

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Robert Pinget's *Passacaille*

The French *nouveau roman* has a pronounced self-destructive urge. It puts the novel on trial, denies its own innocence, exposes the novelist himself as the chief suspect, incriminates him in his inadequate and self-contradictory evidence, and condemns the two of them together to a life sentence of fruitless forced labors.

Passacaille (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969), is a fascinating piece of testimony. One cannot be sure of the events which it is struggling to piece together. All is supposition and hypothesis: "Quelqu'un dans la pièce froide viendrait d'entrer . . . Se serait assis devant la table" (p. 7). The style of the witness is stuttering and fragmentary, changing tracks, offering variants, leaving blanks and inconsistencies, "la source d'information défaillante à chaque instant" (p. 9). It is a text which confesses its own impotence, at one moment running riot and proliferating in a bewildering way, at another halting and drying up. The merest attempt to give an ordered version falters through lack of evidence or simply lack of confidence: "Qu'on aurait vu donc, ne m'interrompez pas, au petit matin un cadavre sur le fumier, il devait être cinq heures du matin, et qu'on aurait pensé qu'il s'agissait du maître lequel s'était mis à boire, pas plus difficile, or rien n'autorisait à cette déduction, il y avait des voisins et d'autres ivrognes mais les choses s'installent dans l'esprit et plus moyen de les en déloger, d'ailleurs qui on, il fallait préciser, d'ailleurs pourquoi cadavre, ce pouvait être un corps qui se relèverait quelques minutes ou quelques heures après . . ." (p. 86). Who has been found dead on the dung-heap: postman, cow, scarecrow, or writer? The postman might not have been dead, but only dead drunk. Perhaps the scarecrow was not a scarecrow but a real person, because "l'enfant du voisin . . . aurait pris pour un cadavre l'épouvantail à moineaux" (p. 33) and someone seen running off with the scarecrow reveals itself to be a man and his boy heading across the fields. And if it is the writer who has been killed, then is it fact or fiction, reality or imagination, an event in the past or a mere possibility toyed with on paper? The reader hovers on the fringe of what might have been, or is due to be, an event, but an event which never takes shape to form a reassuring anecdote. At no point does a literary overseer emerge to establish some logic, make links, or provide explanatory commentary.

The characters involved are equally nebulous. People appear and disappear as if they had no proper existence: ". . . c'est au détour de la carrière qu'il aperçoit le docteur, il va vers lui, environ cinquante mètres les séparant, et constate en arrivant qu'il n'y a personne, il remonte dans sa camionnette pour refaire le trajet habituel avec les mirages habituels" (p. 45). "Nulle trace de personne," "Quelqu'un . . . personne": these are among the commonest words. Characters between whom one cannot see the connection loom into focus and fade away, their role strangely undetermined. Substitutions are made, gratuitously, it seems—at one moment the teacher could be a sorcerer, then the woman with the goats; at one moment it is the postman in the ditch, then the delivery man—and one suspects that these different figures might be one and the same, so much do they overlap and intermingle. A person called Rodolphe becomes Edouard and Edmond, perhaps by an

accident of memory, but one wonders in the end if he ever existed, or at least in what form and under what name. The characters are, in fact, curiously "verbal." One cannot even be sure of the voice that speaks or the pen that writes. Is there a centralizing narrative mind at all and who is performing the literary task? The semblance of a narrative "je" may appear momentarily, but gives no stability to the "récit." And finally the narrator, if there ever was one, dissolves into nomadic images, verbal likenesses, and no more: "Je soussigné dans la pièce froide, ciguë, pendule détraquée, je soussigné dans le marais, chèvre ou carcasse d'oiseau, je soussigné au tournant de la route, au jardin du maître, vieille femme à maléfices, sentinelle des morts, satyre, simulacre, en camionnette sur ce trajet dévié par le mauvais oeil, jouet de cette farce qu'on nomme conscience, personne, je soussigné minuit en plein jour, chavirant d'ennui, vieille chouette, pie ou corbeau . . ." (p. 130). Characterization becomes a kind of "space to let," a central vacuum to be tried by anybody. Various persons, some known by name, others unknown, float towards it. But no one fits or seems to find it livable.

It has been suggested that the *nouveau roman* is the detective novel taken seriously. If by "taken seriously" one means not glibly wrapped up in a false but convincing story form, then *Passacaille* is a kind of detective novel. It has many of the features of the "whodunit," but with the one outstanding question: what is *it*, and who is *who*? Camus, speaking of his own radically changed literary climate, has said: "Pour l'homme absurde, il ne s'agit plus d'expliquer et de résoudre, mais d'éprouver et de décrire." Pinget's text takes a further tumble into "l'absurde" in that it cannot even describe, not knowing what its subject is, or even if it happened.

The writer's great stumbling blocks are time and words. These are, paradoxically, the two elements that prevent a story from materializing. If one could solve the question of the clock, the "pendule détraquée," one could possibly solve everything. At one moment the clock's hands mark the time, at another some malicious person has moved them round, at another they have disappeared from the clock face completely. The divisions of the seasons show themselves as a hollow convention: "cette saison n'a pas suivi la précédente mais se perpétue d'une cassure à l'autre, si bien qu'une phrase murmurée jadis à l'époque des moissons vient d'être dite ce soir ou qu'au printemps dernier telle question ne trouvera réponse qu'aux jacintes prochaines, comment se ressaisir . . ." (p. 82). Time may capriciously change its pace, make the real seem unreal, even cause people to vanish when one is not looking. It is a mad kaleidoscope in the mind, churning together memories and present realities, present realities and future projects, facts and hypotheses. Its bewildering switches, "collages," and contradictions leave no reliable foothold. For the writer, time is the absolute impediment to "vraisemblance" and to the dream of achieving "la version définitive." It reduces to nothing his hopefully acquired structures. It erases itself, brushing out its own tracks as it advances, "de sorte que l'association s'est dissoute comme elle s'était soudée, au fil des jours . . . et les jours passent sans passer" (pp. 99-100). It is the dubious time factor in *Passacaille*, obsessively pinpointed in the recurrent image of the broken clock, which makes one aware of all the gaps which cannot be filled and links which cannot be soldered. And one is left with the impression of a novel which is a "tonneau des Danaïdes" through which time and words could go slipping forever, or an *A la recherche du temps perdu* written by an amnesiac.

Words are no less intractable. The writer cannot say that he possesses

or has any feeling of identification with his own language. "Que faire de ces bribes?" (p. 39): they are redundant fragments without an owner or a theme, whirling round to make their own provisional patterns. Words are the creators, not his servants; and his text is dogged by the impossibility of writing anything, if this means capturing and holding and faithfully reflecting things as they were or are. The style is one which leaves its own lacunae, out of confessed ignorance and confusion; which speaks in alternatives, as if there is no criterion for giving one image or the other a priority; which is composed entirely of variants and revisions, erasures, and rewritings. The writer is the "maître alchimiste des riens qui le faisaient survivre . . ." (pp. 47-48), seeking to turn words into something more than words and vacuity into substance, but doomed in the meantime to fruitless repetitions and endless metamorphoses. He is writing his life for lack of anything else, words being the only way to save it from nonexistence, total silence. Yet every word is the proof of life's absence: "il ne restait sur la page de souvenirs que taches d'encre et graffiti, sa vie avait émigré ailleurs . . . paroles à la dérive comme autant de désaveux, pourchassé jusque dans ses rêves il n'aurait plus d'histoire qu'écrite, plus de respiration que littérale" (pp. 96-97). And beyond all these peripheral ramblings, desperate but superfluous, there reigns the supreme mirage of a kind of eternity and of one magic word, "phrase nourrissante, apaisante, la panacée" (p. 117) which would contain everything, transform life, and give a sense of completeness.

But just as one is about to despair that this labyrinth of language can lead anywhere but back to itself, one begins to decipher its patterns and leitmotifs. Words and phrases do their dance movement, changing places, reversing their order. Approximately identical forms recur in different contexts, making links and new combinations. Repetitive details in the end take on an obsessive significance. Sudden changes of tempo give intensification and special import to an image. One sees the figurative lurking behind the literal, and certain phrases have collected such a charge of associations in their course that they become infinitely rich in resonance. It is then that the tracings of a deep human meaning emerge: "Quelques images à débarrasser de leurs scories pour découvrir au fond de leur trame la déroute, la détresse . . ." (p. 19). Death is the most prominent: firstly in the form of the corpses, real or imagined, the birds' skeletons in the wood, the ever present crows, the question of drafting a will; but more especially in the tenacious effort to write a life story which turns out to be nothing but a death story. It is significant that, by the end, virtually everyone has died and no one has died: death, even if only an ink in the mind, has spread everywhere and contaminated everybody. There is the image of things broken: the hands of the clock, the tractor engine and the breakdown of the lorry, which in turn link up with the idea of broken friendships and then the dislocated form of the novel itself. Even when the novel finally comes to a halt, one suspects that this is only a temporary breakdown of the word machine rather than anything more conclusive, and that the man with his "dépanneuse" (in this case the novelist) will have to come on to the scene sooner or later to help it out. The image of ghosts disappearing through trapdoors expands as it makes contact with references to apparitions and illusions (both optical and metaphysical), to half-open doors and chinks of light, both of which touch on the theme of religious promise.

One could go on developing at length the complex network of images which seem to demand to step out of the world of "simulacres" and become real. Much of the fascination of *Passacaille* stems from the tension between

the earthy solidity of the everyday and the phantomatic and disquieting; between the sober focus of an attentive mind and all the unfounded speculations which threaten to run away with reasonableness; between words which refer to nothing but themselves and words which open up a rich vein of symbolic suggestion. But numerous warning notices within the novel itself serve to keep one's more fanciful constructions in check: ". . . tout est truage et exploitation de la crédulité . . . tant d'intérêt porté à nos supçons c'était vouloir leur donner corps . . ." (pp. 68-69), "Ou que rien n'avait à voir avec rien, on se faisait des idées . . ." (p. 56). And one wonders if the mysteries one detects, the multiple angles one sees, and the discoveries one makes are not "fantasme," "fausses perspectives" and if one has not been drugged by "le plaisir des fausses découvertes."

All the things which make a novel—a story, a character, a time sequence, and a control over words and their progression—are missing from *Passacaille*. But perhaps, in damning itself as a novel, it resurrects itself as a form of poetry: ". . . grande liberté, n'était-ce pas là le domaine de la poésie?" (p. 90). Certainly, the great themes of poetry (time and memory, nature and the seasons, solitude and death) seep through the verbal fissures. Little touches of human emotion, all the more poignant because of their spasmodic appearance in a framework of absence and erosion, remind one of Reverdy's world. Pinget's technique, which juxtaposes images but states nothing, creates a play of suggestion. Above all, the work has the densely patterned structure of a poem, within which repetitions act as refrains, changes of tempo set up waves of rhythm, and words, no longer subservient to plot or ideas, enjoy the greatest creative autonomy. The prose poem has gained respectability as a "genre." *Passacaille* could well be a major development in a poem-novel.

Peter Broome
The Queen's University of Belfast

Juan José Hernández and his City of Dreams

Juan José Hernández, a young Argentinian author, is not unknown to the English speaking reader. A good number of his short-stories have been published in various American and Canadian magazines. He started as a poet (*Negada permanencia*, 1952 and *Claridad vencida*, 1957) but soon after he was writing short stories, a genre in which he was to develop remarkable skill. He is a regular contributor to *La Prensa* of Buenos Aires and other periodicals. In 1969 he received a Guggenheim fellowship in the field of creative writing, and during that year he wrote his first novel *La ciudad de los sueños* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1971). In this book the author does not stress the ideological side of his story although he is not indifferent to it. He has other means of expressing such a theme. He seems to be more interested in what the social and political turmoil (unleashed by Juan Peron) did to people, than in the description of that turmoil. The history of those days when Peron rose to power is the background against which Hernández draws his characters. They all belong to the middle and upper classes of Argentina, specifically of Tucumán, his own native province.