Altman’s Travels

Graham Little

Dennis Altman
DEFYING GRAVITY:
A POLITICAL LIFE
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THICK POLITICS, thin life’, the late Alan Davies used to say, but that was before the personal became political. Dennis Altman tells the story of how he turned his life into politics, building an impressive career as a public intellectual by making public what was once required to be private and challenging politics to take an account of how lives are actually lived.

Such a programme, already autobiographical in action, calls out for a reflective autobiography. A Political Life isn’t quite that — the subtitle suggests some part of the personal is reserved, perhaps only postponed. Centrally, Defying Gravity traces a life lived in public and linked to the struggle for sexual tolerance. It is also about wanting to invent and reinvent a self, opening and closing with Priscilla, Queen of the Desert. Indeed, it is an account of a movement in which the belief that identity is not fixed was foundational.

Altman is not announcing the end of the struggle. On the contrary, aware that societies yield all too easily to the backlash, he wants eternal vigilance. And it is not paranoia but prudence to see in the revival of any particular prejudice (like the present racist revival) threats to All The Usual Suspects.

Mind you, it isn’t always easy to balance Altman’s sense of his marginality and, I suppose, subversiveness, with a personal and political style so dutiful, practical and positively good-citizenly! […] There’s not much on any intellectual pilgrimage, or on his teachers. Hannah Arendt and the self-applied label ‘Social Democrat’ have clearly been important. ‘Gore’ and ‘Christopher’ are rather more present, but their teachings are also largely absent. But the surprise of Defying Gravity is how feet-on-the-ground Altman is, with his Weberian sense that politics is work and that work is not always the same thing as talk or writing. […]

Clive James, born in 1939, quipped that the other important thing happening that year was World War II. Altman writes: ‘I turned twenty-one in the winter of 1964, several weeks after Lyndon Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam.’ Nothing funny here. Altman’s joke, if it is one, is in the title of his first chapter: ‘Leaving Tasmania.’ This is his how-I-came-to-be-me chapter, and it’s the shortest. He’s hardly the first man or woman for whom growing up meant getting out, but Carmel Bird has suggested the Tasmanian version is fiercer because the only way out is up. And the young Altman certainly headed for the top, beginning an ambivalent love affair with America as well as a professional interest in politics on a world scale. More recently, his interest has shifted to Asia, where he combines ordinary political studies with research into the struggle with HIV.

It strikes me as surprising that more Australian writers […] haven’t written about their personal and intellectual struggles with America. Altman’s description of New York’s place in the history of the gay movement, and the role of different gay places of New York, are among the best pages in the book. His ‘flirtation with expatriatism’ turns on the discovery that America, at least in the 1960s and 1970s, seemed home simultaneously to both the problems and the solutions.

In Dennis’ travels, one direction is away from marginality/parochialism/anonymity/silence and towards wherever the action is. The other direction is the theme of stability and, if it may be said, a form of settling down. How this stands among gay men, how debatable it is, whether it is a trend or an eccentricity, I do not know. This is a candid book and Altman does not renge from or disguise the pleasure he had in past sexual adventuring, but this is balanced, even outweighed, by his determination to convey a sense of his partner Anthony and the satisfactions of their life together. The many tensions between centre vs periphery in its various forms — Tasmania vs Australia, Australia vs America, 30,000 feet in the air vs inner-city town house — are resolved for Altman in love and Melbourne!

One wonders where ‘the personal-is-political’ is found today. It might be among Aboriginal people, in the post-colonial ‘politics of identity’, or with the young despairing of their elders. On the other hand, maybe it flows strongest now in the bush, among the pastoralists and the gun owners and, egregiously, among the followers of Pauline Hanson MP. They are the latest to discover that a big part of politics is about proclaiming and defending an identity under threat, and about getting it written into the nation’s identity. […]

Of course, Altman is clever, but the urge is, perhaps, to notice and comment rather than fathom or systematise. He’s a good watchman, a broadcast-teacher, a specialist in the Big Picture and Coming Events. My disappointment with the book is that observations of this sort don’t interest Altman himself. Defying Gravity is commentary, sometimes confession, but not introspection or self-analysis. […]

On reflection, Altman has a lot of the policy-maker in him, even the bureaucrat (in political science this is not always a term of abuse). It is good to see that those who are intellectuals in public, in the agora, as Altman himself would say, can feel driven and fear judgment and, in his own words, wake in the middle of the night with doubts. Donald Horne said the same. The thing is for the public not to be a compensation for the private, a flight from it. Anyway, there are very good moments in the book, unrehearsed and genuinely available. In our present age, when being wise in your own conceits is de rigueur in public and corporate life, this is great testimony to what a real civic life might be like.

The late Graham Little’s review of Defying Gravity appeared in the April 1997 issue of ABR. Allen & Unwin was the original publisher.

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