

Jean Guerreschi

Up to the front line

Novel

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Back cover

"In front of such an erudition serving such a fantasy, one remains stunned. It is said that most French people only buy one book a year. If you sadly happen to be one of them, don't wait any longer. Throw yourself into this novel."

Pierre-Robert Leclercq, *Magazine littéraire*

"A Musilian dream. Unclassifiable, huge."

Gilles Tordjman, *L'Express*

"A wonderful novelistic jigsaw in which characters and events mingle, written with erudition and humour. An amazing and promising literary machine."

Jean-Claude Perrier, *Le Figaro littéraire*

"Because it is extremely realist, such a novel bitterly questions reality, defy it, because we are constantly uncertain whether it is the novel or the history which triumphs, reality or imagination."

Gilles Lapouge, *La Quinzaine littéraire*

"We are dumbfounded, carried away, overwhelmed, we border on vertigo. Not surprising when you stand so close to cataclysm..."

Annie Copperman, *Les Echos*

"This is gigantic, pass it on!"

Jean-Louis Ezine, *Le Nouvel Observateur*

Autumn sun (sunrise) detail

By Egon Schiele

... I wanted to describe a war (...) but then everything turned out differently under my hand.

Franz Kafka
about the *Verdict*
June 2nd, 1913.

On the river Nihil's banks

On June 25th, 1914, André Gide's starling had the diarrhoea. The writer, worried, wrote down the colour, the odour, the consistency. He had taken in the bird on the avenue, four days earlier, as it had just fallen from the nest and was not yet able to fly away. This diarrhoea must probably have remote causes because, already, on June 22nd, he had written down that "every ten minutes, he (the starling) lets small liquid and corrosive droppings fall down", then, on the 23rd, that to keep him perched on his shoulder, he (Gide) had to wrap the upper part of his body into a cloth. However, he had not paid too much attention to it so far. Maybe because the frequency of his productions was not so important and, above all, that the passerine had not refused to feed himself as today.

Gide admitted he was unable to take good care of him. Thought he could soon lose him. Had it been the stink which reigned in the linen room, he would have stayed there looking helpless, with a heavy heart, contemplating his favourite to wash without worrying and even with a certain cheerfulness, in the too narrow bathtub he had brought him the day before. Knowing- the only one of the two to know, cruel ability of anticipation of the human consciousness- that his last days were coming to an end.

Mr Georges Lecomte, president of the *Société des Gens de Lettres*, went to the rue Clauzel, accompanied by the committee's members, where he gave a gold medal to Mr François Fertault to celebrate his hundredth birthday. The oldest of the French writers received them with simplicity and kindness, in his modest flat in which you could only find Louis-Philippe style furniture. For them, he evoked some memories dating back from his twenties: the beginning of Michelet's teaching, on January 9th 1834, at *la Sorbonne*; the death sentence of the murderer-poet Lacenaire on November 14th of the following year, two days before the Halley comet passed; and, of course the creation of their distinguished *Société*, on January 25th 1838... Paid a deep tribute to his wife, praising the sixty years of happiness he had experienced thanks to her. Then, pictures were taken (the doyen wanted to

pose at his desk), few of his poems were read and everyone urged him to keep writing “many others”.

Mr François Fertault had lived too long not to detect, under this immoderate confidence in the future, the discreet sniggering of young people who were not only going to physically bury him, but would not cease working to make his works forget by the ones they were refurbishing at the very same moment, secretly, behind the screen of their smiles and praises. It made him laugh. After all, wasn't it the inevitable obituary chore of this kind of ceremony? Consequently, in a mischievous manner, he willingly lent himself to consider with them the detail of his literary projects, those which were the most uncertain to succeed for lack of time. He even made new ones up. Such as to narrate, in verses, the unfair Juliette Drouet's disappointments on stage, among which the first night of *Marie Tudor* at the *Porte-Saint-Martin*, where he had been the only young man of the audience to defend her against the crowd's hisses (it was false). Or to begin a monumental history of the parodies of the famous works, classified by genre and by period of time. To start with the four *Hernani*'s pastiches which had made their appearance during the only month of March 1830 and he probably was one of the rarest to remember nowadays (it was true). They went into raptures. None of them noticed neither the malicious gleam in the centenarian's eye, nor the so intense pleasure he had to watch, behind the lenses of his glasses, the appearance of the discreet signs of their surprise or of their disappointment.

While he was seeing them to the pavement of the rue Clauzel, he advised them to daily take on their time to write to walk. They nodded in agreement, looking convinced. All of a sudden, suiting the action to the word, the old man seized the president's sleeve and took him along with him, arm in arm, towards the rue Bréda (he still named it that way although its name had been rue Henri-Monnier for more than ten years now), and from this one to the rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, a long, straight and austere street, which went abruptly down to the church of the same name.

“It is a street I like, my dear Lecomte, he said to the concerned person leaning over against his ear, because it helps the calf to keep young.”

Then, turning around to the learned assembly which, after some hesitations, had followed close on their heels and formed up again:

“Do you know, gentlemen, he asked, raising his voice, what we used to call *lorettes* around the 40's?”

He gave time to the last ones to join them before he continued :

“ Well some young and charming persons who lived in the neighbourhood and who, believe me, got out of breath less than I – he paused for a short while- but also probably less than the youngest ones of your lot, he lively added, to climb the Montmartre heights...”

They laughed.

“Our dear doyen, Lecomte went further tapping him affectionately on the forearm, the greenest of us all!”

Olivier Gratiolet came across their noisy group as it was dispersing at the beginning of the rue Saint-Lazare. Concerned not to lose sight of the young woman he was following from a distance from the boulevard Haussmann, he preferred to take a wide step aside on the road to have to apologise several times for cutting the trajectory of the numerous handshakes which were taking place on the pavement.

How did he end up following close behind this young woman, he didn't know, while he was attempting to find again another one that he didn't know any better? He was the first surprised by the absence of answer to this question. The day before he had met Madeleine. The one he called “Madeleine” because he had not been able to approach her in the street before, then at the bookshop's, where she came in after him and yet without him bringing himself to talk to her. Madeleine such as the church in front of which he waited – really unnecessarily since the missed opportunity at the bookshop's- for her to go out again of the antique dealer's Sigismond.

After he spent the night tossing and turning in bed, pushing the bed linen down with his feet, to pull them back on his shoulders almost instantly, he had chosen to get up as early as dawn to go back to the places where they first met. He imagined- o undoubtedly in a crazy way, he objected to himself to avoid the disillusion- that if Madeleine had suffered, as much as he had, from the heat and the memory reunited during the night, she would have done the same. As if the insomnia of the one and the other, had they happened at the same time, had the value of an unsaid rendez-vous. As if love , not even declared or just born, was measured by the simultaneity of these flying away, by the synchronous beating of these hazardous intuitions, by the miracle, maybe only statistical, of this beforehand coexistence. Community, already, of the thoughts, before being of the bodies or the feelings...

But it is vainly that Olivier had debarked place du Palais-Royal at the time of the cleaners weeping the streets and of the first café-crème. Gone through the arches of the rue de Rivoli up to the Jeu de Paume, both sides. Come into Galignani's, the bookshop, as soon as it opened. Stayed, rue Royale, in front of the window of the Lubin perfume shop whose,

without seeking it, names and prices of the products were now turning round and round in his mind: *Sola Mia*, 8 fr.; *Au soleil*, 30 fr. (unless it is the opposite), *Tanit*, 20 fr.; *Epidor* 6 fr; *Enigma*, 12 fr... Then, getting more and more exasperated, with time passing by, and above all humiliated to have to admit that he had been the only one to hope, he had showed himself less discreet, and even bluntly unpleasant. Standing about waiting, for a whole hour, just a stone's throw from Sigismond's window, following close behind the antique dealer's scarce customers, as if he was going to come in with them, but changing his mind at the last moment and pressing his nose against the window, shading his eyes with his hand, to have a better look inside. To such an extent that when the manager had closed the shop, at midday, he made a beeline for Olivier, who was looking at him from a distance with an air he had taken for some provocation (whereas it only was the orbital grin of the love suffering, accentuated by the tiredness of standing upright), and he had shouted at him nastily:

“Sir probably wants something and can't make up his mind to ask for it?”

In front of Olivier's dumbfounded silence, he had taken advantage of the situation:

“Sir certainly wants that I advise him to chose? Sir... Sir?”

Olivier had stepped back without answering. Then he had turned on his heel and walked away, without speeding up, to the rue Tronchet. However, he was bursting inside. New stop in front of Nicoll and C°, to give himself time to feel calm again. Fancy cheviot suit with double-breasted jacket, 135 fr., the blue serge one, 120fr.; raincoat "under any circumstances/in any event", waterproofed pure wool fabric, not lined 50fr., lined by the waist 75 fr.

He had first seen her in the mirror. Reflected, in a virtual image, among the men's dummies, full scale, on which he let his frustrated thinking of Madeleine lie. He had loved her like the widowed shadow of his desire, before turning back on her body and considering it in broad daylight. She was not as beautiful as Madeleine. Is it Madeleine who has sent her? In any case, he had followed her as if it was an order from her. She was walking up to the boulevard, discreetly turning round sometimes to check if he still was behind her. (at least it was the way he interpreted it, because, otherwise, what had she been expected to discover with so fast twirls?) He very soon knew that he had not been wrong. While she was crossing the Haussmann boulevard opposite the Printemps shops, Olivier, because he liked to have fun, and also because he was not attached to her yet, suddenly stopped to follow her to go to the excavation of the rue du Havre, which was widely extending beyond the middle of the crossroads. The open-air works, made necessary by the falling down of

the road resulting from the June 15th thunderstorms, attracted a ceaselessly renewed crowd of onlookers, so that Olivier had no difficulty to thread his way to the front row. From where he stood, turning his back on the rue du Havre, nearly leant against the triangular block of houses whose peak finished the rue de Provence in the running on from the Printemps building, he could not miss to observe the slightest change in the public which gathered all around the circular perimeter of the worksite. That is how, when he thought she had already gone far or felt discouraged to wait for him, he saw the head of the young woman appear. Facing him, slightly on his left. Between the dark shoulder of a bourgeois with a tie-wearing bourgeois and the light spot of a baker's boy's forage cap. She was obviously not the least interested in the show which was opening in front of her, such as a theatre which had sunk with stage, scenery, actors, firemen and the stagehands, under the surface of the orchestra section... Olivier could have sworn that she had not taken a look inside the hole, now well cleared up and full of retaining girders, when it was her turn to see him. He smiled at her, but she did not answer back his smile. On the contrary, she looked down and bit her lower lip, as if she had something to blame herself for, or if she made him know her embarrassment to have been led to stand there. Olivier understood it. Besides she immediately stepped back and disappeared from his sight. He had no problem to find her again on the pavement of the rue de Provence, in which she did not turn back a single time before she reached the rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. Although she did it quickly, in the same movement as when she looked both sides to walk across. Then, she only had turned her head one more time, at the top of the street, when, leaving the church of the Trinity on her left, she had stepped into the rue Saint-Lazare.

He had been following her for a quarter of an hour, and he would have been unable to say what she liked in her. Her ease? The shape of her face? Her slightly hooked nose. Her black eyes. Of an intensity... yes... almost painful. (Had he not read this somewhere?) For the rest, he didn't have much information for him to imagine her body shape. Quite surprisingly, he didn't seem to care about it. Anyway less than for the other women. As if what he called, maybe in a too offhand way, her 'easiness', that is to say the natural and instant way, with which she had tacitly met his desire to follow her, prevented him, in return, from being demanding as far the sexual charms were concerned. (He blamed himself for this thought.)

She was walking up the rue Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. Took a narrow crescent-shaped street on the right, which, skirting round the place Saint-Georges, got back on to this same street a hundred of meters further up. Olivier wondered: she does it on purpose to lose

me, or does she hope that, thanks to the detour, I am going to make up my mind to approach her?

In front of the number 10, she stopped. Olivier, who bent his head while going up, saw it too late. Now, he barely was at five or six meters from her, on the opposite side of the street. He also stopped. The time seemed to have stopped too. She looked at him straight in the eye, with both an innocent and solemn look, which seemed to mean: "Who are you? What are you doing here? I don't know you. And however I have the impression that I do." (He had the feeling that he was reciting. That he came into a character's part, at a moment's notice. In a scene he had already read, or seen, then forgotten, and in which the stranger was about to play opposite him.) He wanted to break the unreality of the situation. Without thinking, he crossed the street in the manner of an automaton. She watched him approaching with neither fear nor provocation. Smiling. Undoubtedly curious to hear which formula he could have invented to introduce himself to her. When he was very close, only separated by the width of the pavement, he said :

"Miss, would you let me have a walk with you?"

- It is not a walk, she promptly answered with a soft and amused voice, I am walking back home."

Olivier was taken aback. He mumbled :

"Here... I... you live here?"

- Yes", she answered.

He became bolder :

"Could I see you again? Tomorrow? Tonight? In a moment? You are going to go out again, aren't you?"

She frankly laughed. She had thick eyebrows, plucked near the summit of the nose. Nice teeth, equal, well arranged.

"Oh yes, I will probably go out again."

For the first time since he had been following her, she seemed unsettled by his presence. Waddled from one foot to another. Olivier thought (stupidly, he considered) that she had legs. Felt, imperatively, in the hollow of his hands, that she also, had a waist, hips, where he would have liked to put them on straightaway. He was itching to do it. She must have understood it, because she said, as if she was suddenly in a hurry :

"Tomorrow, maybe? Same place, same time.

- Here? Olivier asked. (He was less surprised by the place than amazed by the velocity of the proposal and the concision of the date.)

- No”, she simply said.

And she walked inside without looking at time any more.

Châtelet-en-Brie

Seine et Marne

Morhardt finished writing on the envelope of the letter that he intended to send to Auguste Rodin. (He always started with the envelope). Slipped this one into the desk blotter. Unscrewed the stopper of his inkpot, then the one of his penholder tank, a Gold Starry n°39 that he had bought at Jandelle's, street Ernest-Cresson, for the modest price of 15 fr. Filled it with slow and precise gestures. Screwed the one and the other back again. Opened the pad.

« Dear Sir and friend », he started. He had received Rodin's cheque by the yesterday afternoon post and he did not want things to be dragged on. Because it was urgent. Not only because of the tragedy Camille was physically experiencing day after day (she had been confined to a mental institution for sixteen months now), and of the hermetic refusal of the family to accept any external financial assistance from Rodin, but also because the press had, since then, got hold of the affair, on the convenient grounds of the abrogation of the June 30th, 1878 law on the insane person scheme, which was then being discussed at the Sénat. The very anticlerical *Avenir de l'Aisne* had started, in September, and the *Grand National*, a Parisian daily newspaper much more important than the Château-Thierry's paper, had taken over in its December 8th editorial, under Paul Vibert's efficient words.

to be continued