves. When they first meet, Catherine is reading *Wuthering Heights*. Paul immediately makes gentle fun of it, only to later confess that he has read it several times. The gothic romantic drama ironically contrasts with the mundanity of Paul and Catherine's encounter, and it is perhaps another reference to the same opposition: the real world and its hidden dreams, Catherine's timeless romantic text and Paul's *The Wall Street Journal*.

If it is true that, as Beer observes, "romance depends considerably upon a certain set *distance* in the relationship between its audience and its subject-matter" (5), and "romance is always concerned with the fulfilment of desires" (12), Paul and Catherine know that some of their desires will not be fulfilled. Therefore, instead of connecting with one another on the illusion of changing each other's world—as it would have perhaps happened to a younger couple—they get close on the basis of a perceived and acknowledged *distance*: between what they are now and what they were supposed to be from the perspective of their youthful aspirations.

Now that they both possess the means to travel to a faraway, exotic place, Paul and Catherine prefer to explore this place in their imagination, so that their 'illusion of Italy' (45), as Catherine puts it, is gradually built together in their conversations, while visiting Italian espresso bars during their lunch breaks. As Paul and Catherine bring to light their unfulfilled dreams, the narrative becomes a gentle, bittersweet reflection on "the intricate harmony of chance and time" (Beer 1970: 38) and, as Paul phrases it, "the moments that almost happened but never did" (49).

The "unstable blending of *the actual* and *the symbolic* is typical of the romance method, which constantly allows appearance and significance equal presence" (Beer 1970: 20). The narrative takes place at the border between said domains. As it unfolds, the reader is made to enter the space of Paul and Catherine's shared dreams. While visiting an art gallery, they see a small painting they instantly like, an image which seems to perfectly encapsulate their longing:

They toured the gallery then returned to the same painting, looked at other works by the same artist, and for the third time came back to it. It was the picture of a seascape from a balcony in Nice or Collioure or somewhere else on the Mediterranean, and most likely from an hotel room. (65)

The scene, the gallerist explains, is from somewhere in the South of Italy. Later, as Paul and Catherine decide to return to visit the painting, they observe that it

had acquired a certain familiarity, as though it already belonged to them and had been removed from their wall and, by sheer happenstance, ended up in this tiny gallery in Chelsea. If it belonged to them, he [Paul] thought, then surely they were already living together (67).

[...]

We should buy it, and, unlike Solomon's baby, slice it in half, and each hang our half in our private space in our shadow home" said Catherine (67).

The 'shadow home' is a private space, a personal core that their encounter makes visible to themselves and to one another. Later, Paul speaks of the painting as "the portrait of what might have been ours" (144).

Paul and Catherine decide to continue their relationship and see where it leads them. Perceiving themselves as "two would-be lovers trying to slip back into a past that never was" (98), and having met at a time in their lives when romantic expectations have become marginal, they are very much aware of the fact that their "imagined Italy could turn into such a disaster" (91). Also, they admit to one another that they "do not want the furniture moved around too much" (91), but they also cannot let each other go.

Beer observes of romance that it is an "inclusive" (29) genre: "it offers comedy; it includes suffering. Yet it does not have the concentration of comedy or the finality of tragedy. It celebrates—by the processes of its art as much as by the individual stories—fecundity, freedom, and survival" (29). The fecundity of a budding relationship, the freedom Paul and Catherine give each other to experience it without hasty promises, survival of all that came before: Catherine's unhappy marriage and Paul's unexamined disappointments—all that impeded their encounter until it became possible.

Aciman's story, precisely calibrated between "the remote picturesqueness of romance" (Beer 65) and the real, makes a sparse but potent use of such picturesqueness — painted pictures, evocative scenes of Mediterranean beauty, and idealized memories—giving the New York setting an evanescent flavour, but also confidently projecting the images of a story that could have been but never was. *Room on the Sea* is "subtly balanced between the claims of myth and analysis, the ego and society" (Beer 73), the psyche and the law, personal desire and expectations, showing that "the remote, the exotic, are harboured in each [person]" (Beer 76).

From this perspective, the happy ending of *Room on the Sea* does not so much consist of Paul and Catherine deciding to continue their relationship; their encounter already made them happy by making them rejoin, through connecting with each other, their deeper selves and neglected aspirations. Their story ends well because Paul and Catherine decide to enter and inhabit together the painting they love so much, and in doing so they keep the promise of all romances, which is to "remake[...] the world in the image of desire" (Beer 79).

[1] *Room on The Sea* is the last one of a trilogy of novellas André Aciman published between 2021 and 2025. The other two are *Mariana* (2021) and *The Gentleman from Peru* (2024). All novellas explore the relationship between love and time.

Works Cited

- Aciman, André. *Room on the Sea*. London: Faber & Faber, 2025.
Beer, Gillian. *The Romance*. London: Methuen, 1970.