


A B Y S S E S

Pascal Quignard

TRANSLATED BY CHRIS TURNER



ABYSSES

(*Last Kingdom III*)

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CHAPTER 1

His silence did not seem a product of adversity. Silence, shadow, ennui and emptiness were connected, for him, with the pleasures to be sought in them. Most often that silence is accompanied by a nudity that is as one with this pure waiting in the half-light. And happiness too. And reading adds another voice to it, an even more singular voice, a voice even stranger than song, a voice maintaining the soul in a total absence of resonance. The reader is like an animal standing on the edge of a lake more ancient than the human voice.

At banquets he was a companion of the utmost goodwill and affability. In the revels following, he was more reserved. He sat apart, uncovered his loins hardly at all, but was stirred and lent the whole of his attention to the indecent goings-on without really becoming involved.

He detested all turbulence.

Violence horrified him.

He avoided the company of men or women who talked too much.

He loved Latin enormously and enjoyed reading most of the authors of the old language that had been written in France in the days of the knights and the courts of Champagne. He wrote down nothing that he hadn't previously read and that hadn't already compelled his reading to echo the rhythms of his breathing.

He wrote that not to stray was a thing beyond his powers.

He wrote that it is difficult to regulate one's desires.

In the fable he composed on the subject of two doves that have tender feelings for each other but are very poor lovers—preferring sentiment to physical pleasure, and tourist-like social curiosity to the aseman-tic happiness of observing each other in the darkness—an inexplicable lyric impulsion can be felt at the point where the narration is coming to an end, like a wave that has been summoned up by all that has been said, a wave that rolls forward and cannot be held back.

This element of song, which has no more story to tell and has become quite nakedly musical, is so simple

that it takes some effort to escape its power and attend to the thoroughly unchristian, primal, sexual, lethal ideas it is conveying.

Then the wave, like every wave in nature, creates the patch of damp, dull sand on which it washes up.

There is no sparkle at that point.

But amid these darker traces something glimmers, or at least lies breathing in its fearsome, tranquil place of rest.

The ringing beauty of the verses spreads a muted light into the world of sound dying there.

It throws back a strange, muffled luminescence;

a pale *golden glow*;

a *dawn at the wrong moment*;

an *untimely glow*.

A *glimmering* one scarcely knows whether to apportion to the night or the day.

*

The evanescent trace of waters which might be said to be *darker* than the night that follows each sunlit period.

Like waters in which we might have dwelt *before we knew the sun*.

I am trying to conjure up a face, the face of a man who began writing in 1640 or, rather, I am speaking of a world that is, as it were, mirrored in flowing water. Not a distorted but a floating world.

A universe just below the water's surface, with the creamy reflection of the sun.

If one gazes at one's reflection beside the shore,

It isn't oneself one sees

One sees only an image

Which endlessly returns.

*

The famous line of verse describing the temporality that divides the tasks of human beings, the division of time's flows that dislodged them from the moment and wrested them from the animal power of its ecstasy—*Le mal est que dans l'an s'entremeslent des jours* [The unfortunate thing is that, in the year, days are intermingled]—turns out to be a correction at the proof stage dating from 1678.

Jean de la Fontaine noted the change on a piece of card slipped in between the pages.

I went and examined these proofs in the Reserve Section of the old French National Library which was

situated, last century, on the rue de Richelieu in Paris' Second Arrondissement.

We shall never again go to refresh our energies—or to read—in that dull yet clamorous atmosphere, in that dimly lit reading room looking out onto a square.

In those days and in that place they had kept the first printed copies which read: '*Il s'entremesle certains jours . . .*'

A little line of no value—or, at least, of scarcely more value than what I can say in memory of that highly unpredictable art.

*

There's a place I love far from the world, a place I lived in before the first eighteen months of my childhood, before the ivy-covered wall and the walnut trees, the bramble bushes and the ditches beside the river Iton. A place in the world where the water is so clear that there are no reflections. I don't know where that place is now or that sort of stream I seem to have known on earth. It was perhaps, if it was on earth, inside my mother, behind her unseen sex, in the shadows harboured there. It is perhaps quite simply a place, a shabby place, a tiny place—that thing I call the Erstwhile. They say that in his swimming pool up on the rock of Capri, the

emperor Claudius would repeat a Greek phrase he remembered from a tragedy by Euripides. 'There is no human dominion,' he would recite. 'Above me I see only seabirds.'

They say that President Azaña, dying in Andorra, turned his face to the members of his close circle and mumbled: 'What was that country called? You know, that country that once existed? That country I was president of? I don't remember any more ...'

CHAPTER 2

The telephone rang. I leant over. I saw the cable that ran along the skirting board and the plug located between door and sofa. I got up, went towards the door, crouched down and pulled out the plug.

The ringing stopped abruptly.

I sat down on the floor, rubbing my hands with satisfaction.

‘But . . . this isn’t *your* house!’ she said.

I thought for a moment, then answered, ‘No.’

‘What gives you the right to unplug my telephone?’

‘The noise.’

She was smoking a cigarette that she held between her cupped hands.

I watched the smoke float up into the gaps just discernible between the thin, white joints of her fingers.

CHAPTER 3

The earth's axis of rotation runs through the polar regions. The sun's rays strike these obliquely. The quantity of heat received is proportional to the angle at which the rays reach their surface. As a child, I got supplies of affection from radiators;

from Godin stoves;

from standard lamps;

from electric sockets;

from pocket torches.

Sometimes there were sudden bright intervals between showers that made their way along the quays in the harbour, sweeping across the blackish lock-gates.

The succession of belts of vegetation and their fauna follow the contours of the mountains.

They too are dependent on the angle of the slope.

How far they advance depends on which way the hillside faces.

For this reason, the highest forests are in dark shadow.

*

Some electric fish can give off up to 550 volts. The electrical field that silently surrounds them is *the ancestor of eyesight*.

*

Matter, as it explodes in space, fuses and subsides again. Either as comet or as planet. There is little difference between repetition and degradation.

Then, in the living world, birth and old age become disconnected.

And later, in the human world, adolescence and obsolescence seem ranged against each other as opposite poles. But at their source sex and death formed one single action, as is betrayed in the identical moaning associated with them.

These two sources that I place at the origin of time aren't opposed diachronically.

It's the same volcano—it's just a question of spurting forth.