

1975

A revival of the Gothic tale in French twentieth century literature : Claude Seignolle

Eric Deudon

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A REVIVAL OF THE GOTHIC TALE
IN FRENCH TWENTIETH CENTURY
LITERATURE: CLAUDE SEIGNOLLE

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A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

APRIL, 1975

**TO JACKIE WHO MADE IT ALL POSSIBLE,
WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE.**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	IV
FOREWORD BY LAWRENCE DURRELL	I
<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	
The Author	1
Influences	5
Inspiration	12
Motivations	16
Themes	20
Style and Progression	30
<u>TRANSLATION OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES</u>	
THE ROTTING DOG	35
THE CHARMER	41
THE CHIRPING HOOPOE	55
THE REAPER	60
THE MIRROR	68
THE SLEEPER	76
<u>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	
.....	86
VITA	87

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Neil Larkin and my second reader, Dr. Robert Terry, for not only helping me through the writing of this thesis, but also for believing in it and encouraging me from the very start.

I extend my warmest thanks to Claude Seignolle who, besides granting me the privilege of his friendship, provided me with a wealth of documents as well as numerous and helpful suggestions. May his generosity and kindness find here the expression of my deepest gratitude. I would also like to thank all the faculty of the French Department for their support, and Ms. Cyndy Lombart for her skilled assistance,

*



CLAUDE SEIGNOLLE

FOREWORD (*)

BY LAWRENCE DURRELL

It is perhaps the very diversity of his gifts and interests that has prevented Claude Seignolle so far from reaching the wide public that his work deserves. The scholars know him and rightly value his unique contributions to folklore; the novelist know well that his novels are a distinct contribution to literature, written as they are with the pure and forceful eye of the poet. Finally, those who are interested in the devil keep their eyes open for every new tale by this strange diabolist ... These little tales of mystery and horror have a quality which is entirely their own.

I speak of diversity in his work, yet to anyone who looks at the whole range of it there is also a great unity-- a unity of intention, of attitude. Everything he turns out has a sort of "Seignollisme" about it- the mark of a temperament which is at once curious, poetic and also realistic. He has achieved something rather strange. The devils, the

*Previously published in The Accursed (McCann, New York 1967). Reprinted by permission of Lawrence Durrell.

werewolves and vampires he has discovered as a scholar have been carefully captured for literature; in the toils of his sinuous vivid unaffected prose they struggle in vain. He holds them firmly under his pen. They appear in his novels as disturbing realities, and the attitude he adopts towards them is so matter-of-fact that the reader rapidly finds himself believing in them, as presumably the author himself does. It is doubly curious that (I speak of the artist now, not the scholar) he should be French, for the tradition to which he is so effectively contributing is not a French tradition at all. It is essentially the Romantic-Gothic tradition which calls to mind names like E.T.A Hoffman, Mary Shelley, Maturin, Monk Lewis. Yet in the actual execution of Seignolle there is a very special quality which comes, I believe, from the fact that he is a Frenchman and not either a German or an Englishman; he treats his frightening subject-matter with a rather terrifying lucidity and intellectual control which makes it most convincing. He is of course a born story-teller, but you never feel with his work (as you so often do with the Gothic school) that the writer has set out to "epater" you, or to frighten you. You feel that he is coolly describing something which is taking place before his eyes, and that these strange creatures of the human subconscious do really exist and can at will materialise before our eyes.

VIII

And if you feel at all incredulous about it a glance into one of his scholarly compilations will suffice to show you that whole communities believe in them as well ! The sorcerer, the vampire ... they are still alive today, acting invisibly on the secret life of man : they are not the dead subject-matter for scholarship alone, but also fitting material for the poet who is always turning over the stones of the human mind to see what might lie underneath. It does not take long to become completely seduced, completely "Seignollise". It is this curious taste of mystery which gives him poetic density in his work even when he is writing of things very far removed from the diabolical. In his memoirs of the war, for example, in La Gueule there is little enough about vampires or such matters; but the tone of his prose charges the atmosphere with the feeling of poetry and mystery. Poetic mystery hangs like a mist over his work. And yet - diable!- he is not dreamy, diffuse, sentimental; he is gay, strong, truthful and intense.

Seignolle has won a distinct place for himself in literature and his particular temperamental gift of qualities - poetry, mystery and irony set him apart from most writers of the day. Il est seul dans son genre!.

THE AUTHOR

To introduce Claude Seignolle is not an easy task. Widely known in France, Belgium, Switzerland and many other European countries, he has become one of the most prominent writers of a literary genre which has frequently remained on the edge of literary respectability: the Fantastic.

If his name is as familiar as Simenon to the French, if thousands of enthusiastic readers have become addicted to his gothic tales, he has yet to reach an American audience. After more than 25 books in continuous reprint, translations into more than eight languages, screen adaptations, television shows and a number of scholarly achievements, Claude Seignolle remains a stranger on this side of the Atlantic.

Only one of his books (The Accursed, remarkably well translated by Bernard Wall) has to this day reached the American public. Introduced in 1967, it met with a rather cool reception. The very nature and subject matter of Seignolle's work, mainly primitivism and popular tradition of French folklore, could have been enough to estrange the reader's interest because of its apparent complexity. Therefore, it is long overdue that another attempt be made to bring readers and scholars into contact with the literary heritage given to us by this author.

Before we analyze the works of Seignolle and their meaning, let us briefly get acquainted with the author himself - briefly, for his life could easily be the topic of an entire book. Claude Seignolle

was born in 1917 in Perigueux, France, the son of a somewhat eccentric middle class family whose members were to provide an early orientation toward the Unknown, the mysterious, for young Seignolle's mind. Long evenings spent listening to the eerie tales told by a grandmother from whom the creatures of darkness had no secrets; numerous afternoons in the company of his grandfather who introduced him (as did other members of his family who shared this same fascination) to the mysterious searching for ancient artifacts, Roman bottles, Gallic sword handles, etc. Thus the attraction for the dark world, the past and its enigmas, did not suddenly erupt in Seignolle's mind, it was the result of an influence which can be traced back to his very youth, when he was taught and directed by a family who knew how to communicate a wealth of tales of popular origin.

A student at one of the best "Lycees" of France, the Lycee Lakanal of Sceaux, near Paris, he was expelled at the age of fourteen, after displaying a definite lack of interest for school subject matters. Set free from the academic world, he decided to turn toward another source of learning:

Expelled from the "Taught knowledge," I had to content myself with natural knowledge, the knowledge sown in me by family heritage, curiosity, instinct and intuition....¹

This quest for a different sort of knowledge was to bring Seignolle into contact with a great variety of people. Addicted to

¹From a personal letter from the author (January 23, 1975).
(All subsequent quotations have been translated from the French.)

archeology, he became well-known through his work and was taken under the protection of Father Breuil (The discoverer of Lascaux prehistoric drawings) and the illustrious Theillard de Chardin. At the age of sixteen, he was introduced by them into the French Prehistoric Society of the Sorbonne, of which he became a life member.

These precocious achievements led to more in-depth studies of the almost forgotten tradition of French folklore, studies that he made public in his first book, a voluminous anthology published in 1937: Le Folklore de la Provence. World War II saw him prisoner of the Germans and his captivity was to provide him with a wealth of observations that would prove to be a strong source of inspiration in his subsequent books. After the war, he continued to write extensively, extending his studies of folklore from provence to other parts of France. Earning his living by managing a small cloth factory and supervising a publishing company, Seignolle gradually shifted the subject matter of his writings to novels and short-stories, all deeply rooted in the substance of his previous studies.

Success and public recognition came late for Seignolle, whose name became familiar in the sixties, as a sudden avalanche of literary prizes honored his book: Un corbeau de toutes couleurs (1962). Since then he has written about fifteen books of short stories, an anthology of the supernatural and an autobiography. Amidst numerous screen adaptations and translations of his works, Seignolle, now famous, continues to live in the same fashion as he did when he was obscure. Very little is known of his private life or of his family and he has never divulged much information about himself. Legends

have built up in the general public which, lacking requisite knowledge, has tried to imagine what he could be like:

People imagine weird stories: I died long ago, I am an old warlock living like a recluse in Sologne, I have magic powers.... A myth has developed about me and time will probably make it worse....²

Actually, Claude Seignolle is a man totally different from the substance of his writings. Warm and friendly, he emanates a feeling of constant vigor, of happiness and of a joy of life:

I am happy to live a rollicking life, to have had good and bad luck; wealth and misery, bicycle or Cadillac, to have seen Hitler alive and Stalin dead....³

Now famous and surrounded by literary and artistic celebrities, he has kept a wonderful sense of humor and still walks daily through the streets of Paris, searching in old book stores, meeting witches and mulling over the treasure of memories kept in his mind, until he suddenly seals himself off from the external world, when the contiguous forces of dormant thoughts come together in his mind, giving birth to another volume of gothic tales.

*

²From a personal letter from the author (January 23, 1975).

³From a personal letter from the author (September 19, 1974).

INFLUENCES AND PLACE IN LITERATURE

As the task of assigning any author a definite place in a literary movement has always proved to be delicate, it is likewise impossible to fit Claude Seignolle into a school of thought of any one group. This contemporary author has inaugurated a style of his own, a manner of writing and of thinking that belongs only to him. Nevertheless, even his originality has found its links to past authors or literary schools with which he neither hides nor denies a certain affinity.

From his family, Claude Seignolle is a direct descendant of Brantome, the 16th century author who so vividly chronicled life at the court of Marguerite d'Angouleme. This heritage has always enchanted Seignolle who views it as perhaps a sign of fate in his career, as he has always been fascinated by the story tellers of southern France. He was born in that atmosphere where legends and oral traditions are transmitted to children in their youngest years. Thus his family, along with his southern French noble ancestry, has played an important part in the development of his literary preferences. But if we can assign Seignolle to an almost predilective geographical area, it is much more challenging to link him with a literary movement:

Claude Seignolle is difficult to identify with a school or a tradition. One would think of Miller or Cendrars, when suddenly the name of Montaigne appears, swiftly shadowed by the one of Nerval....¹

¹Bernard Planque: Un Aventurier de l'insolite: Claude Seignolle
p:9 FANLAC 1960.

But above all, it is Nerval who represents for Seignolle a sort of family link in poetry....²

Seignolle's love and admiration for Montaigne are no secrets to his readers. Both of them are from the same region, that rich and productive soil of the Perigord, where life is by tradition a value to be celebrated. It is perhaps a reminiscence of the past when nobles from Perigord enjoyed the most active intellectual pastimes at their courts, where even food or the taste of wine generated a certain philosophy of life.

Seignolle can be associated with Montaigne by the subject matter of his writings: the desire to study man, to witness his "passage" and to catch his essence wherever possible, a quest that seems infinite by the immensity of its scope, but that finds its resolution by the author's study of himself in order to study man. Seignolle and Montaigne also share the same propensity to digress, to allow their minds to wander pages away from what the reader took to be the title of a chapter. This likeness that will be explored further, is beautifully acknowledged by Seignolle who write as an epigraph to his anthology Folklore de la Provence, a quotation from Les Essais of Montaigne.

In the same manner, the fraternity between Nerval and Seignolle is acknowledged by the epigraph written for the novel La Brume ne se

²Figaro Litteraire: extrait de la critique d'Andre Rousseaux (9-17-60).

levera plus. It is a confession of a shared feeling, an understanding of another world:

Gerard, remember that shadowy alley...that gate...feel that rope angrily grabbing your throat to throw you in a sudden dark pit.... Gerard, why did you not wait?....

Nerval used to descend into a world that he alone knew; and when he would return, the author of Chimeres was like a mystic in ecstasy: his belief in that other world and in immortality was strengthened. Seignolle confesses something quite similar when he says:

the fantastic gave me the secret of long life, even eternal life. It is just a question of organization and patient awaiting....³

This communion of thought has always been dear to Seignolle, even if his own style and expression remain quite different from the lyricism of Nerval. As for other influences, Seignolle deeply admires Restif de La Bretonne, Guy de Maupassant, and Edgar Allan Poe, to whom he affectionately refers as "the grand-father of us all."⁴ If we now try to link Seignolle to a literary movement, we face the same difficulty we might encounter with any prolific author whose interest and style have considerably evolved with time, and still continue to evolve. The first notion that comes to mind is that Seignolle is

³G. Jacquemin, Claude Seignolle, p:31.

⁴Personal letter from the author (January 23, 1975).

only a contemporary writer by the date of his birth. His literary identity is found in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We could attempt to define him as an author in whom realism, romanticism and even naturalism can be simultaneously found. Realism is a driving strength in Seignolle's writings. It is a will to describe life in a positive way, to make us discover people as they are, things as they meet the eye. It is that force that gives his works the aspect of a document, a simple, precise description of the world as it is.

The second force that can be traced all through his short stories and novels is the Fantastic. The discovery of the things which are not apparent to our eyes, that cannot be heard unless we give ourselves the necessary time to listen. This trend, that others could call imagination, blends with realism throughout every book. Seignolle makes us look at the world and at its people, but as soon as an accurate description has been made, the power of the Fantastic enters to add another dimension to reality.

When Seignolle shows us a house, or an old woman, the accuracy of the description reminds us of Balzac. Everything is there: it could be Vautrin smoking a pipe in the garden of the pension Vauquer. This first setting presented, the author then shows us that beyond the aspect of these walls or the physical dimension of this man just described lies something else -- something that the eye will not see and that the mind has to discover. The man sitting in the garden is real, but beyond reality, something is hidden, and this man could

literally be the Devil incarnated. We will not see hooves in his shoes or pointed ears under his hat, something that would betray his identity. Seignolle will show us what our eyes can see. It will be left to our mind to go beyond mere appearance to know that behind the innocent look of that old lady whom you may help cross the street, there smolders an unsuspected source of evil powers.

Such knowledge is thus the unique property of sensitivity and intuition alone. We can witness in every book of Seignolle that same blending of realism (sometimes even edging onto naturalism, when his description of putrified matter and rotten consciences bring him quite close to Zola) and the supernatural. The distance that separates them is that path the reader has to walk in order to proceed beyond the reflection of reality, towards another substance that lies behind the mirror of our eyes:

"the definition of Seignolle's talent can be summed up in these two words: realism and Fantastic.... The Fantastic of Seignolle penetrates realism as though these two notions were one single element...."⁵

Seignolle is a realist in his own way, he is Zola corrected by Hugo....⁶

Many aspects of Seignolle's work remind us of the romantic-realist tradition. Throughout more than 25 books, the author portrays

⁵Figaro Litteraire: extrait de la critique d'Andre Rousseaux (9-17-60).

⁶G. Jacquemin: Claude Seignolle, p:74.

a panorama of our society: palaces and tenements, cities and country villages. In the manner of Balzac, he goes beyond mere description to arrive at a portrait that reflects man's condition: our fears and anxiety, our consciences are analyzed through the depiction of many characters in all possible situations of life. Even Seignolle's approach is reminiscent of eighteenth and nineteenth century authors. He confessed that writing is to him a sentence he has to serve, a jail where he voluntarily confines himself to work:

another myself struggles in me...it buries
me alive for days...and what a torture: to
write...endlessly...to write...

To further the comparison with the romantics, we witness in his works a certain feeling of "Elevation," of initiation. A force which gradually builds up from the simple penetration of French folklore to the celebration of a cult: the cult of the mystical essence that exists beyond reality. Although Seignolle would categorically deny any comparison with the last literary period of Hugo, he has now become more than a writer. More and more his works show a trend towards a real initiation: a discovery of the unknown which goes beyond the printed words into every aspect of life, into the reader's mind.

For Seignolle, this substance is now not only beyond but also above reality; the reader must cross an imaginary line to come closer to it. Thus the latest work of Seignolle clearly shift the notion of

⁷Claude Seignolle: Un homme nu, p:9.

unknown towards absolute; and this is why, if we wish to find a place in literature for Seignolle's writings, we see it, with all necessary reserves and exceptions, as a resurgence of the Romantic school.

INSPIRATIONS

The archeological and scientific background of Claude Seignolle has always been his underlying source of inspiration. What was undertaken primarily as scholarly research proved to be an immense store of ideas for tales of all kinds. After writing so many books which remain the working tool of any student of French folklore, Seignolle only had to retrace his steps to his first studies to find inspirations for his tales. However, his interest in old legends and living witches shifted from the scientific point of view to a desire to make French folklore live again within the frame of fiction.

This represents the remarkable evolution of an author who knew how to transform years of searching and investigations into a corpus of material that would be more accessible to the general public. Seignolle thereby achieved the goal of preserving the substance of oral tradition by scientifically studying and compiling French folklore, as a contributor to the French Prehistorical Society, and by reviving what might have remained scholarly achievements in the form of short stories and novels. His contribution to folklore is therefore remarkable on both the scientific and popular level.

We do not know of any other writer who, at the same time, gave such a wealth of information and the result of their application in the novel..."¹

¹A. Durand-Tullou, Du chien au loup-garou Maison-Neuve (1961).

This archeological background is far from being a memory of the past. Even today, if he no longer digs in Gallic graves, Seignolle is still haunted by an unceasing desire for the bizarre and the past. His former excavation sites are now fictionally the streets of Paris, the Roman graves have given way to suburban cemeteries.

Seignolle has simply changed the site of his quest, and leaving the shovel and the pick aside, it is now with a pen that he searches through another rich soil, having turned into an archeologist of the mind. The study of contemporary legends has now replaced Gallo-Roman mythologies, the ancient gods have become the superstitions and fears which animate twentieth century man. We can therefore see the continuity that exists between the scholarly work of Seignolle and his gothic tales.

If times have changed, the preoccupations of the human mind have remained the same, and the beliefs of ancient times have not died, they have merely undergone a mutation, reappearing under a more modern guise that cannot conceal their similarity. The Gallic Shaman has simply been reincarnated into the fortune-teller or the faith-healer of our cities.

His tales...reflect all beliefs, all superstitions, every malevolence, they make use of these popular symbols which struggle to find immortality in the most insignificant events....²

²Rene Doyon, A la recherche du Vrai a travers l'oeuvre de Claude Seignolle (1959).

The other equally important source of inspiration for Seignolle is his own self. Not only is his youth rich in events that he often transposed in his stories, but his family and the many people he came to meet (scientists, authors or villagers) have also provided him with an abundance of information and memories. Thus his own experiences as an archeologist or a prisoner of war have been the topics of entire novels.

Seignolle believes in the adventures of his characters. To what extent are they not his own...?³

Seignolle uses either the memories he kept of encounters with extraordinary characters, or he simply takes reality as it exists around him and, acting as a magician, changes its appearance while he retains its substance, projecting his imagination onto the flux of everyday life:

'These places I describe are in myself,' confesses Seignolle. All his Fantastic is like an intimate affair, it comes from within and not without.⁴

Claude Seignolle sketches some of his characters from his own acquaintances or family members, either to enhance a characteristic or one facet of an individual, or to allow his subconscious to materialize its obsessions on paper, in the same manner as we would dream

³G. Jacquemin, Claude Seignolle p:26.

⁴Ibid., p: 32.

away the buried thoughts and troublesome memories that linger in us:

Almost all my stories have a part of
autobiography in themselves.....if I
write "The Mirror," "The Rotting Dog,"
or "The Reaper"...it is above all to
exorcise myself of characters with whom
I have lived, who tortured me and whom
I made suffer.....⁵

The inspiration of Claude Seignolle is therefore derived from two main sources: his background as an archeologist, which provided him with the substance of his books, and his own self, the man, who gave these dormant tales a new life, by making them real again; and for Seignolle the fantastic is real, real for anyone who allows it to grow and bloom in himself.

*

⁵From a personal letter from Seignolle, (January 23, 1975)

MOTIVATIONS

There are no superstitions, there are only survivals.¹

All secondary considerations left aside, there is only one reason which motivates Seignolle to write: the desire to preserve primitive customs and to save whatever our civilization has left of popular traditions in French folklore. This commitment, appearing at the time of the author's early archeological studies, is not only the motivation behind his books, it also represents a 'credo,' almost a way of life:

I looked for something nobody seemed to see and which was staring at us: the superstitious popular soul. Therefore I do not convey a message but carry out a rescue...²

Thus the safeguard of superstitions and primitivism is not a mere desire to store away relics of the past in a card catalogue, it is a will, a necessity for Seignolle, to make them live again. For he believes that beside their historical or literary value, these folk legends and superstitions represent the natural human source of initiatory knowledge, from the time when materialism had not tarnished the primitive impulse of intuition:

¹Iblis, 2.72 p:19.

²Personal letter from Seignolle, (September 20, 1974).

The folk tale tellers are the keepers of secrets which, to be primitive, are nonetheless of an initiatic source.... and to save superstitions, means to preserve for our human heritage, the respectable rags which bring warmth to our psyche....³

For Seignolle, there is much to be learned from these reminiscences of the past, they remain the pure expression of fear before the universe, a genetic fear that modern times endeavour to calm by assigning to these ancient legends the name of ignorance.

But Seignolle clearly separates ignorance from 'unwillingness to know.' The Fantastic remains for him the literary expression of primitive thoughts that are dormant in us, hidden perhaps, but ready to be revived at the mere contact of darkness:

It is our goal to make people realize that fantastic literature is not only a flower of human thought, but also a teaching, a warning, a wisdom and a fascinating philosophy, even if it lies in a dusty attic....⁴

In this effort to preserve oral tradition and to reveal its true meaning, Seignolle has become almost a medium who strives to relay to us a knowledge from ancient times through the means of fantastic literature. Conveying the riches of the past, the author has gradually come to be absorbed in his subject matter. At first fascinated by

³Personal letter from Seignolle, (September 20, 1974).

⁴Loc. cit.

the literary resources of fantastic literature, he has become an adept of supernatural initiation, and his position today is no longer that of a writer, but instead that of an initiate in the substance of his own writings:

It is not with impunity that an author penetrates the secrets of the unknown, he fades into them instead of assimilating them and can only become himself a hero of his own tales. It is the reward of sincerity, objectivity, and total commitment....⁵

In this manner, the works of Claude Seignolle become humanistic. Through the unknown and the fantastic, the author searches for a hidden substance he feels present around him; and this substance, he finds in man alone. Thus his books are not only a journey in darkness and supernatural, they are a quest for reaching the depths of the human soul and its very essence:

The works of Seignolle put us in the presence of man; not so much by the precision of his description but by a certain thickness, an uneasy feeling that surrounds all humanity.⁶

Searching for what he believes to be the lost conscience of our civilization, the author constantly lies in wait for events and situations that will lead him to the very heart of the unknown, things of everyday life that have ceased to attract our interest, or perceptions

⁵Personal letter from Seignolle, (December 7, 1974).

⁶G. Jacquemin: Claude Seignolle, p:86.

that our senses can no longer feel:

I am deeply interested in Seignolle's work...for most people are not curious. They do not even look or listen when the strangeness of the unknown offers itself to them....⁷

This quest gives Seignolle's work that feeling of purity, simplicity and almost 'naivete' which, along with his deep commitment to preserve primitivism and folklore, betrays an unceasing feeling of warmth and love for man.

*

⁷Jacques Bergier: foreword to Invitation au chateau de l'etrange

THEMES

The primary theme found in Seignolle's writings is the Fantastic, a constant and persistent penetration into the world of the unknown. The author's approach to these satanic spheres always originates from the level of the real world. That is, there is at first a moment of amazement and wonder, as the protagonist discovers the supernatural, the crescendo of terror beginning only when he suddenly realizes that this unknown is not a remote entity, but instead a presence born out of everyday reality, a person or a sight with which he was familiar, only to discover them now in a new light.

This supernatural world is inhabited by creatures of the dark such as werewolves, vampires and witches. In the end, all these human mutations reveal themselves to be nothing but the ever-changing incarnation of that one power of darkness: the Devil, the living force of French folklore.

When he writes gothic tales, Claude Seignolle....does not turn away from folklore; he explores its rich and secret resources by assigning in his work an important place to the wisest and most constant character of this world: the Devil....¹

The appearance of the Devil in Seignolle's stories is far from being limited to its popular imagery. Seldom does the Devil appear as

¹Figaro Litteraire, Critique d'Andre Rousseaux, (9-17-60).

a monstrous beast or under some frightening human incarnation. His presence is rather felt than seen - felt in the acts of the characters or perceived under an innocent guise. If the author wishes to incarnate Satan as a creature of flesh and blood, it will be most likely under the appearance of a shepherd or a country blacksmith whose looks will not betray his true identity.

For Seignolle, Satan is a spirit, a spirit which cloaks itself in human or bestial semblances.... Indeed these are only appearances....²

The part played by the Devil is therefore to be understood as a most subtle manifestation. Seignolle does not remain at the level of the eternal duality, God versus Satan. He goes further than that. The cosmic rivalry of the powers of good and evil evolve beyond their popular and religious aspects to become a struggle of spirits and feelings.

For Seignolle, the old antagonism God-Devil seems old-fashioned. Everything happens as though the problem was elsewhere, at the level of strange coincidences and unexplained influences....³

This evil spirit is therefore an entity that loses a cosmic dimension to turn into a force which potentially inhabits every character. The Devil becomes man himself, not only as a mere human incarna-

²Edmond Locard, Les cahiers du chene d'Or, 1963, p:17.

³G. Jacquemin: Claude Seignolle, p:41.

tion (e.g.: The Sleeper), but also as a presence which finds itself prisoner of its disguise, to the point of actually experiencing and fighting true human feelings that clash with its satanic identity.⁴ The Devil is for the author a presence alive in any community, and this presence enables him to introduce the supernatural in everyday life. The Fantastic is thus something that belongs to reality and is no longer the quality of phantasmagorical situations alone. Seignolle takes reality and merely unveils its darkest details without having to imagine others.

These tales do not invent unworldly things - they only allow the Fantastic to come out from the ordinary that contained it....⁵

Nothing is invented, nothing explained, the reader is simply "Seignollise"....⁶

If the author need not embellish anything to achieve fiction, it is precisely because he views reality as the unique source of his inspiration. For Seignolle, the Fantastic, the unknown, are at all

⁴This is illustrated by the tale: Le Diable en Sabots, in which a country blacksmith, an incarnation of Satan himself, lures a young innocent girl to help him carry out his plans, and gradually falls in love with her, thereby finding himself in a struggle with his inner satanic nature.

⁵Figaro litteraire, critique d'Andre Rousseaux, (9-17-60).

⁶New York Times, (8-27-67), p:32.

times among us and everyday life is for him a constant and amazing journey through the unknown.

You ask me: what is the tie which unites all your stories? I will answer: Life as it comes, death as it passes by....⁷

That is why Seignolle's stories focus almost exclusively on mankind, since man himself represents for the author the most unknown and strange creature of this earth. Short story writer, archeologist and researcher, Seignolle remains above all a humanistic writer, an observer of fear, anxiety and illusions of all sorts. Beyond the depiction of peasants; soldiers, superstitions and sortilege, there is man and his conscience; man with his potential for evil or for friendship and love. This constant and faithful observation is perhaps for Seignolle his most important commitment as a writer.

His fantastic is by no means unwarranted.... Seignolle does not invent the shiver he gives us. He improvises nothing. He follows the tracks of the Fantastic which haunts thousands of human beings....⁸

This study of man, along with the constant blending of fiction and reality provides the bridge between Claude Seignolle the author and Claude Seignolle, the man. As stated previously, many of his tales emerge from the reality which surrounds him, be it his own family or his friends. But a sort of interaction has also taken place through-

⁷Claude Seignolle: Un homme nu. Epigraph p:8.

⁸Hubert Juin: La Malvenue, p:6.

out the years. Explorer of the unknown, Seignolle has seen his own tales, born from matters of fact, suddenly clash with everyday life.

Thus the French film star of the late fifties, Martine Carol, was found dead in her bed, struck by a heart attack, a book of Seignolle's tales in her hands, open to one of the most frightening episode of La Malvenue. What could be mere coincidence or even gruesome publicity for the author turned out to be another chapter of the intervention of the supernatural in everyday life. Years after this tragic event, the former tenant of the apartment Seignolle had been occupying for twenty years came to inquire whether he could see once more the place he had lived in, probably out of nostalgia. After Seignolle let him in, the man told him of his misfortunes as he paced through the rooms. He confided in Seignolle the tragic death of his sister-in-law which had afflicted him ever since. His sister-in-law had been Martine Carol herself, and unaware of the abyss of amazement he was opening for the author, he eventually mentioned that his sister-in-law's room, was what had now become Seignolle's study - the very room in which the author wrote the book which perhaps played an instrumental part in the promising star's death!

In yet another macabre intrusion of reality into fiction, Seignolle, in September 1965, took the road to Belgium to visit his long time friend, the writer Jean Ray. After spending an evening with him and telling him his latest tale, The Reaper, Seignolle drove back to his hotel to spend the night there. The next morning, as he was ready to return to Paris, Seignolle was attracted by a peculiar noise coming from the street. Just in front of the hotel, stood an old itinerant

knife-grinder, who looked exactly like the old man in The Reaper. Seeing Seignolle looking at the window, he asked him for work as he kept sharpening an ancient scythe blade on a creaky grindstone. Transfixed, Seignolle confessed that he then experienced the frightening feeling of having awakened some dormant and satanic reality, by indulging in what he thought to be only a fictional literary creation. He also admitted that he dared not touch his car for the entire day and left only the morning after. The mere reading of The Reaper will convince the reader that it was indeed a wise precaution: A circle inevitably closes itself.⁹

These occurrences are no longer extraordinary for Seignolle. Convinced that he is mingling with powers which have been forgotten for so long, and having penetrated the unknown with an interest which has grown much deeper than that of a simple writer, Seignolle sees reality as being not only the source of his themes, but also as a reawakened unknown which continues to disrupt his own everyday life.

How many times have I been spied upon,
followed and threatened at night....
But try to assign a face, a name, an
epoch to baneful influences from several
angry pasts, which stagnate in inexpug-
nable shelters, like old gargoyle-shaped
buildings....¹⁰

⁹Iblis, 1972, vol I, p:88.

¹⁰Ibid.

All other themes in Seignolle's books are derived from his primary interest in the study of man. Thus we will witness a constant feminine presence throughout novels and short stories, where a woman becomes prey to man's desire or an incarnation of satanic powers. Although magic often was in the middle ages an almost exclusive matri-archal practice, Seignolle does not depict many witches in his stories. In general, one could say that it is man who, most of the time, falls prey to evil tendencies. Even if Seignolle's women have their share of malevolent influences, he prefers to depict them as a source of tenderness and love.

Characters sensitive to love, Seignolle's heroines are...close to nature and represent a certain heathenism mixed with religion, a blending still frequently encountered in our countryside.¹¹

Man's surroundings also play an important part in the author's themes. Emphasizing the power of nature, Seignolle assigns significant roles to things and objects. Sometimes edging onto a semblance of naturalism, he stresses the presence of matter and food, picturing them in states of utter decomposition (e.g. The Rotting Dog), in the same manner as he depicts man's depravity through his evil instincts.

Animals are found in many instances (The Chirping Hoopoe, The Charmer, The Rotting Dog, etc.), for they also possess the natural and sometimes devilish powers of matter. As Seignolle finds the best illustrations of evil incarnate in the rivalry between men, (be it

¹¹G. Jacquemin: Claude Seignolle, p:63.

World War II, as depicted in the novel Les Loups Verts and in the tale The Rotting Dog), or personal vengeance between two farmer's families, (e.g. Marie La Louve), the theme of war has been a rich source of inspiration for an author who sees it as the most complete liberation of man's inner evil.

A war is between men. and not between soldiers.¹²

Another theme found in Seignolle's works is the theme of time. Time becomes an entity whose relativity enables the author to play with it. It can also grow into another force which serves the world of the unknown, an immaterial reality which controls its own traps (e.g.: The Chirping Hoopoe). Time is feared by the author, not only because of the decay that it brings, but also by the deceitful powers it possesses.

One of my mottos is "Time serves those who place themselves out of time"....¹³

The last theme we find in Seignolle's books is perhaps more than a source of inspiration; it is almost a commitment from the author. It is an open state of hostility, even warfare, against intellectualism. Seignolle sees this trend very much alive in the twentieth century, where mind has taken over matter through the power of science.

¹²Personal dedication from the author in his book Les Loups Verts.

¹³Personal letter from the author, (January 23, 1975).

Intellectualism is for the author that literary tendency of dissecting any piece of literary creativity, making it lose its innocence and freshness.

Intellectualism is far from being restricted to literature for Seignolle, as he senses its presence everywhere in our modernized society. Progress and science are not enemies of the author, but the pride and the uncontrolled self-satisfaction and certitude that they bring manage to make man forget about the hidden reality and the wealth he carries within, entities which are not subject to any intellectual analysis. If intellectualism kills primitivism and popular tradition for Seignolle, it also destroys the natural gifts of intuitional creativity.

What is killing the French spirit is that horrible venomous centipede which is intellectualism... It blows a dry wind...and we have lost innocence in literature... Popular tales are discarded as elementary school subject matters...¹⁴

It is perhaps to escape that form of intellectualism, as it exists in our cities, that Seignolle takes shelter in the countryside, where primitivism and innocence still enjoy an undisturbed existence. When the author returns to the cities, it is always to extricate the unknown from behind the neon barriers that surround it. Under the cover of the night, he is then able to search and find again their

¹⁴Personal letter from Seignolle, (September 10, 1974).

magic powers.

The strange feeling to walk, dressed in a raincoat, through a decor built for the doublet, the cape and the rapier!¹⁵

*

¹⁵Claude Seignolle, as quoted in Iblis, 1972, vol. I, p:80.

STYLE AND PROGRESSION

This constant and open struggle against intellectualism has led Claude Seignolle away from the style of many twentieth-century writers. Expelled from school at an early age, the author learned the art of writing through the people he met and the research he pursued. Thus he has never hidden what a certain class of critics might call a lack of sophistication. On the contrary, Seignolle remains proud of the way he expresses himself, as his style is a faithful reflection of his thoughts and his way of living: instinctive, warm and intuitive, sometimes naive, always pure and sensitive.

I write without a concern for style, the way
I feel, at one given moment, as my heart guides
me....¹

One cannot help but think of the similarity of these lines with those Montaigne wrote in Les Essais:

The Search for unknown words and new sentences
comes from a scholastic and childish ambition...
The language I like is a single and naive one,
the same on paper as it is uttered by mouth...²

Like Montaigne, Seignolle believes in the natural and spontaneous way of writing. After studying French folklore and popular traditions for years, he has transferred into his works the simplicity and freshness

¹From a personal letter from Seignolle, (January 23, 1975).

²Montaigne, Les Essais, I, 26, pp:212-213 (Gallimard, 1965).

of rustic style, the manner in which stories are told by the fireside. But safeguarding the past does not imply that Seignolle never wishes to improve himself. If he wants to relay to us the heritage of popular tradition, the author is not self-satisfied but instead strives constantly to preserve the purity of his message.

My characters no longer say: "you've seen," but: "you have seen"; these are perhaps details, but they are also the proof that my books have not become fossilized. They are alive, and as long as I live, I will improve them. One day, they will go back to the anonymous soil from which I took them; it is their fate, the fate of all legends...³

Thus Seignolle is quite aware of his disparity with the intellectual world of today's literature. But this does not annoy him in the slightest, for he compares his style to a second self, a product of intuition and maturity.

By refusing all compromises with the academic world, with rules or customs, and by drawing his knowledge from the very heart of French folklore, he has himself become a legitimate heir to popular traditions.

I disregard the rules of "proper" writing. I still make horrible spelling and syntactic mistakes which the hypocritical appellation of "typo" does not absolve...⁴

There is a definite evolution in Seignolle's style, an evolution

³Iblis, vol I, p:17.

⁴Claude Seignolle, Un homme nu, p:15

which makes the writings follow the author's increasing maturity. Besides the development of vocabulary and the unceasing improvement of the text, we witness an evolution towards an even greater simplicity. Having already written the geographical background of his tales by numerous previous descriptions, Seignolle no longer deems it necessary to linger on local color. He now focuses his efforts upon feelings, emotions and analyses of his characters' psyche.

My most recent tales are above all personal introspections. I now dream of writing the perfect tale, the one which would be similar to a sketch of Picasso, ... Each time stripping itself of surplus and over-elaboration, to achieve the most perfect restraint.⁵

As the reader proceeds through Seignolle's books, he gradually realizes that the numerous landscapes and various characters portrayed by the author reveal themselves to be nothing more than Seignolle himself. All these mysterious villages and eerie cities, along with the cohort of so many diversified protagonists, are the reflections of the imagination, intuition and multiple facets of Claude Seignolle, the man.

And we shall once again link him with Montaigne, when we say that the result of such a long and elaborate search, if it rightly serves the cause of reviving French folklore, also represents the ultimate evolution for the author. Through the careful portraying of society and man's condition, he has eventually portrayed himself. The resolution of this quest does not represent an end in itself. As Seignolle once wrote: "A circle inevitably closes itself."

⁵From a personal letter from Seignolle, (January 23, 1975).

The final step of this search is thus an interaction in which Seignolle discovers man's condition through himself, and at the same time finds his own identity through the portrayal of others.

* * *

At the close of what we have attempted to be a presentation of Claude Seignolle and his work, I dare hope the reader is now asking to read for himself this author's tales. Besides one volume (The Accursed, McCann, N. Y., 1967), which is a translation of two short novels, there had not been to this date an English translation of Seignolle's short stories. In the following pages, I have chosen a collection of them, drawn from five different volumes, which I have translated from the French.

Blessed and Guided by the author's friendship, I have endeavoured to preserve the flavor and the style of the original text. The reader being sole judge of my efforts, it is my hope that I could be in some way instrumental in his desire to discover more of Seignolle's writings and become, as I have, "Seignollisé."

Each translator brings new details which belong to the process of oral transmission. I am inclined to like that, for it makes me the link of a long chain...¹

¹Iblis, vol. I, p:13.

the rotting dog

(Translation of "Le Chien Pourri",

Selected from Recits Cruels, Pp :171-180.)

THE ROTTING DOG

It was in October 1939. The French army was scrambling and burrowing like a fox in its den, its trenches and saps, following the example of World War I. Ruse was our way of fighting, ruse for food, sleep or disease with the hope of recovery. The War? Yes, we were getting our feet wet in it, but wasn't it phony that mute war! We, khaki foxes facing an invisible and lumbering pack of green wolves who, squatting a few miles away from us, took the war dead seriously.

Every day it rained more than we could take. The sky, dying of an early autumn, was wretched and depressing. The end of the world seemed near but we were voraciously devouring our wasted era thanks to a magnificent field-kitchen which, sheltered under a humble awning, was the heart of our motorized detachment, the high altar of the venerated and respected Holy feeding.

And, just as in the olden days, when the faithful erected their miserable and parasitical abodes on the hillside of sacred monuments, and as swallows glue their wart-like nests on the front of our houses, the detachment had erected its individual tents, or parked its trucks in the orbit of the field-kitchen, in order to be able, at any given moment, to become inebriated with the nourishing scents of beef-stew, french fries, rice with gravy or the ritual coffee, precious consolations that were artistically cooked for us by Leon, my accomplice, for I was at that time the food supply clerk.

I cannot help talking again about the field-kitchen, our sanctuary. Looking like a toad, it had two bellies, which were the front locker for the meat and the vegetables; and a bladder, the sacred little rear tank reserved for coffee, at the bottom of which one would inevitably find, when scoured once a month, skins and tiny bones of cooked and over-cooked rats, which had clumsily fallen in it, for the coffee thieves always left the lid ajar so as not to repeat their noise.

The hearths were huge and solid--Fortunately, since to make the green and wet wood catch fire, we had to sprinkle it with generous bowlfuls of gasoline: ten quarts that we would set afire by throwing in a torch from a distance. The fire started and raged without ever failing, each time projecting outside the hearth a comet tail that threatened to kick the thing back like an old siege cannon.

The dumping area, the open wound of any field-kitchen, stood a little to one side. Every week we would pour about twenty gallons of gasoline on its rottenness so as to purify it from the millions of worms swarming in it, whose overflow was spreading about on the surrounding mud, in close order, wandering aimlessly, larvae without a destination, the strongest pushing back the weakest, and keeping for themselves the best places on the tiers of the unceasingly renewed garbage. We would empty three or four cans, strike a match, and when it was burning, we could hear the monstrous sizzling of bursting and popping worms. Afterwards, just as many remained. You should have seen this stinking swarming mass--over ten inches thick, undulating like a swell and rising like a chest that breathes!

*

There were also dogs. Wandering and famished dogs, these

miserable German sheperds which had lost, in a single stroke, their kennels and their masters, who themselves had lost their farms and all their property, summoned by a brief order to leave immediately the frontier zone of the Maginot line where we were, with all these strays under our feet.

These were the lost dogs of these lost villages; they wandered around our camp, some frightened, some ferocious, all emaciated. One of them, a stray dog with no god or devil to follow, (man has to be the god or the devil of his dog depending on whether he pets or beats him), one of these pitiful animals used to come every day, sniffing the heap of trash and, having made a choice, he would abruptly snatch away a bone covered with putrified flesh.

He was horrible with his crusty sores, his fur eaten by mange and his skin, oozing a continuous infection that drew black blood on which the mud daubed its fragile armor of earth. His wrinkled ears dangled, almost eaten off by a disease which also stripped the flest off his chops; and to top it off, he dragged along a generously gangrened leg, probably broken by a truck. But though he was nothing more than a disgusting thing, a bag of pus procreated by a charnel-house more contaminated than our dumping area, he moved your heart to pity, that rotting dog, and did so because his pleading glance could move the toughest among us, people who were mostly truck drivers, who had run over a half-dozen dogs and cats, without counting a string of hens and perhaps several reckless pedestrians.

The eyes were the only pure thing that was left in this animal horror.

"It's a spaniel", said Leon the first time he saw it.

"It was", I corrected him.

We tolerated him around us, but one day it came to be too

much. Having wallowed in the dumping area, he fell asleep on it in such a way that he ruined our appetite.

And so Leon and I decided to kill him. It was not to be easy. We lacked the necessary courage when, having succeeded in cornering him in a grassy hole, we started to club him with whacks that were as violent as they were clumsy. The poor animal was crying out like a child punished for a mistake he did not make. We felt like we were murdering a human being, not a dog. And yet, we were doing this for him, so that he would not suffer any longer and so that his agony would end once and for all. Sure, we could have poisoned him, but we thought that by swallowing so much garbage, he had to be immunized against the worst poisons. Or we could have laid him out with our military rifles, but the order was strict and categorical--disobeying it was liable to bring you before the firing squad: no shots, save bullets! Damn it! weren't we at war, was against mud, against worms, against dogs!

The miserable animal was wriggling and howling like mad in that hole where we were cowardly torturing him with bludgeons. Each time we hit him, we would jump aside, for fear that his pus-swollen body would burst and cover us with a gush of germs.

"We've got to smash his head", grumbled Leon with rage.

Sure, but it was the hardest place to hit, not because the dog, in his struggles, was clumsily dodging our blows, but because all we could see were his imploring eyes that begged for mercy, eyes which could not believe us as torturers. Then, shutting our eyes, we blindly crushed his and the animal moved no more, dead at last. Throwing our contaminated bludgeons far away, we covered up the hole with a big pile of heavy rocks.

*

That night, when I laid down between the wheels of our truck,

which we used as a shelter, on the thick straw with rats moving underneath, I was still nauseated. Drowsy though I was, I felt only too well that I could not fall asleep. Leon was dozing, he had drunk himself to sleep to forget.

And suddenly I heard an unusual crackling of leaves. Then after a short period of sleep, came nearby lappings. A fetid smell was floating around me. I sat up. My hand grabbed the flashlight and I flicked it on.

Good God! There before me stood the rotting dog. Besides the old sores, he bore fresh ones all over his body, with coagulated blood mixed with dirt, the very wounds opened by our bludgeons. His pink tongue, the only piece of pure flesh that was left in him, was dangling and panting. He sniffed and found a can of rice that he greedily lapped up.

Driven to my knees by a speechless terror, I moved back toward the hollow where Leon slept and shook him. Ill-tempered when awakened, he sat up, mad enough to kick me.

"Look--take a look!" I yelled with queasy spasms in my voice. Then, grabbing our tabooed rifles, we both shot like lunatics all of our forbidden bullets into this monstrous ghost from beyond the canine grave.

And at last, for a second time and forever, he passed away, the rotting dog from the lost country that hunger had returned from the dead.

* * *

THE CHARMER

(Translation of "Le Hupeur",

selected from: Recits Cruels, Pp: 199-224.)

The Charmer

An old friend of mine, Dr. X... from Chateauroux, had advised me to visit the manor called Guernipin, in Brenne, between Mezieres and Rosnay - provided however, the proprietor would extend an invitation to me, his mood not always being in harmony with that of the strangers who solicited him.

And so I discovered Guernipin and Geoffroy de la Tibaldiere, an eccentric zoologist, a bachelor fortunately without relatives who, sacrificing his comfort for an exceptional collection of stuffed, mounted or bottled animals, lived in a narrow room on a cot, each of the twenty other comfortable rooms being, by force of preference, crammed with a dusty and docile fauna. He welcomed me gladly into his zoo-room, confessing to me that this tough and persistent collectionitis dated back to his tender youth. He had stupidly caught it when he was eight, by playfully trapping inside empty match boxes all the wandering insects of the Guernipin estate. Venerable small coffins, carefully tagged, formerly gleaming now wrinkled by time, just as the skin of their owner, who trusted me to the point of allowing me to handle them.

Guided by the ideal expert, since Mr. de la Tibaldiere was a spry old man of eighty-five years and himself a collection piece in the shape of a card catalogue, I was invited to meticulously proceed through this mess of feathers, hair and scales.

That afternoon, we only visited the first-floor rooms, and the deepening twilight, falling like a curtain over these local and

exotic marvels, left me with a craving to see more of it. And then, having acquired a taste for this safe and effortless hunt, I did not know just how to convey to him my desire to see every thing.

He forestalled my gluttony by inviting me to spend the night in the high poster bed of the country-style room that he had had remodeled in the attic of Guernipin. We would informally dine in the kitchen, and thus be able to search into his erudite memory, while eating the chanterelle omelette and the truffled goose pate as Sylvain, the servant, would look after maintaining in our glasses the proper level of a Reuilly wine, manorial in its own way. Actually, Mr. de la Tibaldiere being quite talkative, I was going to satisfy his pressing desire.

*

The bouquet of the Reuilly enhanced the flavor of the chanterelles, brightened up the truffles and, indeed, quickened my host's already brisk tongue. At midnight, which was lazily spelled out by a pot-bellied clock, he was still talking, his back toward the fire, served by Sylvain, a man in his fifties who was sunburnt up to the shock of his tousled hair and looked like an old moorish woman, a common likeness in this part of Berry close to Poitou, that the Saracen occupation had contaminated.

Mr. de la Tibaldiere evoked memories of his remote and adventurous hunts, back in the days when the sights were not trembling before his eyes. With love, he lingered, retracing for me the life-

style of Brenne at the time of his youth, his patient explorations of burrows, nests and lairs, and he glorified the effervescent life of this half-water, half-earth soil, paradise second to none for its sedentary or migratory fauna. At one o'clock in the morning, my head was heavy with a brand new knowledge of Ornithology: wild duck (Anas platyrhynchos), country crow (Chondestes strepera), sheldrake, I spare you the Latin - pochard, heron, coot, wheatear, water rail (Rallus aquaticus, I have not forgotten), all scrupulously introduced: looks, calls, habits and even more.

Sylvain was slouched over on his oak bench, drawn near the chimney, and as patient as a dog that anticipates all the bones to come, he yawned with faithfulness. As for me, despite the strain of this long day, I did not dare break in on a host as generous with his welcome as with his conversation, still hoping that it would not be long before he would also doze off. But he carried on about the mythical fauna that the people of Brenne, who were dreadfully superstitious, grant the nights of the area. He told me about the Charmer.

My curiosity piqued, I straightened up: a Charmer! I was indeed in the mood for a brief hunt for legends, even though I was tired. Hearing that name, Sylvain had slid across his bench and had come closer to the fire as if to move away from us, attentively staring at the crackling embers as though he had never seen any of them. "You should know," Mr. de la Tibaldiere quite peremptorily told me, "that formerly, that bird's family was so widespread that every swamp in France and even beyond, owned its beckoning spirit, a deceitful winged creature that lured the simple-minded to utter terror.

I agreed while he proceeded on a brilliant enumeration: Boobers of Normandy, Hawers of Ardennes, Hooers of Brittany or Hooters of Limousin, protean beings formerly born in the popular imagination and which were kept alive during the long troubled nights by credulous peasants. Here, they had a Charmer, the only one alive in the entire area and no doubt, the very last one anywhere.

Then, my host pretended to aim a rifle, and raising his voice he threatened: "I never caught sight of it, or else.....," and this skeptic maliciously winked at me before addressing his servant sympathetically: "isn't that so, Sylvain?" But failing for once in his obedience, he did not answer.

*

At last, I was set free. My host stood up and entrusted me to his servant, giving him orders to see that I was well taken care of, then he dismissed us with such an agile about-face that I envied him. Sylvain took a bucket of water, a lamp, and proceeding first, slowly led me, without turning around, through long corridors and steep stairways, up in my room, the attic.

I was not disappointed as I had feared. Quite the contrary, the place, even though sultry with the heat absorbed by the roof, was clean and pleasant. Large, too, with magnificent varnished beams that gleamed as we passed by. The poster bed, made of walnut, smelled of wax, and the sheets, somewhat coarse, which I lifted, exhaled a fragrance of lavender. As for the four bouquets of flowered

cretonne, tied up to the posts, if they made me fear some spiders hiding in them, I set my mind at rest thinking that they had to be certainly pinned, labeled after their species, therefore prisoners and harmless. Understanding my fears, Sylvain was prompt in unfolding and shaking the fabric in order to show me that no spiders lived there. And for the first time, he consented to smile at me. Mr. de la Tibaldiere's authority must have been heavily weighing on him, and probably, he also wished to talk a little.

Therefore he kindly directed me around, showing where to find the wash-stand as well as the small round window, a source of fresh air that he hastened to open. I pointed out to him that this narrow opening would be insufficient; he motioned to me to follow him to a door which he unlocked and pushed open. We climbed up narrow stone steps and emerged on the balcony of a crenelated tower that I had not noticed in the day time, on arriving at Guernipin. The view all around was amazing. Everywhere, far in the distance, water: pools, lakes glittered under the moon which was full that night, and they gave the impression of being boundlessly entangled. Framed by a vegetation that appeared thicker under the shadowy light, but which was actually made of sparse bushes, the water world of Brenne offered itself to me like a jewel, discarded for a flaw and exiled in this forgotten hole amidst the Rich Berry.

I felt that Sylvain was proud of the surprise he offered me; not hiding my feelings, I asked him details. The man knew his Brenne by heart. Soon I knew the name of each of these moon-mirrors, of each moor and of each swamp, the nearest of them standing there, so

close you could touch it, a miserable rotten soil in the process of hardening, but still treacherous to the imprudent: Ox-Engulfer Swamp.

Feeling now far from any wish to sleep and leave this wonderful nocturnal landscape where only a touch of life was missing, I told Sylvain: "what a pity that this famous Charmer is only a legend, otherwise I would have listened to him and applauded enthusiastically." The servant abruptly grabbed my arm and squeezed it. I understood that my words had just made him lose his satisfaction. his voice dropped and almost died out.

"Never wish it sir," he whispered, "especially on a night like this, this is the one that suits him to lead us towards death." And he forced me to leave the place. Back in the attic, he carefully closed and locked the tower door again. In the light, I saw with astonishment his disconcerted and lightly perspiring face; add to this such a frightened look that I felt like cheering him up with a comforting slap. But interested and strong in my disbelief, I used a more clever way to induce him to trust me and succeeded in having him sit down with me on the edge of the bed where, uniting the tone of my questions with that of his restlessness, I obtained some details about this frightened bird.

And so I learned that the one Mr. de la Tibaldiere had spoken of really existed. Better still, that his favorite abode was the Ox-Engulfer swamp, right there, a half a mile from us and at an equal distance from the village. He did not look like anything frightening and could be any kind of common bird, but he continually changed his

species, the better to fool his victims. His call had one note too many....something slightly strident: his curse. To listen to it meant to lose your will in spite of yourself and to act only according to his will. Obedient, you would get out of your bed, leave the security of your house to go, in a nightgown, like a sleepwalker, towards this hellish bird who was already rejoicing in his fresh prey. You would walk towards him, and in spite of having your feet in the mud, you would not feel as if you were in the swamp. He would move back, back again to lure you a little further down to the depths of the slime where you would mercilessly sink. Pessaut, Guerin, old woman Marguerite and so many more had died that way. Their bodies were never found, just their footprints on the harder parts of the banks of Ox-Engulfer, which, no doubt, later shared the flesh with the Charmer.

But it was easy to know that it was him, since at night, birds do not sing or whistle. That is why, when you would hear him, you had to rush and double-lock your door, barricade everywhere, clamp your fists over your ears, bury yourself under the sheets, and above all, be at least two, so that one would prevent the other from following the baneful call.

And after unloading that on me as one would get rid of a secret that weighs too much, Sylvain hastily left, taking the lamp and leaving me in the dark. I heard him double-lock the door, probably by force of habit, and then he walked downstairs, stumbling in his haste.

The silver needle of the moon, taking advantage of the open

window, was sinking in the darkness of the attic, but it failed to break the oppressive silence that started to swell like a balloon. I undressed and laid down on the bed, forgetting in my tiredness the disturbing images that this superstitious servant had left in me.

*

The heat prevented me from sleeping immediately. I tossed and turned continuously, oppressed, until I decided to open the tower door. After much groping about, I found it. The fresh air that came in, together with the air that penetrated from the window, relieved me. I went back to bed, and this time sleep obeyed me almost instantly.

I had a dream whose beginning was very pleasant, but which gradually invaded me with a dull uneasiness. I found myself in a huge ballroom, with clothes of another era, relaxed and satisfied, sunk in an arm-chair. A beautiful young woman came to invite me, using the most charming smiles.... But I impolitely refused, remaining seated when I should have stood up and readily granted her the dance she was asking of me. But she, without appearing to be shocked in the slightest by my behavior, started to laugh in a strange way, laughter with three sharp notes, balanced with silences that syncopated them.... Then taking me by the hand, she pulled me towards her...I resisted.... But her gentle strength gradually managed to lift me up. Standing now, I had the feeling I was naked and a sudden embarrassment forced me to run away....I clumsily hit a wall or a closed door, I could not remember which. I fell, and people came to pick me up, pitying me. Their hands supported me and carried me away from the ball into a

cool park smelling of cut grass. They lead me to a well, and there, either playfully or maliciously, I was pushed so as to be forced to step over, and jump.

I resisted by letting myself fall to the ground, where, taken by a sudden terror, I tried to make myself heavy, refusing to carry out this stupid act.... And I heard again the shrill laughter of the young woman who was now invisible, but to whom I desperately granted all my attention, regretting, too late, not to have joined her.

*

The early morning chill woke me up. I found myself on the tower roof, lying on the bare floor shivering. A grey fog covered Guernipin, gradually gilded by the rising sun. The moment of astonishment over, I easily understood the reasons for my being in that place. No doubt was possible: choking in this hot house and craving fresh air, I had got up, half-conscious, to spend the night there. Then, leaning over a crenel, I discovered the impressive, precipitous height of the tower, and overwhelmed, I realized what a horrible fall I had escaped!

*

This new day in the company of Mr. de la Tibaldiere went on as warmly as the one before. The man had such widespread knowledge, be it about the ambiguity of the onager or about the cyclical migrations of the wild African boar, with anecdotes and biological digressions to back it up. We lunched in the park, in the cool shade of

a cedar, which the wind, slightly springing up, tried in vain to ruffle. The table consisted of a long slab, taken from the earth of a nearby abbey. We ate heartily over the belly of an austere abbot, stiffly engraved.

As the evening came, we had not yet reached the second floor, where, according to Mr. de la Tibaldiere, suddenly excited at the thought, the jewels of his collection were: coelacanths, big saurians from Borneo and other survivors of antediluvian times. And so I dined again at Guernipin, but I succeeded in escaping the lecture after the meal. By now I knew the place, I went up to bed on my own, this time keeping the lamp. And, fearing another awakening on the balcony if I left the door leading to the corridor open, I tightly locked it so that a similar misfortune would not occur again. Lying down, I started a book, but as I reached the third page, it slipped from my hands. I blew out the lamp and sleep came to me.

*

This time the heat did not torment me, quite the contrary. I was caught up in a dream, soft in its beginning.... I was visiting Guernipin on my own, discovering for myself new rooms, astonishing in variety.... At last I could touch and hold in my arms, as I pleased, birds with soft downy plumage.... Mysterious birds, with unknown shapes, who, as I touched them, came to life and fluttered.... Soon, there were so many of them around that by bumping into me, they managed to push and guide me towards the freedom of the park where they continued to surround me, flitting silently.... Mr. de la

Tibaldiere then appeared on the stoop, he indignantly shouted for me to return before the most secret pieces of his aviary escaped forever.... Anger strangled his screams so much that they sounded like the calls of a bullfrog... But paying no attention to him, I suddenly escaped, the heart of this liberated flock of birds whom I obeyed, and who were breathlessly carrying me away.... I ran until I felt a violent oppression.... Out of breath, I felt my running gradually hindered by sticky forces that suddenly awoke me.

*

Today, it seems impossible to describe the violent repulsion that I felt as I was suffering for real under this cold viscosity. All of a sudden, I came back to reality, my legs in the slimy mud. Where was the bed on which I thought I was sleeping? Where was Guernipin? Where was I?

Trapped by an enormous leech that slowly drew me down, I was sinking in an infected, nauseating swamp. My hands and my arms were vainly searching for a solid support: a root or a branch, life.... When sudden bellowings, sounding like an angered bull, cut my attempts short. Coming from the swamp where I was sinking, they were loudly cutting through the night. In spite of my fear, I recognized the calls of a heron. But instead of being regular in their three consecutive notes, his calls were most disorderly.

At last I saw him.... He was violently struggling not far from me. And then Sylvain's stories came back to me in a flash. I thought of the Charmer. And what if he really existed? It could only

be him, rightfully shaking with laughter at his ridiculous and pitiful victim. I really was in the Ox-Engulfer!

However, I noticed that he was hopping as though the ooze was also trying to catch and engulf him. Seeing that I was struggling again to escape this slime which was gradually creeping up on me, he increased his calls, as though he wished to whip me on, helping me to escape sinking. I finally succeeded in reaching a nearby patch of grass and setting myself free from the hungry earth, I crawled up on it. The heron had drawn closer and was encouraging me with his fluttering. Thus he helped me reach the firm soil of a pebbly path. And if, exhausted, I did not collapse there, I owed it again to this providential bird whose pecking forced me to get up and turn back without any further delay towards Guernipin, which I could see, massive and reassuring, at hope's reach.

It was at that moment that I felt this invisible and threatening force which shackled me with terror. I had the terrifying feeling that a huge but impalpable single wing was flying around me like a lissome ray of nothingness in the ocean of the night. Immaterial reality which was pushing me with an unmerciful constancy to bring me back in the swamp. Without the desperate calls of the heron who was giving himself up to a paroxysmal panic in order to come again to my rescue by forcing me to run, I admit I would not have fought against this Thing which succeeded in capturing me and carrying me back again.

And I understood! I understood that the Charmer, be it an owl, a crow, a heron or any kind of bird who stood there and could feel this flying death, was neither a legend nor man's enemy, but his

protector.... He warned man of the inexpressible danger that only he could feel.... And his calls, far from being ominous, were warnings: terrorized himself, he screamed against fear instead of for it.

The Ox-Engulfer swamp, propitious and putrid haven, still sheltered, after thousands of years, an invisible and voracious monster, a survivor of the times when accursed powers were reigning under the most subtle forms! Then I thought I saw two swift greenish glimmers.... An illusion, a reflection of my fear? No....eyes! Screaming with repulsion, I succeeded in wrenching myself free from this horror which had chosen me, and had already vainly come to get me a first time, the night before, in my sleep, on my bed at Guernipin.

*

After awakening, Mr. de la Tibaldiere, already eager to make me visit the prehistorical ancestors floor, had to order Sylvain to go up and awaken me. But except for mud traces left everywhere, Sylvain found only this note, which will probably remain enigmatic to everyone:

Never Kill the Charmer.

* * * *

THE CHIRPING HOOPOE

(Translation of: "Huppe et pupuler",
selected from Contes Sorciers, Pp:159-167.)

The Chirping Hoopoe

Swift for the lover who wishes it everlasting but finds it too short; infinite for he who, shedding tears, wants it brief but finds it long, the true nature of time is the most secret thing there is. Pretentious indeed is the man who believes he has trapped and subdued it in the mechanism of his clocks. Intangible and omnipotent, time remains illusive and baffles us at every moment. And so we live in the deceit of time, against it, beyond it, in a word: out of it.

*

So, that morning, during his daily monastic walk, Brother Guillaume noticed how still the forest was, with an absolute feeling of peacefulness. Seized by a sudden need for contemplation and wishing to hoard a good supply of serenity, he urged his companions, Brothers Louis, Camille and Jacques, to go on without him. As soon as he was alone, he surrendered himself to God. Not a leaf was rustling, no animal call broke the silence. The hour-glass of time seemed to be tipped on its side. And Brother Guillaume imagined that God was looking at him. Who knows? Perhaps He wanted to make him taste a slice of paradise. Only a hoopoe, its crest like a crown, broke this divine silence. It chirped the usual melodies of its family, but chirped them so harmoniously, that it embroidered heavenly softness in Brother Guillaume's ears. Ecstatically, the monk moved closer to it, and the ground seemed so soft under his feet that he experienced the intoxicating feeling of walking upon the silky hair of the Virgin Mary. But as he reached out a thankful hand to pet

the singing hoopoe, it flew away and vanished in the foliage. He then thought that it was time to go back to the monastery.

He found the door shut; the other monks had probably already returned. He rang. The monk on duty came and cracked the door. But seeing him, he did not open it any wider, and fearing a false monk, a looter or a murderer, he asked for his name. Surprised, Brother Guillaume complied. The monk on duty answered that in this monastery, no monk was known under any such name. And he slammed the door.

"Call Brothers Louis, Camille and Jacques," shouted Brother Guillaume who, left at the door, could not recognize this earthly Saint Peter either. The Brothers he had named arrived and looked at him one after the other, through the door-grill, but none of them resembled the real companions of Brother Guillaume. However, one of them asked which monastery he belonged and why he was lost. "But I have been praying here for twenty years! ..." said Brother Guillaume, losing his temper - "and this very morning, was not I weeding the main alley of our garden?" And he proceeded to describe the area set aside for flowers, the place assigned to vegetables, shrubs, paths, the scents, everything, even the garden tools, their use and number. Then, he was harshly told that he himself had just proven he was wrong: this could not be his monastery since there was no garden there! But Brother Guillaume firmly asked to be escorted to the father superior, and he offered to lead the way, to show them that he did indeed know the place.

Confronted by his despair, which appeared to be sincere, they

let him have his way and he resolutely went into the left corridor, brushed the wall as he used to, as a sign of humility and if Brother Camille had not grabbed him just in time, he would have fallen down the stairwell which opened up at that place, right in front of him. "You have to agree, dear brother," he was told with a harsh tone of reawakened suspicion-"that you do not know anything about this place and that you have the wrong monastery." "But this stairway was not here before!" shouted Brother Guillaume, uttering with the purest intent what the others took to be a serious lie. "It has been here for more than a hundred years," Brother Camille thought fit to add in an unctuous tone. And, taking him by the arm, they guided him so that he would not crack his skull against a protrusion of the wall which his imagination also would have liked to ignore, as much as the obvious existence of that stairway. The father superior was no longer the same. Brother Guillaume insisted on seeing Brother Anselme, the regular leader of the community. He was told that that name meant nothing to anyone there, but Brother Louis, probably guided by a hunch, came up with the idea of digging into the archives.

And then it became quite evident that a Brother Anselme had been superior of the monastery for a long time, but his death dated back to the year 1540, or two hundred and twenty-nine years before the present day. And going over the records of that same year, it was also found that a Brother Guillaume, having stayed one morning in the forest, had never come back.

During the writing of this short tale from a popular source, I have likewise been caught and fooled by the fantasy of time. I thought I had been writing for only an hour when I was asked if I had decided to go to bed or not. Go to bed! But it should not have been past noon! They opened the shutters of my study, for I always bury myself when I work; and I was shown the night outside. I looked at my watch, the hands on twelve, appeared to make fun of me. It was not noon but midnight....

I had stopped at the fifteenth line of my text, over the words hoopoe and chirping that I had, for thirteen solid hours, untiringly and with a deep feeling of comfort, ornamented with arabesques to the point of blackening out the whole page. As incredible as this may seem, these words gathered in the barter-shop of time had exercised on my mind, just as on Brother Guillaume's, the beginning of a magic spell. Hoopoe...Chirping, these two notes, probably keys to a lost reality.

And if I had lived alone, with no ties at all with the external world, like a wild man who is left to himself; if, to write this tale and play with its words, I had secluded myself in an abandoned attic or had hidden in a forgotten basement, would not I still be there now, tomorrow and for eternity, the victim of the spell of the deceit of time, without having aged with a single wrinkle? It is tempting, but not desirable.

the reaper

(Translation of: "Le Faucheur",

selected from: Histoires Malefiques,

Pp:167-172.)

The reaper

When I enter "La Renommée", the most luxurious diner of Aubry-Le-Boucher Street, the manager, "The Potato King", immediately breaks two eggs and before I even open my mouth, he briskly whips them to make me a Parmentier omelet. That's what I always get. I am barely seated and without ordering anything, he serves it to me with a smile of complicity. And if I don't feel like it, for once wishing something else, I eat it anyway, just to be friendly.

He's so sure about me, that sometimes he even chances making it beforehand. How many of them has he started one as soon as he saw me coming toward his truck-stop, which he had to serve by force to a docile customer, because I was only walking down the street, without stopping at his place!

For him I'm "The Parmentier omelet guy." Don't go ask him if I do anything else in life but like Parmentier omelets: he never tried to find out. He honors me that way, and it's a real distinction which I appreciate, showing my gratitude by remaining his faithful customer, even though I like eggs less and less. I have only one serious competitor, "The mussels guy." He can wolf down ten platters of them in a row. He's greeted three times, no more than me and I don't eat ten omelets at one sitting!

The boss is Italian, from a poor area, and so all of his reflexes work at full speed: one eye on the greasy mess in his pans, the other on the customer who might leave without paying: Taking the orders with one ear, listening to stories with the other. One nostril

sniffs the cooking, the other one puffs out the smoke of his "Gauloise" whose long ashes are precariously hanging, thanks to the strong paper of the French tobacco company; it's a miracle if you consider that he talks out of the other side of his mouth and orders around the young waitress with abrupt nods. She is tired of this dog's life where it's forbidden to bite roaming hands

Truck-drivers like to stop at "La Renommée" and help make it known nation-wide by agreeing to meet there from the four corners of France. While their trucks, which clog traffic like a kidney stone, are unloaded, they come to drink or eat leisurely. They also can speak loudly with their mouths full, and they have steel laughter that sounds like grinding gears.

Tonight, one of them is telling how during the afternoon, around Saulieu, his truck skidded on an unexpected patch of sleet. The wheels, locked by the brakes, had become uncontrollable skates, and he swerved toward a bridge railing that was drawing nearer....nearerwith nothing to prevent this mammoth of a truck from smashing it. Beyond that, there was empty space, a huge void. "I could see death coming at me" the driver said, rolling his shoulders to demonstrate the movements of his runaway vehicle..."I could see death coming closer and closer" he said again, to shake his silent friends a bit more, as they look worried despite the reassuring presence of the narrator. At last the truck came to a stop just as it grazed the railing.

Mass relief.

"I can say that I touched death"...., the survivor concluded with such conviction that the manager ironically spit out, between the ashes and

french fries: "what you talkin' 'bout!, nobody can see death, it ain't a person...." Everybody broke out laughing, even the man who just said he saw death quite close. I got out of the conversation, I know you can really see death, and I seriously mull it over.

*

The road that runs between Vitry-Le-Francois and Cezanne is laid on a dreary, barren plain: The Dry Champagne. To make it worse, the road no longer runs through cities, not even villages. Strategic tight curves keep away drivers who, abandoned to speed, find that alone to be of some entertainment; and so they drive as hard as they can. That's what I do every time, surrendering myself to the hazards of a steady 100 MPH.

And so, last July, when I took this suicidal road once again, alone in my Citroen and in need of tempering company, I didn't hesitate to answer the call of a hitchhiker, eyeing the road at the Vitry exit; besides, even if I had not wanted to stop, he acted in such a way that I had to obey him, since without jamming on the brakes I would have run over him. I say "to obey him," because while he stretched his arm out toward me in an authoritative way that designated me as his chosen means of transportation, he stepped onto the road with determination.

I let him get in and sit beside me; he was a sprightly old man: tall and gaunt, his nose resembling the blade of a pruning-knife, his tousled hair low on his head, his pallid skin was thick and wrinkled like bark, with dirt in every crease. He was dressed in honest

farm worker clothes, whose cut was certainly not following any recognized fashion: rain-faded and sun-bleached corduroy, as everlasting as time. Add to this a lingering smell of freshly-plowed earth. He placed a shapeless sack on his knees in which pieces of wood and metal knocked together. He immediately grabbed it with his heavy hands as though he feared it would fall. The tip of a detachable handle protruded, belonging to a scythe whose dismantled blade stuck out through the worn, dried-out cloth. He was, no doubt, a journeyman reaper on his way to be hired in the fields of Brie that needed harvesters. (But I didn't notice, although it was obvious, that nowadays Brie farmers have no use for the services of an old reaper, when machines mow in a single stroke as much as twenty sturdy young men.)

I asked him where he planned to be hired. He didn't look at me nor did he answer. He only moved his index finger once again with authority to show me the road ahead of us, and I understood that I would get nothing more out of him: he wanted to go until he ordered me to stop, it was quite clear. I repeat I had to obey and soon his company annoyed me. I had given someone a lift in order to talk and forget the speed and I was now carrying a silence much worse than the loneliness that prods you to accelerate.

Therefore I didn't hesitate to whip up the fieriness of my invisible horses. Far from being concerned, the man seemed to be relaxed, and when I reached 105 Mph, he looked at the speedometer with a satisfaction that brightened his face. But I'm talkative, I slowed down and started a monologue directed at him, making him instantly

lose his secret pleasure. It so happened that the day before, in my in-laws' garden at Monthureux-Sur-Saone, I had broken the gardener's only scythe while mowing the lawn. So I had immediately gone to buy a new one and the hardware dealer, proud to show me his knowledge, had explained to me the different advantages of five or six kinds of scythes that he offered. Advantages that I in turn described for my silent reaper who, surprised, granted me a brief but friendly glance.

I then told him that during my captivity in Germany, I had turned out with a cutting machine at least ten thousand scythe blades in the best quality steel: swedish steel whose sharpness could shave beards as well as prairies. At that moment, he looked at me a little longer and I saw that he was pleased to hear me talk shop. However, he still didn't open his mouth. As he belonged to a dying trade, if it was not already completely extinct, I described the style of the illustrious old-time mowers, those amazing reapers who journeyed from oceans of grain to seas of alfalfa, driven by a cutting strength that seemed as invincible as the tide. And I knew what I was talking about, since I had personally reaped for months with such men in Wurtemberg, and I confessed my respect for all reapers of quality.

This time, he stared at me intensely and showed that he was listening with real satisfaction. I told myself that by remaining silent, I might irritate him. So I told him that Saint Claude, an amazing reaper, had become the patron saint of the guild, ever since the day when, carried away by his enthusiasm, he had inadvertently cut down, like simple thistles, a whole row of poplars. But when I

acknowledged to him my deep melancholy on seeing the reaping trade vanish so quickly, he appeared suddenly to come to a decision. He adamantly pointed to the gas gauge; I looked at it: it was on empty!

I was surprised, hadn't I filled it up less than forty miles before! A leak maybe? Fortunately we were close to a service station. I stopped and asked for a fill-up and a check on the leak. But after a few gallons, the gas surged back and overflowed. The attendant then remarked that the gauge must be out of order and looking in at the dashboard, he glanced at the front wheels out of professional habit. He immediately jumped and wiped his forehead. I joined him and in turn retrospectively sweated with fear: the tire, gashed open, showed a swollen hernia of the innertube. We didn't have to puncture it, it burst on its own just as we were expecting its explosion. "Three hundred feet more, at the speed you were driving, and you would have been dead," said the attendant, "you can brag that you are a survivor." I agreed with a shiver and told him I owed it to my passenger, this silent but wise traveler, who had shut one of the trap-doors of my fate, just in time.

"What traveler?" said the man with surprise, "you were alone when you got here!" I turned back to my car. The reaper was no longer there. I leaned inside, searching for some trace of him. Nothing! Or maybe a slight smell of freshly plowed earth.

*

Since my strange adventure, I think of those who have picked up and trustfully driven this death laborer - real or imagined, but who

will never be able to give evidence of his existence, as I have just done.

* * *

the mirror

(Translation of: "Le Mirroir",
selected from: Contes Macabres,

Pp:9-20.)

The mirror

She arrived alone, driving a luxurious limousine. The guard had been impatiently awaiting her for hours, watching for her in the grey of this December dusk. The winter wind was howling angrily at this small rundown resort, deserted the way places look in the off-season. She rolled down the window and told him her name. Her voice was gentle and pleasant, but edged with deep sorrow. She also apologized to him. Troubled and reluctantly friendly, the guard answered that since waiting was part of his job, he was used to it and didn't mind at all, and he hastened to open the car-door for her. But as he saw the lady get out, he immediately became distrustful.

She was regal, wearing suede boots and wrapped in a rich fur coat whose hood covered her head, but her face was almost entirely hidden behind a black shawl, and her eyes, compulsively staring and ant, were the only features that could be seen.

As for the guard, the people who rented a villa in the Winter and wished to be left alone were always hiding a suspicious need for loneliness. And so this woman, already masking her face, had to have worse reasons than the others. She only brought an expensive leather suitcase that he picked up, feeling it heavier than it should be; and this made him more suspicious. Wearily, she followed him.

In the hall, he flicked on the light, but a short-circuit finished off the brief glow of the bulb. Annoyed, he lit his lighter and went down to the basement, where the fuse-box was - But it was

no use trying, the light did not come back on; the lingering humidity had once more defeated the fuses. "I'm going to notify the electrician," he said as he walked back upstairs.

This blackout gave him the opportunity to leave and return to the peace outside, though soaked in a cold drizzle, but much more quieting than the invading silence of the Stranger. Nevertheless, he finished his work. Finding a candle, he lit it and rushed through the showing of the first floor, even though it was his pleasure to initiate newcomers to the maze of rooms. He picked up the suitcase and climbed the stairs leading to the bedroom. The Stranger followed, distant in her halo of despair, but still so close, right there behind him, that he forged himself an armor of threats and shrouded himself in it, as tight as he could, just to climb the last few steps.

At last he pulled himself together and abruptly entered the room which a sleepy fire bathed with a dreamy glow. He quickly revived it, prodding it with a poker as you would vent your anger on an animal that had fallen asleep on the job. The fire crackled and popped and he covered the sparks with new logs. Left to their hunger, the flames rose and snorted cinders, projecting all around the room the anger of a stirred up brightness. "This fire will give you light The bed is made....if you want another blanket...." He whispered between the streams of breath that he blew in the chimney, like jets of gasoline. He was trying to fend off this growing uneasiness the woman radiated, like certain frightening flowers which emanate a deceitful scent that paralyzes you as you approach them.

He stubbornly praised the excitement which animated the house and the area in the summertime, though it was now so desolate. "It's a house for young people....you've got to imagine it in the busy season.... Hear the children laugh and dance.... And the disguises The carnivals.... Ah, it's not a place that likes winter.... It sure don't!...." The Stranger was seated on the edge of the bed, staring at the flames. Was she listening to him? He sensed she was not. After sticking the candle in a suitable spot, he left and she didn't even turn around.

*

The woman's shadow suddenly arched on the wall. She gave way to a gentle sobbing while her fingers brushed her bandaged face, as someone who would hesitate to caress somebody else's face. She followed her chin line, lingered on her cheeks, and avoided touching her nose and ears as though they were fragile: all the places where, following that cruel accident, she felt as if she wore a horrible mask, molded with uneven strips of grafted flesh, taken from elsewhere on her body, and pieced, welded there to make her almost bearable. "They told me my features would live again.... They swore I would be just like before.... But why did they talk about miracles?"

She got up, went to the window and opened it. A long finger of whistling wind rushed in and peeled off the rest of the damp calendar, which had stopped on September. The wind was catching up with time, ready to finish off at the same speed the entire span of a human

life, were it only given the chance. "...They have frozen my lips
....sown my cheeks.... My nose....I can feel it.... They have
turned me into living death, forced to run away from itself....To run
away in vain from this other person that I don't want!" Everything
was hostile and dark for Her, The Magnificent one, the sun of millions
of fans who, at this very moment all around the world, were enrapt-
ured by the grace of her body and infatuated with the incomparable
beauty of her face.

She had come to hide here, with her new unknown self, plastered
inseparably onto her flesh. It would be a month before she could see
her new face. Time for luck, time to get used to the worst.

But she could wait no longer; she wanted to know right then, in
this place where, as a little girl, she used to spend carefree vaca-
tions: a happy and lively child, already so pretty with her long
blond pigtails.... So pretty before! "Before!... Oh God,
could you ever be so cruel?" Having made up her mind to undergo
the test of truth, she looked for a mirror. It was waiting for her,
framed in the upper panels of a door, stripped of its handle. The
flames from the fireplace, blown by a draft, were lighting it; alter-
nating shadows with reflections, just what she needed - not to see
too well. She threw her heavy fur on the bed and coming to the
mirror, took the shawl off her white bandages, her third and tempor-
ary face: a cotton-helmet, slit by only one hostile opening which
was her only tie with the outside world.

And then, unrolling it, she began to free herself, at the risk

of suffering even more. Her courage gave way when only a few strips were left. She stopped, closed her eyes as tightly as she clenched her fists, and started suddenly to bang on this cynical mirror which was waiting to destroy her. Hitting hard enough to break it, she did not have to unroll the rest of the bandages, they fell off themselves, leaving her with a feeling of nakedness that she had never experienced before. She stared and saw herself!....

Rather, she saw what they had done to her: a face made of sown-up patches of flesh, unevenly melted together, furrowed with deep wrinkles, a monstrous truth at which she was staring in a daze, as though this spectacle had been the highest achievement of her acting career. At last, an opaque veil of despair fell before her eyes; and since she worshipped the sea, she had only to join it and make it her grave. She walked across the loneliness of the deserted beach, the very beach which in the past had been covered with a crowd of happy bathers, her crowd! It didn't bother her since, in her childhood, she had almost drowned herself, over there, toward the reefs.... Now fifteen years later she only had to complete it. But wasn't it already done? Wasn't she dead since her beauty had been her whole life?

*

When the guard came back with the electrician, he immediately restored the electricity, then they went upstairs to notify the tenant that it was all right to use it. They knocked repeatedly but with no answer; surprised, the guard tried cracking the door. The

room was empty, the window wide open. They came in and flicked on the light. Neither the bed nor the suitcase had been touched. The Stranger's fur coat was lying on the bed. Seeing the shawl entangled with a long bandage on the floor, the guard bent over to pick them up, and straightening up, he faced the mirror.

He screamed with such terror that his companion was frozen in his tracks. In the depths of the mirror, turned back into transparent glass by the loss of its silvering which had fallen from many places, probably from being hit, you could see, with horrible details, the unmistakable face of a greenish, cut-up corpse in a state of decomposition. Horrible revelation of a crime which had remained hidden there! Finally, pulling themselves together, and pushed by the courage of curiosity, they managed to break open the door with the mirror.

A narrow closet, unknown to the guard, was behind it. He looked inside and his repulsion immediately vanished.... "Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed in a muffled voice, and reaching out without fear or disgust, he took down from a hook a tall dummy, swollen with seaweed and dressed in mildewed clothes.As for this realistic cardboard mask the dummy wore like a face from another world, it reached just the height of the mirror, memory of a time when the carnival put up with all kinds of ugliness; it fell on the floor with the lightness of a dead leaf.

*

At Dawn, the ebb-tide, raging with swells, was forced to surrender her body from among the reefs that had reappeared on the long

colorless beach. Shell gatherers saw her from a distance, as if she were crucified, looking like a gigantic starfish. They came closer and saw that it was a svelte human star, drowned by the sea and lying on her stomach on the sharp rocks. Fishermen ran up and freed her bare wounded foot that was caught between two rocks. They turned her over, and stretched her out on her back.

Immediately, the women kneeled down, driven not only by the respect owed to death, but also by the heart-rending emotion that gripped them as they saw on that face *Beauty beyond all possibilities*. With their hats in their hands, the men stood transfixed, struck by a breathtaking feeling of divinity. And all the people who came stood, one after the other, in amazement.

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"She....She looks like!...someone dared at last....she looks like....like the one in the movies...." "Yes, maybe, people answered in a whisper of reverence.... But this one is so much more beautiful!"

* * * *

THE SLEEPER

(Translation of: "Le Dormeur",
selected from: Recits Cruels,

Pp:117-134.)

The sleeper

Old Glaude, gardener of Coulondelles castle, had the plumpness and gentleness that young women look for in a husband, a man with whom a perfect and happy married life could be confidently shared. With his big round face gleaming with generosity and his paunchy fifty-year-old look, Glaude was kindness itself, offered to anyone who asked for it. And to pay such a compliment is not to flatter him, for he really worked wonders.

Old Glaude was some sort of a country side conjuror, different from the others; not like these common healers of diseases, these quacks and their easy tricks that can be found most anywhere in every village, mumblers of secrets, spinners of dirty tricks, bone-setters, medicine men and other charlatans. No, from birth, he had inherited - since long before him, one of his ancestors out of three used to also have it - a most uncommon gift: he was endowed with the power of "putting ailments to sleep." So if your sweaty chest had absorbed an icy cold like a sponge, caught at nightfall by a river, and if a chill pressed its big thumbs against your lungs, so strongly that you would feel them with each breath, what could you do? Two possible cures: either you could bury yourself under three layers of blankets after drinking a quart of hot sugared wine to sweat the ailment away - without being sure of recovering immediately - which meant wasting time in your bed, or you could go to see old Glaude, bent over his flowers, to ask him to heal you as a priceless service.

Quietly twirling his thin white mustache which looked like a

carnation under his nose, he seriously listened to the sound of your breath, sniffed the sweat on your brow and finally poked his hand under your shirt, where the congestion was burning you - "You in pain?" he would ask, slightly wary. At that point came the big lie: you had to hide the pain, even if it showed itself in your eyes, for old Glaude, as he grew older, refused to "sleep" pains. Long ago, he had slept burning colics because back then, his bowels were like the copper pipes of a still and able to turn the fire of colics into water; but as time passed by, he had put up so much resistance against the shocks of the ailments he received that the parts of his body had grown weaker: his bones were no longer encased in iron, the hard leather on his joints had worn off, and there was no longer alcohol instead of blood in his veins.

And now he would suspiciously ask you a "you hurtin', hurtin' real bad?", which would compel you to lie in order to reassure him and force him to make up his mind. "it ain't so much the pain, but it kinda bothers me when I raise my arms." And old Glaude would buy it although not entirely fooled, but hoping for not too big a lie. Besides, one or two more pneumonias could hardly do any damage to his lungs, since they were still roaring like two wild beehives. He would ask you for three gold coins which you had to give him without haggling. That was part of the treatment!

"The church makes you pay for a miracle.... So why shouldn't I....?" he said as a comfort to his clients. However, if in church it was easy to cheat with an apparent generosity, promising gold but

actually slipping three copper coins in the anonymity of an alms-box, it was impossible to fool old Glaude with copper coins instead of gold, his hand knew the difference quite well. Once the money had been given, you were already cured by the transfer of your torments through this deal made in good faith, until you could prove it otherwise.

Old Glaude always performed his work to perfection and never delayed. He would notify his wife to leave him alone on his bed. Upset, she would scream "No, no, no!", shaking the wrinkles of her neck that dangled like a turkey wattle. Then he would remind her of his warts, and showing the back of his fingers that were full of them, he would maliciously pretend to give them all back to her. The threat worked every time: old lady Glaude wasn't eager to have them back, and with gratitude she would remember Glaude's promptness in "sleeping them away," where on account of them, she nearly lost her job as a cook at the castle, the duchess feeling ill just at the sight of dirty fingernails. Glaude had taken them himself in an uninterrupted sleep of thirty-six hours.

Old Lady Glaude would thus sigh with resignation, thinking of the time she would have to be alone because her man was going to snore again for days - Who knows? It could even take weeks, like the time he had "slept" until complete recovery the malignant fever or the duke's youngest daughter. After that time, old Glaude has sworn to himself never to invite that kind of ailment to come into him again, for it had cost him twenty pounds of good fat. If the miseries

that afflicted others still continued to graft themselves on him, who quietened and digested them with the power of his body, it was evident that as he grew older, they stayed with him longer and longer, like his wife's warts, the arthritis taken from Gravier, the contractor, was still in his body, grinding his bones; and so this ungrateful person was used to making fun of him, ironically asking news of "his" twinges. And old Glaude would scare the teaser, pretending to give it back to him right then and there.

So he was now determined not to touch what belonged to others any more, so that he could enjoy a rightly deserved convalescence. Alas! Fate was to be contrary and sneaky.

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One evening, a man from Chicrolles, the nearby village, came to see Glaude at the bar, where he was enthusiastically engaged in a game of dominoes. The man managed to get him outside and described his ailment, stammering so much that Glaude had to make him repeat his story several times. At last he understood that his client had something wrong in his mind. "To sleep" back pains or heartburns, yes, but madness, never! Just as he would never accept "sleeping" a terminal disease, how were you going to get rid of it afterwards? Besides, the stranger, a fidgety skinny guy with feverish eyes, had a nasty face that was unpleasant to look at. These funny scared looks of his added to the sickness he radiated, and forced Glaude to sniff like a weasel coming out of a hen-house.

But at last, reassured as the man managed to compose himself, he understood that he was only scared that someone would try to explain some of his absences away from home. And Glaude decided the man was not crazy, but just panicked. He was probably confused by a rebuking wife and troublesome children. Knowing that he was level-headed about that, and seeing the other guy out of his senses, Glaude sympathetically made a deal with him. All this very common nervousness was going to be carefully "slept" for a few days: afterwards, it would be nothing more than a bad memory.

And if the stranger left without telling him his name, he turned out to be quite generous since he put a handful of gold coins in the "sleeper's" hand. There were so many of them that Glaude had to give them back to him, so he could keep only the three he asked for - the excess of gold being of no use for this cure, which was not worth that much anyway. And Glaude went to sleep to take upon himself the stranger's ailment.

But this time, he was troubled in his sleep like never before. Usually he would doze off a muscle ache and feel his joints being pulled, a high fever that would make him shiver with sweat, or a pneumonia whose fire would smolder in his lungs. This time he felt no pain, but instead something much worse: desires that would make the devil himself blush. He dreamed all the evil of the other fellow.

He was eyeing little girls as they left school and felt overwhelmed with itches in his groin, like the desire of possessing a woman..... He was following the prettiest one, hiding from her with

all the ruse of desire. He jumped on her as she was walking by thick woods, dragging her by her blouse which tore open, showing him her back which almost made him faint with pleasure, just that white skin that showed down to her waist... He tried to kiss her... The young girl struggled, screamed and rolled in the ferns, where her skirt, now lifted, showed the tops of her thighs. Instead of being afraid of getting caught and running away, he felt his desire grow in him and he tore off the young girl's underwear, throwing himself upon this struggling body which could do nothing against his crazed strength... He crushed her under his weight.... She scratched him without hurting him at all, and this added to his pleasure.... Then she screamed louder and louder, so much that to force her to quiet down, he grabbed her throat and strangled her just like a chicken... But this did not calm his stormy desire.....

He dreamed all that, endlessly, consumating the rape and starting it all over with another and another, jumping in his bed, moaning with such desire that finally his wife, troubled by the obscenities he was shouting, dared enter the bedroom, to awake him in the middle of his torments. If she had not backed off in time, he would have dragged her into the bed.

Awake, Glaude understood he had accepted a satanic proposition and was wise enough to decide to break it off, despite the bestial pleasure he had just experienced. Once before, "sleeping" a hateful feeling he thought to be something different, he had almost sleep-walked, loaded his shotgun to go shoot the mayor, who was actually

the prey of his patient. Without the cold that clutched him in his night-gown and woke him up in the yard, he would have become a criminal! Fortunately, he was able to break the arrangement by bringing back, without delay, the three gold coins of the deal. The hateful man was not at home, but Glaude left the money in an obvious spot, on a white sheet of paper on the kitchen-table. Going back home, the other man, wondering if they had just fallen out of the sky, touched them with the tips of his fingers, and that was enough for all his hatred to go back into him. Now with this strange vicious man, Glaude had to act fast and in the same manner.

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His legs still numb with sleep and his senses slightly dulled, old Glaude took the road to Chicrolles to find the sick fellow and call off the deal. He looked for him without daring to ask anyone, looking in all the shops with a boldness that surprised even him, for he never bothered people in the slightest. All the streets and alleys saw him walking by, two or three times; so did the fields: the man was not easy to find. And each time he would pass by the county school, even going back to it on purpose; Glaude slowed down and listened.

Now he would have liked to hear the girls sing. Before he had always been annoyed by the school-girls of Coulondelles. But a studious silence worried him, making him fear that they had already left.... Until the teacher let the whole flock go out for recess. And he saw them, fresh and playful. They were shouting and running

after each other, teasing the boys or quietly talking in couples.

This was such a shower of desire, that Glaude felt dizzy with excitement and had to grab the iron gate with both his hands, looking like a man drunk on a gallon of cheap wine. Then he felt so guilty and so scared that one of the young girls might recognize him, that he rushed to hide behind one of the basswood trees on the square, where he continued eyeing the one he would probably choose. And he admitted that it was only gossip to say that at Chicrolles, people were thin-blooded. Here, the girls were full of life and had to be damned hot. But what did he care about these, since he could have others at Coulondelles, as many as he desired, now that it had become easy for him. And old Glaude felt he was getting violently aroused.

Thank God, he pulled himself together and was so ashamed of finding himself thinking about that, burned alive by these lewd thoughts that were not his own, but were gradually creeping up on him, that he stopped beating around the bush and went inside the city-hall to inquire at the reception desk. At first pleasant, the employee put an annoyed mask on his face when Glaude described the stranger to him. "You wouldn't be looking for Leon, by any chance?", he said at last in a disgusted voice. "I'm telling you," repeated Glaude, "I don't know his name, otherwise I wouldn't be here to ask you....all I know is that he wears a dirty beige corduroy vest."

The employee was now sure, but he looked suspiciously at Glaude, "That's Leon for sure, what do you want with him?" "I sort of want to give him back some cash he lent me." "In that case," answered the

employee, trying to muster a smile, "you're that much richer."
"Hell, why?" asked Glaude, feeling uneasy with this suspicious fellow. "Because," the man bluntly said as he grabbed his throat with his two hands.... "Because that son of a bitch hanged himself yesterday after raping Lucette Richard, and he's probably the one who also strangled Landier's daughter, a month ago. You bet he would have raped others if guilt hadn't put a rope around his neck."

Suddenly understanding that the vice of this unfortunate man was in his groin forever, and that he had no more rival in this vicious hunt, old Glaude, with a sudden evil look in his eyes, dropped in a chair, and in front of the stupefied employee, he started to cry hysterically at his new-found potency.

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