

Cleary, Skye. *Existentialism and Romantic Love*. Pp. 208. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. US \$75.00. ISBN: 9781137455796.

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Published online: July 2016

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

In her introduction to *Existentialism and Romantic Love*, nascent Australian scholar and writer Skye Cleary speaks directly to the motivations behind her book. Cleary seeks to set the record straight on the popular notion of modern love as it is articulated via the maze of popular internet dating sites, self-help books, and celebrity advice columns. Romantic love is defined and referred to almost constantly throughout Cleary's book as the proverbial search for our understanding of the perfect soul mate or as the nineteenth-century ideal would describe as the "immortal beloved." The quest, defined by Cleary "involves the idea of creating a union and becoming 'we' instead of two 'I's" (14). Cleary examines the questions: does such a union exist? Can it exist? And if so, how can it exist?

To complete her mission, Cleary enlists the assistance of five existentialist philosophers as her antidotes-in-arms because she believes "they explore the space between the ideals of romantic loving and the compromise lovers make in order to try to achieve those ideals" (1). In a work that is part scholarship, part demystification, and part guidance, *Existentialism and Romantic Love* pursues a tour-guide approach to philosophy that is best represented by authors such as eminent English philosopher Roger Scruton and Swiss-born writer Alain de Botton. As their proprietorial rental rights of the bookshop front window attest, Scruton and de Botton are masters in distilling opaque philosophical theories into practical and palatable formats that are both enriching and entertaining for a broader thinking audience. Their nuanced crafting is more difficult to achieve than appears in the reading of their works. *Existentialism and Romantic Love* falls in between the categories of a reference manual and the type of work read by de Botton's populist audiences, because the style and tone of Cleary's writing does not subscribe to either category. The caveat here is that this is Cleary's first book.

Cleary's argument is organized into five neat, balanced, and similarly sized chapters. Bookended by an instructive introduction and conclusion, Cleary's chapters provide a synoptic overview of the persuasions and central arguments of the five existentialists in chronological order: Max Stirner; Søren Kierkegaard; Frederick Nietzsche; Jean-Paul Sartre; and Simone de Beauvoir. Each chapter offers a brief historical summary and a perspective of existential theory that is contextualized with contemporary expectations of a romantic

relationship. As a part of each chapter, Cleary also offers a clever tactical detour that navigates the reader's attention to a particular and narrower lens of interest. For example, in the case of Max Stirner, Cleary steers us toward the topic of "loving egoistically," and in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, the notion of "loving authentically" occupies the central theme. This zooming in style is a skillful stratagem that allows Cleary an opportunity to canvas the broadest spectrum of existential interpretations of romantic love at the same time as giving her the occasion to probe deeper into a specific quality of love. As a result, the reader is acquainted with Stirner's contemplations on sacrifice and ownership; Kierkegaard's search for balance between passion and pleasure and notions of subjectivity and perspective; Nietzsche's advice on self-mastery; Sartre's note to self on love's destruction, and Simone de Beauvoir's contemplations on devotion and gender differences.

On the positive side, Cleary's duplication of the mapping structure in each chapter offers the reader a concentrated introduction to each philosopher's contribution. Cleary's summation of her extensive reading of each philosopher's theory is built on a lucid style that is easily comprehended. The internal organization of each chapter has a catalogue-like quality. The danger of this uniform approach emerges after reading the first two chapters. It is at this point that the rewards of this reliable organization begin to weigh on the reading rhythm – so what we gain in recognition and direction we lose in our anticipation and the desire to keep reading. This is a pity since Cleary's best work comes in the penultimate chapters on Sartre and de Beauvoir.

As a counterpoint to this clinical style, Cleary interpolates her information material with personal opinions. The insertions in the text ranging from practical instructions through to subjective observations are candid, conversational, and built with a language rooted in popular idioms. An example of this kind of tone and language is revealed for instance, when Cleary speaks about one of Nietzsche's romantic interests, Lou Salomé. Cleary describes the lover as having "both brains and beauty" (73). These more populist interjections appear in contrast to the academic writing style of the work, and while it is easy to see why Cleary is tempted to add these commentaries as a way to posit the work for a wider readership, the colloquial style pleads to a different publication.

Cleary's insights however, provide their most valuable worth in a well-cadenced conclusion that bring her aerial discussions of existentialism and personal observations together. Cleary's canvas of the existential view of romantic love is vast, compact and at times dense, but the quick reader can look forward to the book's excellent and comprehensive concluding index which represents a highly resourceful shortcut for any tour guide styled reading.

Existentialism and Romantic Love is a catalyst. The book opens one door to further close reading of existential texts and opens another door for thinking romantics to reconsider their idealistic approach to romantic love with an existential and, perhaps more realistic light. While Cleary's rhetorical approach refers back to the reader as the self-interrogator, Cleary's surgical probe through the eyes of five existentialist thinkers does not mask her personal skepticism that the quest for a union built on "becoming 'we' instead of two 'I's" (14) is fraught with danger.