

## Maurice Pons: Worlds Within Worlds

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Maurice Pons's writings show such a puzzling variety of subjects, tones, and settings that it is difficult to find any continuity from one work to another. *Le Cordonnier Aristote* (1958) and *Le Passager de la nuit* (1960) are earnest political treatises, while *La Passion de Sébastien N* (1968) is a novel of almost pure fantasy in which a young man's passion for a car leads him to eat it.<sup>1</sup> *Mademoiselle B* (1973) is the sinister tale of how various men die or disappear after visiting a mysterious woman of evil repute. *Rosa* (1967) tells a similar story of soldiers who disappear after gaining the favors of a beautiful tavern keeper. In *Les Saisons* (1965), Pons has produced a metaphysical text that examines man's search for a better world. *La Mort d' Eros* (1953), by contrast, is the down-to-earth account, with Balzacian overtones, of a young provincial's success in a Paris theater troupe. In *La Maison des brasseurs* (1978), Pons turns to an allegory of artistic creation in the tale of a painter who acquires the ability to pass physically through his paintings into new worlds. *Métrobate* (1951) and the stories in *Virginales* (1955) are delicately ironic accounts of how innocent children glimpse the world of adult sexuality. *Chto!* (1970) which is Pons's only play, is a fantasy centered on a Russian mage and his ability to paralyze individuals with a magic word. Pons's most recent work, *Douce-Amère* (1985), is a collection of stories in which characters are caught in events they cannot foresee or understand.

Despite the apparent variety of these texts there is, however, a fundamental unity. They all reveal that, behind the world of appearances, there is another, hidden, reality. But this other reality is firmly set within the everyday world. "Not a day passes in which the most banal reality, the simplest manifestations of life . . . do not appear to me like a fantastic, fearful adventure," says the narrator of *Mademoiselle B* (134). Consequently, the setting of Pons's work is often very "realistic": the peaceful village of *Mademoiselle B*; the ugly, rain-sodden one in *Les Saisons*; the large house in *Métrobate*. Even the imaginary middle-European state of Wasquelham, which is the setting of *Rosa*, is described with a wealth of "historical" detail, backed by footnotes relating to its history, and a preface indicating how the events in it have been pieced together from old "documents." In Pons's work, "the fantastic and the everyday remain inseparable."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the following editions of Pons's work in this article: *La Mort d' Eros* (Paris: Julliard, 1953); *Virginales suivi de Métrobate* (Paris: Julliard, 1955); *Le Cordonnier Aristote* (Paris: Julliard, 1958); *Le Passager de la nuit* (Paris: Julliard, 1960); *Rosa* (Paris: Denoël / Folio, 1967); *La Passion de Sébastien N* (Paris: Denoël, 1968); *Chto!* (Paris: Bourgois, 1970); *Mademoiselle B* (Paris: Denoël / Folio, 1973); *Les Saisons* (Paris: Bourgois, 1975); *La Maison des brasseurs* (Paris: Denoël, 1978); *Virginales* (Paris: Bourgois, 1984); *Douce-Amère* (Paris: Denoël, 1985). All translations are mine. I am grateful to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for providing me with a grant to carry out some of the research that led to this article.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Freustié, "A Tombeaux ouverts," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 7-13 May 1973: 70.

At its vaguest, this other reality manifests itself in *Douce-Amère* as a sense of some force or order that governs the lives of characters. The father of the boy in "Le fils du boulanger" mysteriously disappears, but he reappears briefly to his son on the latter's birthdays, according to some strange pattern that the boy cannot fathom. The narrator of "La Petite Chinoise" is greeted by a Chinese girl as though he were her father, and he becomes embroiled in a kidnapping plot. A man takes to hospital a friend who has attempted suicide, but she disappears from his car never to be heard from again ("La Chambre des glycines"). The play *Chto!* also deals with strange powers, especially those that enable the mage to paralyze others at will. But reality in this play is never as it appears, for it is the seemingly insignificant servant woman who controls this power. She and the mage, in their turn, are manipulated by the Tsar Nicholas. However, even the Tsar is not really in control, for the mage foresees that an even greater power will overthrow him.

In certain other works, death is the force behind appearances. A series of apparently chance events gives Robert Bressan in *La Mort d'Eros* access to the theater world, but Robert himself believes that there is a pattern in such events and we are told that "it was in his nature to expect events to speak to him" (36). When he says, "In a few days . . . I shall be on the other side of the curtain" (50), he is referring not just to his becoming an actor, but to his discovery of another reality. Just as he plays a set role in the theater, so, in life too, he is subject to "the law of the play which defines and orders him" (203). The play in which he acts is *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which deals with omens of disaster, and the death of both Anthony and his servant Eros. Robert acts out the role of Eros in a state of somnambulistic possession, and, as forewarned, he actually dies at the end of the play.

*La Passion de Sébastien N* is written in a light, bantering tone, but the epigraph from Boris Vian warns: "Humor is the politeness of despair." Its hero's appetite for food symbolizes his appetite for something other than his drab existence. His fate is preordained when, as a child, he sees a car driven by a German officer, and "[he] believes that the car speaks to him" (31). When he sees the same vehicle many years later, he knows that he must acquire it. Having done so, he is involved in an accident with a tourist bus driven by the same former officer. Impelled by an irresistible force, he eats his "wounded" car, saying "let another life come. Another world" (163). His wish is fulfilled as he becomes the car, and rushes off to his death on the highway.

In *Mademoiselle B*, it is the mystery woman in the village who brings death. Driven by urges that are not entirely sexual, several men visit her, and then die or disappear. She is openly equated with death, for she visits the cemetery where one of her victims is buried, she watches another hang himself, and "she gives her men the taste of death" (96). Those who have known her see another reality that horrifies them, and the narrator's son, as he hurtles to his death on his motorcycle, has "eyes rolled upwards . . . that had perhaps seen, for one moment, what man should never see" (254).

In *Métrobate* and *Virginales* a rather different reality is glimpsed. The boy in *Métrobate* is aware that his new tutor represents a way of life that he does not fully grasp, and that this young man "had revealed an existence that was so different from mine, and whose secrets I did not understand" (138). The mysterious

stranger, who refuses to answer questions about himself, who shows great affection for his pupil, and who has no interest in girls, is revealed to be a homosexual. Even then, the boy does not understand his parents' anger or the nature of the reality into which he was almost drawn. Likewise, the boy in "Miss Frauline" is only half-aware of his own stirring sexuality when caressed by the German girl hired to look after him, and he does not grasp the nature of her pleasure in their boisterous games. The girl who narrates "Ma Marraine" is similarly unaware of the sexual nature of the caresses exchanged with a woman whom she treats with almost religious awe.

A more serious tone is apparent in the novels in which the hidden reality is political. Roland Maillart in *Le Cordonnier Aristote* learns that, behind a social system that he has never questioned, is a world of exploitation, war, and poverty. His belief in "pure" art is shattered as he realizes that his first novel is a commercial success and earns him the esteem of a bourgeois public because it serves the interest of the exploiters. It is "merchandise like any other" (152), and, by refusing any connection with political reality, it helps perpetuate the system. But it is the Algerian war that finally opens his eyes to the brutality of capitalist society and that persuades him to give up "pure" art for a politically conscious one. The narrator of *Le Passager de la nuit* also has his eyes opened by this war. A rather frivolous young man, interested mainly in fast cars, he is persuaded to take with him, as he drives south, an Algerian who has known a quite different world. In the course of the journey, the Algerian reveals to him the reality of French rule in Algeria.

*Le Passager de la nuit* is unlike most of Pons's work in that the hidden face of reality is revealed by a man. Usually, it is a woman who serves as a guide to other worlds. It is the German girl in "Miss Frauline" and the woman in "La Marraine" who reveal the world of sexuality; Mademoiselle B guides men to their death; a girl called Marcotte first shows Roland the true nature of bourgeois society; a girl of the same name in *La Mort d'Eros* helps Robert learn his role in the play; Simon's dead sister in *Les Saisons* remains for him a guide and inspiration. The tutor in *Métrobate* is, of course, a man, but his homosexuality and his "poetic" nature lend him an almost feminine aspect. Even the car that causes Sébastien's death may be seen as a female figure. Sébastien clearly falls in love with it, he is filled with jealousy when the car salesman drives it, and his final "union" with the vehicle, as he eats it, is described as "an act of love" (163).

In *La Maison des brasseurs*, the character named Louane is Frank's guide. When he miraculously enters his paintings, it is she who greets him, guides him, and explains what kind of art he must create. She is his inspiration, and her role as muse is symbolized when she gives birth to his child, serving, as it were, to bring his creation into being. But, as well as muse and guide, she is also that other reality that he seeks in art. She is the goal of his search, and it is always Louane that he tries to find when he enters his paintings. Rosa too is both guide and goal of men's quests. When one of the men who disappears is dragged back into this world, he describes a womblike existence from which he is withdrawn unwillingly, covered in blood and in fetal position. The Freudian connotations of this return to the womb are obvious, but what is more important is the happiness and harmony of the existence that the man describes. He has seen "another world, an-

other life" (155), a world that causes him to exclaim, echoing Rimbaud: "I know now that there exists another life . . . Real life is elsewhere" (159).

It is made clear in this novel that the other reality sought by mankind is something inside the individual as well as in the world around him or her. It is part of an eternal longing felt by all men and women. Mademoiselle B is said to hold "the key to a persistent secret, rooted in the heart of men" (242). When the narrator looks at a picture of a batlike female painted by Athanasius Kircher three hundred years earlier, he recognizes it as another form taken by Mademoiselle B. A more happy representation of this longing is found in *Les Saisons* in the form of Siméon's dead sister, whose image remains a shining memory in his mind.

The possibility of another reality is all the more inviting by contrast with the "real" world. Siméon in *Les Saisons* lives in an ugly village inhabited by unpleasant and hostile people, a world of decay in which everything rots in the torrential rain. Even when a calf is born, it is a maggot-infested corpse that the local magician holds aloft, exclaiming: "Hats off! His Majesty Decay!" (143). Many of the villagers have lost limbs that have been infected by this decay, and Siméon loses a toe, his foot, and a hand. The harshness of life here prevents him from writing the work that he hopes will be his salvation, and the loss of his creative power is symbolized by the infection and amputation of his penis. The political reality in *Le Cordonnier Aristote* and *Le Passager de la nuit* is also seen as profoundly unsatisfactory. In *Les Saisons* it is represented by the brutal customs officers. The military authorities in *Rosa* are also cruel and stupid, unable to comprehend anything outside their rigid view of things. They do realize, however, that Rosa represents a threat and "a sign [that] could undermine their certainties" (196). They forbid any account of Rosa's activities being divulged, and their answer to her is a typically brutal and ignorant one: they blow up her tavern and her with it.

The other, secret world is accessible only to those who are dissatisfied with this one. The characters who seek another world are usually outsiders and outcasts: Siméon in *Les Saisons* is a stranger who is greeted with hostility; Roland Maillart in *Le Cordonnier Aristote* is "something of an intruder" in bourgeois society (20); Robert Bressan in *La Mort d'Eros* is a newcomer who is never fully accepted by the other actors; Sébastien in *La Passion de Sébastien N* is a lonely individual, rejected by women. The soldiers who seek consolation with Rosa in *Rosa* are "poor devils" (24) and Rosa describes them as "all unfortunate" (85). Only the stupid, who lack imagination, are happy. When one officer in *Rosa* affirms, "I am a happy man," his superior thinks, "The idiot" (98).

Artists and writers are shown as especially unhappy with this life and as particularly aware of the possibility of another reality. Even the military authorities in Wasquelham realize that this is a trait of artists, and they choose a poet to send in search of Rosa's secret. For such characters, art is a means of access to the other reality that they seek, and it may even itself be that reality. Robert in *La Mort d'Eros*, as he watches a performance of Shakespeare, is "transported with it far from all his preoccupations" (51). Siméon tries to use writing as a means of salvation in the midst of his suffering, saying, "It is my book that will save me" (*Les Saisons* 25). The narrator of *Mademoiselle B*, as he becomes more and more obsessed with the mysterious woman in his village, is told by several people to write

a novel about her. Although he initially rejects this idea, he does finally follow their advice. Having written about his horrifying experiences, he seems to emerge from a world of gloom and despair into one of light and hope.

This attitude to art may seem strange in view of the rejection in *Le Cordonnier Aristote* of art that is escapism. Siméon's attempts in *Les Saisons* to write are likewise dismissed by some characters as pointless, and the fine paper that he uses is seen as an offensive luxury in their poverty-stricken world. However, it is not art itself that is rejected, but art that ignores the harsh reality from which a new world must be created. Robert in *Le Cordonnier Aristote* learns to write a work that will not ignore the political situation, but that will use it as raw material. Siméon too tries to use the world of suffering and pain as the basis of his book, and he sees his own misfortunes as "raw material from which he would develop a work of art" (*Les Saisons* 32). Although he abandons his attempt to write, this is due to his lack of talent, and it is not a failure inherent in art itself. It should also be remembered that it is his words that inspire the villagers to set out in quest of another world. The search fails, and the angry villagers kill him, but at least he has remained aware of this other possibility. His attitude must be contrasted with that of the magician Croll in *Les Saisons*. While a generally sympathetic character with semimagical powers, Croll is only half-aware of other possibilities (a partial blindness symbolized by the fact that he is one-eyed). He is overwhelmed by the rottenness of this world, and he refuses to accompany the others on their search for something that Siméon, the dreamer and poet, is able to see.

The novel that best illustrates Pons's view of art, and that combines this view with his idea of women as guide, is *La Maison des brasseurs*. In this work, Frank's first paintings are commercial pieces, painted in realistic vein, but impervious to any hidden mystery. He is told: "You are right to paint only what you see. But you must learn to see other things." (20). Unlike Siméon, Frank has the necessary talent to do this, and, as he is painting, he begins to pass through his works into new worlds. He is now creating works in which "Real life is present" (162).

In his study of Patinir, Pons points out that this painter transformed the landscape of his native Flanders by use of his imagination, reproducing "the fabulous lands where his visionary imagination led him."<sup>3</sup> This is precisely what Frank does. He takes the world around him and uses it to create paintings of pure fantasy. For example, he looks at a filthy, unattractive room, and "he settled down . . . in this sordid, stinking room to create what was, perhaps, his finest painting" (58). From the descriptions given of his work, it would appear that he does this by taking significant details of his own experience and of reality as he knows it, and by arranging them in a symbolic pattern on the canvas, disturbing and redistributing the real world to produce a new one. Political reality too becomes part of his work, for he uses political demonstrations as his material. However, it is important to note that he uses the political situation, but he is not used by it. He believes that the artist must be free to employ his material as he or she wishes, and this is exactly the point of one political demonstration, in which the slogans are "Free the fine arts" and "Long live free art" (88). Frank is following the example of Swift,

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Pons et André Barret, *Patinir ou l'harmonie du monde* (Paris: Laffont, 1980) 20.

whom Pons admires for turning the political reality of his day into the fantastic travels of Gulliver.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout Frank's journeys in strange worlds, he looks for the paintings of a certain Gustav de Wing, an ancestor of Louane. What he is really seeking is a predecessor and a certain kind of artistic tradition. The fact that his own paintings are later attributed to de Wing indicates that he does, indeed, discover and become part of that tradition. Another indication that his "creations" are in the de Wing mold is that, when Louane gives birth to his child, this turns out to be de Wing, complete with frock coat. Frank immediately begins to paint a portrait of his "child," and, as he does so, de Wing progressively disappears. Predecessor and the art he inspires thus become one, forming part of the same artistic heritage. Frank has found his place in a living artistic tradition of fantastic realism that reveals the hidden worlds within this one. The reader of Pons's texts is privileged to glimpse, as he or she reads them, another moment in this tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Pons, Préface à Jonathan Swift, *Voyages de Gulliver* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 11.