Romulus, My Father

Raimond Gaita

Writing Style

The author was born in 1946 in Germany to parents who emigrated to Australia in 1950. He has risen to international academic status, currently Professor of Moral Philosophy at King’s College University of London, and Professor of Philosophy at Australian Catholic University. His memoir, which won the 1998 Victorian Premier’s Literary Award, has been highly praised for its style which is both spartan and elegiac. Named in tribute for his father, it charts Romulus’s life from the time he fled his Romanian homeland, aged only 13 until his death in Ballarat Hospital. An example of the increasingly popular genre described as life writing, it fuses fact and fiction to create an unconventional but fascinating biographical portrait of a complex man. It is not chronologically driven, but focuses more on the people than the events they experience.

As Gaita wrote in response to comments made by David Parker in his article Multiculturalism and Universalism in Romulus, My Father: “I tried to tell the story as truthfully as was in my power. I refused, for example, to include more direct speech than I could remember or was recorded by others. Of course that doesn’t guarantee that the words on the page are those that were spoken.” Fact and fiction exist alongside each other, making Romulus, My Father an act of witness; Gaita’s first-hand experiences testifying to the impact of a beloved father on his son. The author’s contemplative and reflective recount is underscored by the philosophical outlook that has played such an important part in his subsequent life. The memoir makes clear that this moral worldview was influenced by the cultural heritage which infused his father’s values and attitudes and his upbringing in rural Victoria. That childhood was in many ways traumatic, evident by accounts of suffering, madness and suicide. Such experiences lend a deeply tragic tone to what is revealed by the author’s lucid prose. Events and people are effectively brought to life within a landscape of dead or sparsely foliaged gums, the primitive home at Frogmore and seasonal change when, “winters were sharp”. It remains Romulus’s story, incidents from the son’s life mentioned only when they help delineate the father’s situation or outlook. The purpose remains the delineation of Romulus as father, friend, worker, immigrant and source of inspiration. The result is a credible account of stoicism, pride and personal integrity, energised, personal and deeply moving rather than the dry, analytical tone typically found in non-fiction.

Credibility is retained because the weaknesses, misconceptions and flaws as well as Romulus’s strengths and virtues are revealed. There are also moments of humour when foibles and inconsistencies show other sides of his personality. It remains a portrait of greatness scarred by acts of betrayal and periods of insanity but also leavened by comical references such as those relating to the behaviour of a mischievous cockatoo or a dim-witted dog. As Gaita himself noted in response to David Parker; “Some memoirs are novelistic, not only because the characters are alive in them, but also because the reason they are alive is that the memoir probes them psychologically. Romulus, My Father resists psychological probing — I mean its narrative style resists it, not merely that as a matter fact I didn’t go in for it. There is very little psychological exploration in the book and that is not accidental to its style. If I had probed the complexity of my father and Hora, Romulus, My Father would have been a different kind of book and much longer.
Themes

Displacement

Displacement is one of the contextual elements that colours events and attitudes within the text. It is far more than just another book exploring the migrant experience and highlighting the physical, emotional and psychological struggle and financial hardship that typically accompanies it. It also establishes the contextual framework of rural Australia in the post war period, highlighting as a societal backdrop, the prevailing social attitudes about migrants and gender roles for men and woman. As Gaita has commented, Romulus, My Father, “is not essentially a story about the difficulties facing immigrants when they came to Australia in the 1950s. Nor is it more generally a story about hardships facing immigrants everywhere. I had no interest in writing a book of social or cultural comment……. I hoped I could achieve the same calm pity in the depiction of the suffering of so many of its characters that tragedy does.”

Set in the turbulent post war period, Gaita describes the “rollercoaster of wild emotions” as waves of migrants fanned out from Europe in search of a new life and new opportunities. Migrant literature typically describes the problems associated with being uprooted from family, culture, language and societal attitudes and values. With little more than dreams, youthful exuberance and stamina, Gaita’s family represents many such families who struggled to forge a future in an unforgiving landscape. The book testifies to there being "a distinctively Australian decency" we are reminded that “Those were the days before multiculturalism-immigrants were tolerated, but seldom accorded the respect they deserved.” Lifestyle was largely dictated for the impoverished waves of immigrants, “Migrants who came on assisted passages were required to work for two years wherever they were sent, on jobs of the government’s choosing.” Opportunity was fettered by bureaucracy for, “the camp chose not to utilise the many skills of the foreign workers who were almost invariably given menial manual tasks. They were called ‘The Balts’ by most Australians in the area because so many of them came from the Baltic countries.” Restrictions were countered by greater “freedom and tolerance” than experienced under the Communist regime in Romania.

New arrivals naturally sought out others like themselves. Romulus had not even wanted to emigrate, “my father….looked forward to a rewarding future in postwar Germany, but my mother, restless and now stricken with asthma, looked elsewhere.. My Father did not want to go.” Romulus, like so many others like him, looked for those who spoke the same language and came from the same homeland; “As soon as my father arrived at the camp in May 1950” he found out about two Romanian brothers Pantelimon and Dumitru (Mitru) Hora and, “he sought them out and they quickly became friends.” Although they, unlike Romulus, were both “well educated, having completed high school in Romania”, ethnic ties surpassed social differences. “Pantelimon, whom my father always referred to as Hora during the course of their lifelong friendship..was taller and stronger in character than Mitru.” Hora becomes a crucial element in Gaita’s upbringing, a lynch-pin in the establishment of the moral codes that would inform his adult life. A special relationship was also engendered between Hora and Romulus, “My father befriended both brothers, but from the beginning his friendship with Hora went deeper.”
Father-Son Relationship

Family belonging is a central motif within the memoir which examines in essence the kind of father Romulus was for his son. While the many enigmatic qualities of Romulus as an individual are highlighted, it is within the context of his filial relationship to Raimond that the book takes spare. As the title makes clear, it is chiefly as ‘my father’ that the figure of Romulus is delineated. It is also made clear by the blended autobiographical / biographical format that the father is shown retrospectively through his son’s eyes. Hindsight and maturity inform the narrative, adding another level of complexity and introspection to the portrait that slowly develops throughout the thirteen chapters. As Gaita has later commented, Romulus, My Father is, “an act of witness, a testimony to the way my father lived his values and to the values themselves”. Those values lay at the core of what made Romulus the man he was, foregrounding him a man whose integrity and principles made him a man worthy of respect.

Family experiences mould our identity and worldview as Gaita makes clear in his appraisal. Gaita’s own values and moral outlook owes much to the moral ethos inherent in his upbringing and “the events of my childhood”. His tribute to filial love is based on his father’s compassion and innate honesty even though at times, his mental condition and the self-delusion that was symptomatic of it, challenged the validity of what constituted ‘truth’. While the author makes clear that his portrait of his father “is not a chronicle of facts” he also emphasises that their relationship ran deep and that the bond they shared remained a fundamental basis for their lives. It helped create a sense of mutual belonging and shared understanding. It was a relationship that was sufficient unto itself so that in typical understatement, Gaita can write, “My father and I lived contentedly at Frogmore.”

Friendship

The friendship and shared conversation enjoyed by his father became a key factor in Gaita’s formative years. Friendship is esteemed, a reflection of self and social identity, a benchmark against which attitudes and moral values can be tested. The conversations shared with Hora allowed ideas to be aired, tasted, compared and contrasted, helping the boy learn to become a man. Gaita highlights the importance of such friendship. “When Hora was at Frogmore he and my father often talked into the early hours of the morning, the kitchen filled with cigarette smoke and the smell of slivovitz. …..Their individuality was inseparable from their talk – it was revealed in it and made by it, by its honesty. I learnt from them the connection between individuality and character and the connection between these and the possibility of ‘having something to say’, of seeing another person as being fully and distinctively another perspective on the world.”

As Janet Strachan has pointed out in her review of Romulus, My Father, Hora is such an integral part of family life at some times in his growing up that he became a second ‘father’ figure and role model helping to foster the moral values that he came to live by. As Gaita later commented, “The friendship of my father and Hora, inspirational to me, was of course marked by (arguably universal) virtues such as loyalty, trust, and mutual respect, they despised the trappings of wealth and status.” Such observations help cement the impact of friendship to the development of a strong sense of self identity. We are told, “Hora often told me stories….As I grew older, the stories
changed from adventure tales to accounts of the deeds of great men or great humanitarians.” Stories shared by friends can have allegorical purpose, reinforcing principles and social beliefs. “Hora’s stories were always of men with ideals, devoted to science or to humanity, and who were persecuted by an arrogant and complacent establishment.” Such stories, coupled with family values fostered lessons of moral integrity. “I have never known anyone who lived so passionately, as did these two friends, the belief that nothing matters so much in life as to live it decently.” Both Horal and Romulus lived by their principles, demonstrating selflessness and boundless charity to others, Hora believing, “himself to be a man with sufficient courage to die rather than betray his principles or other people.”

The longevity of the friendship between Romulus and Hora, regardless of the strains that developed between them, demonstrates how important social bonds are for general well-being. Though friends who shared much, they remained individuals with idiosyncratic differences. Neither were simple, uncomplicated men. “Like many East Europeans who saw much corruption in the church, Hora was ferociously anticlerical. He spoke, however, with respect and affection for Christianity’s ethical vision and for those rare people in whose lives he had seen it practised.” Their forceful personalities led to disputes but despite, “their quarrels, Hora and my father remained friends, but friends apart. This was because of the strength of old bonds.” Romulus’s illness also led to the tempering of their relationship but later, “when his illness relaxed its grip…..their friendship revived.”

Romulus’s friendship with Mitrů is more problematic, given his liaison with his friend’s wife. Drawn close because of their common ethnic heritage, their lives become even more complicated. Sex is shown as a powerful force, compromising moral values and defying rational action. Even Mitrů’s own brother Hora, finds his betrayal of Romulus contemptible, “How can you let yourself fall so low?” he demanded of Mitrů. ‘How can you let yourself be trampled down by such a characterless woman? Why don’t you wake up and see what you have done to yourself?’ His dismissal of Romulus’s adulterous wife in turn helps undermine her already damaged self-esteem. The men are drawn together by shared philosophies but set adrift by her promiscuity.

Mitrů’s friendship with Romulus obviously suffers but each of the three men define themselves in part because of the relationships they share with one another. “My father was very fond of Mitrů because he was so evidently a good man, but he did not respect him as much as he did his brother. Mitrů was softer and also weaker.” Mitrů’s fragility of character and sense of guilt helps explain his decision to end his life, “In his own eyes Mitrů was a wretched man. He had taken the wife of a friend before whom he felt guilty and humiliated. His wrongdoing was unredeemed, for it brought happiness to no one and much misery.”

Gaita however is part of this friendship triangle and the impact of his mother’s infidelities on the men in her life, “I became close to Mitrů and very fond of him. He was gentle, quick to laughter and with a wit that showed the sharpness and delicacy of his intelligence. I did not then, or ever, fully know the degree of his pain. My mother had other lovers and he was tormented by jealousy.” While mention is made of other characters who impact on his growing up, it is the interplay and influence of the male figures in his life that help define the man he ultimately becomes.
Madness

Madness is a curse that falls on many of the characters that inhabit Gaita’s childhood world. Both his mother and father succumb to mental instability that poisons their lives and their relationships to varying degrees. It also confronts the audience who see how tenuous is mankind’s hold on sanity and how much suffering flows from its loss. All those who succumb to madness find themselves shunned and rejected by family, friends and strangers alike. Madness makes the sufferer an ‘outcast’, forced to deal with a situation over which they are largely incapable of dealing. Personality is shanghaied and replaced by something foreign and ungovernable. Gaita admits to his rejection of his father in the midst of his madness, “Afterwards a teacher asked me if one of the men had been my father. ‘No,’ I replied. I was later tormented with guilt and shame for having denied my father, but I knew not quite for what I was ashamed because I also knew that, terrible though it was, my denial was not prompted by cowardice.” Such admissions capture the frightening reality of this condition when he describes his father as, “falling into insanity.”

Romulus shared a strong friendship with Vacek which helped him cope with his mental illness. In talking about how his friend suffered because of his condition, Romulus concluded, “There is no sickness worse than mental sickness.” This assumption is well born out by the tragic events that unfold in the second half of the memoir. Although Romulus’s personality is marked by determination, resilience and courage, he too succumbs to insanity, choosing to admit “himself as a voluntary patient to the Ballarat psychiatric hospital” while he still had the presence of mind to do so. This is described as the ultimate place of alienation, physically, emotionally and psychologically withdrawn from normal human interaction. The memories of that time still powerful enough to trigger great pain; “my heart broke when I saw my father in the ward before he saw us, in a room full of visibly disturbed people, some obviously insane, and he shrunken and bewildered.” Madness had stolen for a time, the identity of this “passionate man”.

While the intensity of his father madness “became unbearable for me,” Romulus is able to endure, even though he exhibits a “terror of insanity”, unlike Mitru and his wife who are driven to suicide. Madness is a powerful recurring motif throughout the text, reinforcing our perceptions of how the condition isolates people, casting them apart. Early in the memoir, we are told that while Romulus, “was far from cured of his illness: his paranoia, his disposition to see omens everywhere, even his hallucinations persisted, but nothing seemed so fierce as before, about to consume him and everyone around him.” His illness also impacts on his relationships for “though he was often impossible to be with, and provoked quarrels with almost anyone who was not a saint, his essential character remained untouched by his illness.”

Romulus learns to cope with his condition and manages to more or less recover even though as his son observes, “he was permanently changed by it.” Emotional stability is provided by his relationship with Milka in the final phase of his life. She offered him something that previous women had failed to give, “he was out of touch with reality in a way that defied rational or factual correction, by himself or by others, and the intermittent realisation of that terrified him. To help him through his illness his strength of character needed the right kind of nurturing to function, and that, I believe, was given to him by the relative stability of his life with Milka.” Balance was also helped by his ongoing love of his garden and animals. Only when in old age, he finds less to keep him occupied does he
begin to decline. Depression sets in, made worse by his son’s living abroad. Their bond however remained strong, “He often said that it did not matter, since I was with him every day in his heart.”

Gaita’s mother is plagued by mental instability for most of her life although at first it is not really recognised as such. Hindsight enables the philosopher son to observe, ”My father, Hora and, I think, Mitru, did not appreciate the degree to which my mother's life and behaviour were affected by her psychological illness.” In an era that did not really understand the behavioural symptoms of different mental conditions, she was deemed negligent and slovenly rather than unbalanced. “After she gave birth to me, she showed signs of an illness that was to become increasingly severe in the coming decade.” Regardless of what her condition was actually triggered by, her inability to cope deteriorated over time; “She also heard voices….torment of her hallucinations…her psychosis.” Australians who knew her largely condemned her lack of maternal feelings as well as her sexual looseness. Insight comes too late to alter events, “Years later, Hora told me that, had he then understood what he now does, he would judge her differently, for he now knows that she could not help herself.”

Physical Context

The events and experiences within the memoir are played out against a landscape that is utterly unfamiliar to Romulus and his fellow migrants. While Gaita, as a second generation child of migrants, feels a much stronger affinity with the Australian terrain, “Though the landscape is one of rare beauty, to a European or English eye it seems desolate, and even after more than forty years my father could not become reconciled to it.” Gaita sees the physical world in which he grew up through different eyes, taking pleasure in “the grey and equally rounded granite boulders that stood among the long yellow grasses, sharply delineated at all times of day by the summer sun.” For his mother however, dead gums become a “symbol of her desolation”.

Much of Gaita’s childhood is spent in the regions of Central Victoria. One particular place, Frogmore which is near Maldon, typifies his lifestyle. “The farmhouse was called Frogmore. It was situated in one hundred and sixty hectares of sheep-grazing country….no electricity and no running water….The land around was mostly bare of trees” This Spartan existence becomes home for the boy and he and his father don’t find it oppressive in the way that his mother does. “Primitive though the house was, it made it possible for my father to keep me rather than to send me to a home, and it offered the hope that our family might be reunited.” Physical isolation worsened her condition but for the author the fact that there “were no other signs of human habitation the sight provoked a surge of affection for my primitive home.”

It was a place consolidation and bonding between father and son, “I never felt that we were poor, although I think we were judged so by others.” Basic needs were met and the author is able to look back and conclude that were “we were in need of nothing, nor did we forgo anything we desired….I was always adequately clothed and fed.” The lack of any pretentiousness was part of the boy’s moral and physical environment, “Nor have I known anyone so resistant and contemptuous, throughout their lives, of the external signs of status and prestige. This rough house in the middle of nowhere brought friends together, “All conversation, which meant all living, occurred in the kitchen.” It provided the physical requirements of shelter, hard work and friendship provided the rest.
Characterisation

Romulus

He is described as a handsome man of dark complexion, mockingly self-described as a ‘gipsy’ and ‘Aborigine’. His Slavic appearance is also noteworthy for his charismatic eyes, “Everybody noticed his eyes, almond-shaped, hazel and intense.” He “considered himself a Romanian” and although his formal education was minimal, he was fluent in four languages and a great lover of reading and learning. What also is made evident is the high quality of his workmanship. “My father was not merely skilled, he was a man of practical genius”. Gaita speaks with pride of his father’s practical ability, “peasant know-how” and skill in using tools and create both functional and artistic ironwork and other items such as garden furniture.

A skilled craftsman rather than just a manual worker, “He was able to make almost anything to the most exacting standards, and his work was unsurpassed in quality and speed.” The high standards of workmanship that he set himself impressed his son, who looking back can appraise how much it showed about his personality. His work ethic, personal pride in what his skills could achieve and confidence in his own ability to create constituted the values by which he lived his life. His skills were an integral aspect of his character, “Like him, his work was honest through and through.”

His working skills also generated a great deal of respect from others, including later day Hippies, beyond the sphere of family or friends. His skill as a worker was a cause for personal pride and it is one of the things he hated most about growing old and loosing full control of his hands, “He recovered quite quickly from his strokes, but never fully regained the control of his left hand.” He often looked at his hands and wondered what had become of him. ‘Can you believe how I used to be? He asked me. I’m good for nothing. Just for the rubbish heap.’

Values

Gaita has described his work as being “written from the perspective of my father’s values” This includes the virtues such as honesty, hard work and loyalty. Truth and morality go hand in hand for a man of character must stand by his principles and beliefs, regardless of personal cost. The son praises his father’s inner “strength of character” as well as his “unqualified sense of common humanity” which enabled him to see beyond personal needs in preference to meeting the needs of others. He does not however paint his father as an unrealistic saintly figure. He makes it clear that he had the fortitude to withstand things that would have crushed another, lesser man. We are told:

“He suffered hurt and humiliation, but he was good to an astonishing degree, and it showed in how he treated my mother and Mitru. That he could also hit me (a fact I make little of) and be prepared to commit murder (though no one knows whether he really had it in him) is not surprising if one remembers that his passionate nature was inflamed, in ways he never really understood, by his commitment to values that pulled him in contrary directions.”
Fearing that his son would inherit some negative traits from his mother, he urges his son, especially during the razor incident to be truthful at all time, warning sternly, “you must not lie. That is worse than any damage you might do.” Although, his illness at times undermined and compromised the values he held dear, it remained that, “my father valued truthfulness above most things” so much so that when in a fit state of mind, “he would never willingly lie.” Simple moral convictions such as admiring good workmanship and honesty remained important as did his detesting pretentiousness or grandiosity of any sort. He had, “no patience for superficialities” and dismissed “arrogant self-importance” as being shallow and unworthy. Above all else however was his deep compassion for others. Gaita later described his father as, “a man of character, a man of strength, integrity, courage, and so on, my father was exemplary but different only in degree from others. His goodness made him different in kind, and it showed most clearly in the quality of his compassion.”

**Personality**

It becomes clear throughout Gaita’s portrait of his father, that he is a complex man, contradictory in personality in some cases such as his “pious attitude” and “instinctive reverence” for church ritual and yet “suspicious of institutional religion”. He is also able to remain unembittered by the many hardships he is forced to endure such as his wife’s inability to stay faithful. To some extent this fortitude is explained by the author as typical of migrants of the era, “he was a typical immigrant of the time-had long come to accept what fate dealt him and felt no resentment or indignation.” Another apparent contradiction in this stoic personality was the fact that while, “not quick to anger”, “when his temper was aroused it could be fierce.” He was a man to be reckoned with and yet his generosity was often exploited by people such as Lydia and family relatives back home to whom he sent money or helped bring out to Australia to settle. “More often than not my father’s generosity was abused.’

Although “at home with the natural as much as the human world” and content to live at Frogmore, miles from anywhere, he was very much a social creature at heart who “loved to be among people”. This lack of social interaction was probably amongst the things he most missed about European life. His language still “rich in peasant imagery”, legacy of his cultural heritage, Gaita from the standpoint of time is better able to appreciate how much his father “longed all his life, for the European conviviality he knew as a young man.” He had indeed come to a new land and while he managed to assimilate better than many, he still “longed for European society” in general and the social interaction in particular that characterised his previous lifestyle.

Alienation is evident in his assertion “that he felt like ‘a prisoner’ in Australia”. This sense of exile was shared by his wife who dreaded the physical isolation and loneliness of being so far from any sense of community, physically isolated by the landscape. Better able to cope with the strain of being cutting off from others, Romulus survived where she did not. Paradoxically, Romulus remained someone who could work independently while yearning for social interaction; a man who, “enjoyed gossip and would talk about anything that engaged with the ordinary dramas and follies of life”. Conversation and social affability are important for we are told, “you were always welcome at his table, to eat and more importantly to talk; always to talk.” Compared to what he had known in Europe, Australian society seemed more inhibited and withdrawn, less open and inviting, especially to migrants.
Romulus deeply loves his son, shown by the overheard statement, “My son is everything to me.” This tacitly understood bond between them becomes more overt as his son becomes a man and in the schemes of life moves away to begin an independent life of his own. He finds companionship with the independently minded Milka, a strong woman described as having “a girlish innocence and a vivacity that charmed many who met her.” She was also just as hard-working, sharing his love of animals and small scale husbandry. Milka provides stability in the final stage of his life as his health begins to deteriorate with problems of angina and heart disease.

His fierce independence asserts itself again, “At first he said that he would refuse all operations because, as he put it, he would not consent to be ‘cut up’. He meant that he would not prolong his life with many operations because it was unnatural and undignified to flee death when nature had intended it for you…vain desire to live beyond your appointed time.” His love of animals is still keen for even when hospitalised and dying, Milka is sent to look after the needs of the animals at home. Perhaps the greatest mark of respect shown by his son’s final farewell, “I have been able to say: I know what a good workman is; I know what an honest man is; I know because I remember these things in the person of my father.”

Mother

Some reviewers have criticised the minor role played by Gaita’s mother in the story of his childhood but as Janet Strachan has pointed out, “this is not the mother’s story.” “Slightly shorter than average” with “black hair, a good figure, an open face with intense dark eyes and a musical voice” Gaita’s mother is a contradictory character. Better educated than Romulus and born to “very German middle-class parents” she is more at home in urban society where she can enjoy theatre, opera and “read Shakespeare in translation”. Her relationship with Romulus is intense for this “romantic and rebellious girl of sixteen”. To find herself in outback rural Australia would be like being exiled to a foreign world, regardless of how it might be beneficial to her health. Gaita describes his mother as a, “troubled city girl from Central Europe” unable to “settle in a dilapidated farmhouse in a landscape that highlighted her isolation.”

She is also depicted as deeply depressed and constantly unfaithful. “She was a woman who liked men,’ my father was to say later. He did not say this angrily. His tone was sorrowful and resigned.” We are told little about her but learn enough to recognise her mental instability, apparent almost from the start. We learn that, “Men found her attractive beyond her physical features” but that this was in combination with “vivacity and intense, haunted sadness.” A character of extremes, she is tempestuous and jealous but also debilitatingly negligent of handling even the most basic needs of her children, “She seemed incapable of taking care of me, ignoring my elementary needs of feeding and bathing.”

She cannot fulfil the roles of either wife or mother, unable to cope with the social identity prescribed to a woman of that time and place. She finds herself a castaway, unable to deal with her problems but unable to fully escape from them. While the author looking back acknowledges this, he is able to counter any perceptions of his being scarred by this with the statement, “My mother’s neglect of me was more than
compensated for by her family.” The love and devotion normally associated with a mother’s bond, misses a generation in her case so that it was his grandparents who,”doted on me, joyful in their unexpected gift of a grandchild.” The son recognises that she is incapable rather than unwilling to care for her offspring.

Her inadequacies are highlighted by association with the father’s attempts to fill the void. “My father must have been heartbroken by his unfathomable, troubled, vivacious and unfaithful wife”, her betrayal making the process of assimilation into a new life even more difficult. The father takes on both parenting roles, his “devoted care of me contrasted obviously with her neglect and this fuelled the hostility towards her.” Naturally, tensions “existed between him and my mother” and the author remembers the relationship between his parents was “irritable, often angry”. This was due to her infidelities and inability to be a proper wife or mother.

Gaita describes her as “highly intelligent, deeply sensuous, anarchic and unstable’ and although her characterisation lacks detail, it is vividly evoked. Through the perceptions of others, often reported long after the even, we get a poignant impression of a “desperately lonely” and “deeply depressed” individual who “longed for company.” Many around her saw only the outward symptoms of her psychological instability. Hora “disliked her” as a “characterless woman”, his contempt mirroring that of others who condemned her inconstancy. Looking back, it is now possible to recognise that the, “contempt for my mother…..was partly the cause of her failings as much as it was a response to them.”

Despite her faults, at the time of her suicide, Romulus wrote to her sister, “telling her of his grief and guilt and saying, “in my heart, I still loved her.’ This is mirrored almost “thirty years later” when “he told Hora’s wife that he never loved a woman as he had my mother.” Raimond Gaita expresses it best however in his response to comments made by David Parker in his article Multiculturalism and Universalim in Romulus, My Father.

“Trapped, so to speak, in the narrative genre of Romulus, My Father, my mother cannot appear full and vital on the page…….The characterization of my mother in Romulus, My Father is sparse. Nonetheless, judging by readers’ responses, she is sufficiently real on the page, sufficiently drawn as an individual, to fascinate and attract people — even to haunt them.”